SPEAK

Suicide prevention and awareness starts with reaching out and speaking up

Discussing suicide and talking about suicidal thoughts can be both overwhelming and frightening. Over the last decade, conversations about mental health and suicide prevention have become more prevalent. In 2020, more than 15 million American adults and youth had serious thoughts of suicide.[1] These thoughts often arise in response to stressful or challenging life situations, including physical or mental health problems, trauma, abuse, loneliness and isolation. Suicide remains the second leading cause of death among Americans between the ages 10–14 and 25–34, according to the CDC. It is a major health crisis—and preventable.

If you or someone you know has suicidal thoughts, the following steps can provide support.

Speak to someone

A person who is thinking about taking their life can be overwhelmed by emotional pain. Giving them the space and opportunity to discuss their thoughts and feelings can help them put things in perspective.[2]

- **Choose a time and place where you can speak openly without being interrupted.** It's important that you don't have to be somewhere or have other commitments. It can take a long time to have this conversation and your friend or loved one must feel that you have time to listen.

- **Ask open-ended questions to encourage conversation.** This may include questions like, *"How long have you been feeling like this? Have you ever felt this?"*

- **Validate the person's emotions and express your own genuine concern.** Showing empathy and emphasizing that the person's feelings are important can go a long way. *"It sounds like you're really struggling. Can you tell me more about it? I'd like to listen and help where I can."*

- **Try your best not to argue with the person's negative statements.** Use positive reinforcement, while acknowledging that their current emotions are real. *"You feel hopeless at the moment; we will get you the help you need together. You are not alone."*

- **Encourage the person to seek professional help.** Offer to help them identify and contact resources.

- **Develop a safety plan.** Discuss with the person who they will turn to if their suicidal thoughts and depressive symptoms begin to escalate. This list may likely include friends, relatives, a professional and the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.

1. *SAMHSA 2020 National Survey of Drug Use and Health Adult and Youth Mental Health Tables*
2. *Vanderbilt Faculty & Staff Health and Wellness, "What Do I Say When Someone is Talking about Suicide?"*

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Speak for yourself

It's important to remember that mental illness or suicidal thoughts are not a sign of weakness or reflection of your character. Asking for help is an incredible show of strength. You deserve support regardless of what your brain tells you to the contrary. Learn more about how to speak up for yourself.

- **Express how you are feeling.** When you ask for help, try to express clearly how much you are struggling. You can start by talking about the difficulties you are currently facing, and explaining the impact your struggles are having on your life.

- **Don't give up on finding the right support.** If the first support you reach out to doesn't work, don't give up altogether. It's okay to switch therapists, talk to multiple people in your network and try different services to find what works best for you.

- **When negative self-talk comes up, take a moment to pause.** What would you say to a friend who was struggling? Talk to yourself the way you would talk to someone you care about. Delay any decisions to end your life and give yourself the time and support you need.

- **Have a plan and keep yourself safe.** It can be difficult to think clearly when you feel suicidal. Try to focus your thoughts on finding ways to stay safe. Once you're safe, you can figure out how to get the help you need.

- **Pause before acting on your thoughts.** Remember that suicidal thoughts are just thoughts; you don't have to act on them. These thoughts might only last a few minutes. You might feel differently in a few hours.

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