

How to talk about suicide^{1,2,3,4,5,6,7}

Find the right setting	It's best to have conversations about suicide in person. If that's not possible, find a mode of communication that allows for privacy. The most important thing is to do it in private, not in a group setting.
Show your concern	A young person in distress wants to know that people care. You can tell them that you noticed a change in them lately and ask "Can we talk about it?"
Be direct	Talking about suicide doesn't encourage it. Rather, it lets the person know someone cares. Don't be afraid to ask about suicide and to use the word suicide, but don't make it your first question. It's important to first establish a rapport with the individual. You're working towards knowing the youth better and understanding their current situation (including what's going well and what isn't). Ask the youth if they're having suicidal thoughts or if they have a plan in mind. If they have a plan, ask them if they have access to a method that would help them complete this plan. If so, stay with the person and get help if necessary.
Listen	Acknowledge feelings and problems in the youth's terms while avoiding complicated language. Allow the youth to express their feelings and try to repeat back the feelings you hear them expressing. Try to listen for warning signs such as hopelessness or fixation with death. Active listening can establish an alliance with the youth and help them feel that they're important. If possible, let them do most of the talking by asking open-ended questions (e.g. "How long has this been going on?"). Talking openly about it might bring them relief.
Show empathy	Use responses such as "I'm sorry to hear you've been going through all this. I want to help – what can I do?"
Be honest	It's important to offer hope, but don't offer unrealistic reassurance. Be careful not to say things like "Everything is going to be okay" or "Don't worry about it, it'll pass." Statements like this can come off as trite and dismissive. Acknowledge where their pain is coming from. "I can see that you're in a lot of distress right now. This is really, really hard for you."
Never question their disclosure	Saying things like "you're blowing this out of proportion" or "you're not really going to act on this" may make them feel more misunderstood. Always take what they confide to you seriously.
Don't try to scare them out of it	Being direct does not mean being brutal. Suicidal youth feel fragile. Stirring up their emotions with a "snap out of it" approach will not make them tougher. Instead, be a consistent, caring listening ear.
Don't promise to keep it a secret	You may be asked to keep disclosures of suicidal ideation or behaviours to yourself. Swearing secrecy not only puts a lot of pressure on you, but it can also be extremely dangerous. ¹ Depending on your role, you might even have a legal obligation to report suicidal ideation or behaviours. It's important to tell the youth that the implications of keeping the secret are too heavy, and that you will need to share the concern with someone else. You can re-assure them that you will only share the concern with a trustworthy resource (psychologist, counsellor, social worker, doctor, parent, etc.).