

Suicide

Why talk about suicide with high schoolers?

According to the CDC...

- Nearly 1 in 3 (30%) high schoolers seriously considered attempting suicide—up nearly 60% from a decade ago.
- About one in five makes a suicide plan.
- Suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15 - 19-year-olds.
- If a kid is struggling with their sexuality or gender, their likelihood of attempting suicide increases by almost 300%.

That means if you know more than five teenagers, this conversation will be critically important to at least one of them.

In this phase...

As a volunteer, your role is to **mobilize their potential** by helping them develop the skills to advocate for themselves and their friends and connect them to resources when they are at risk.

High schoolers are **motivated by freedom**. This means that they may view suicide as a way to get freedom from the pain and stress they feel. At the same time, equipping them with coping skills and strategies to process their emotions can be most helpful when they feel a sense of autonomy and freedom in what skills they use.

In your conversations...

BEFORE YOUR CONVERSATIONS

- Connect with your leader to find out what policies your church and state have if a student shares they are struggling with suicidal thoughts and actions. Find out what additional resources you can connect them and their parents to if they are struggling.
- Spend some time reflecting, journaling, praying, or doing breathing exercises in order to invest in your own spiritual and emotional health before leading this heavy conversation.
- Remember, one of the leading causes of suicide is untreated depression. So, as a volunteer, familiarize yourself with signs of depression. The following signs may indicate a student is struggling:
 - Suddenly becomes hostile or irritable
 - New or worsening anxiety
 - Sudden decline in school performance
 - Tearfulness or frequent crying
 - Disturbance in normal sleep pattern:
 - Sleeping too much or too little.
 - Poor hygiene or change in general appearance
 - Withdrawal from friends or youth leaders.
 - Writing or speaking positively about death, even jokingly.
 - Comments such as, "You'd be better off if I were not here," "They would love me/miss me if I were gone," "I'm tired of this," "I'm over it," and "I can't do this anymore," or "I give up."

Suicide

DURING YOUR CONVERSATIONS:

- This a tough topic, so breathe. Remember to react on the inside and not the outside when a kid shares something big so they feel safe.
- Don't assume you know a student's personal history with this topic. Even if a kid doesn't express suicidal thoughts themselves, they may have a family member or friend who has.
- While sharing encouragement may be appropriate, be careful not only to offer spiritual solutions. Do not talk about depression or anxiety as a lack of faith, as they may already be dealing with shame about their struggle. A student may need extra support such as medicine or a medical professional, and talking about it negatively could be detrimental to a teenager in crisis.
- Do more listening than talking, and think of yourself as a question-asker, not an answer-giver. You do not have to have all of the answers or solutions, but instead, one of the best things you can do is just listen and empathize.
- Normalize the conversation. Try to make it simple, clear, and not super intense or emotional.
- Students may struggle to identify their feelings. Use a feelings wheel to help them give language to their emotions.
- Know that sometimes older students will share their difficulties as jokes or dark humor. Don't assume that all jokes are serious or that all jokes are harmless. Instead, err on the side of caution and check in with students after the group to clarify if they're okay.
- Many high schoolers will test how safe an environment is by expressing how they "used to" want to hurt themselves when they were younger. Be mindful of responding to past hurts with empathy so students will know they have a safe place to express present-day struggles.
- Don't be afraid to address the issue directly if you suspect the student has suicidal ideations. Ask very clearly if they are saying that they want to hurt themselves. If they say yes, make sure to connect them with a professional. Explain this is not a punishment, but you want to keep them safe.
- Often, creating a contract for safety is helpful. This simply means they will make a promise and sign a piece of paper making an agreement with you that they will not harm themselves, and they agree that if they have that urge again, they will reach out to someone who can help them get to a professional. It may seem silly, but this is actually very powerful because the students take those agreements seriously.

Suicide

AFTER YOUR CONVERSATIONS:

- It is important to follow up with any kid who is struggling. Some teenagers feel a degree of embarrassment or regret after sharing so vulnerably. After a sensitive conversation, it's important to interact normally with the student the next time you see them. By smiling, laughing, or just interacting as you normally would, you underscore the idea that your relationship is the same despite them having shared vulnerable information.
- If a kid shares suicidal ideation or self-harm or they are considering hurting themselves in any way, this is not a conversation you can keep to yourself. Know who you report to and that in many jurisdictions, you are legally required to do so. If you don't know who to tell, tell the school counselor. They are trained to handle reports like this.
- Follow up with a parent or guardian with any information that would be helpful. emotional.

TEN THINGS YOU CAN SAY:

1. "Thank you for telling me. Because I believe you and I care about you, I want to take some steps to make sure you're safe."
2. "How do you hurt?"
3. "Your brain was designed to keep you safe. So, if it's telling you to do something that isn't safe, it's okay to ask for help."
4. "When you say depression, what do you mean? How do you feel?"
5. "What are things you love about life? Is there anything that makes you feel hope?"
6. "I hear you. What you're feeling is valid because what you're going through is difficult. I hope you can show yourself some grace."
7. "This is a safe place. I may not have all the answers, but I promise to be here for you."
8. "Hey, I've been thinking about you. You don't seem like yourself lately. Is there something going on?"
9. "Have you talked to your caregiver about how you're feeling?"
10. "You are loved."

Suicide

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Rethinking Youth Ministry Podcast: Episode 99 - What's Going On in a Teenager's Brain in Moments of Despair and Grief
- Center for Disease Control - CDC Publications
- Book for Students: Beyond the Spiral: Why You Shouldn't Believe Everything Anxiety Tells You by Dr. Chinwé Williams and Will Hutcherson
- Book for Leaders/Parents: Seen: Despair and Anxiety in Kids and Teenagers and the Power of Connection by Dr. Chinwé Williams and Will Hutcherson
- 24/7 Crisis Text Line - Text HOME to 741741
- AdolescentHealth.org - Mental Health Resources for Adolescents and Young Adults
- YouTube: Brené Brown on Empathy

SOURCES:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2023. "Facts About Suicide." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. April 6, 2023.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2023.. "U.S. Teen Girls Experiencing Increased Sadness and Violence." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. February 13, 2023.
- Center for Disease Control. 2021. "Youth Risk Behavior Survey."
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2020. "Connection Is Key to Good Adolescent Mental Health | Adolescent and School Health | CDC." Wwww.cdc.gov. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. October 26, 2020.
- Bachmann, Silke. 2018. "Epidemiology of Suicide and the Psychiatric Perspective." International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health 15 (7)