Frequently Asked Questions for Parents

Q: Who considers suicide?

A: In general, people (of all ages) who are depressed or having trouble coping with their feelings may consider suicide if they don't have other coping skills. People of all ages, races, faiths, and cultures die by suicide, as do individuals from all walks of life and all income levels. Both popular, well-connected people who seem to have everything going for them and those who are less well-off die by suicide. Suicidal youth come from all kinds of families, rich and poor, happy and sad, two-parent and single-parent. It is really important to understand that suicidal behavior knows no boundaries.

Q: Can a teen really be suicidal? They haven't lived long enough to know what real problems are!

A: In part, that is exactly the problem. It is widely believed that childhood is free from the stress and problems of adult life and is a time for fun. However, the world is a much different place now than it was when you were a teenager. We live in an information-packed and high-stress society. Competition for college acceptance and jobs is fierce. Teens are expected to go to school full-time, participate in school activities, work twenty to twenty-five hours a week in their "part-time job," and manage to get their chores and homework done on the side. It doesn't leave much time for fun. Many teens don't get enough sleep. This tends to make teens easily frustrated and angry. The expectations placed on teens in our society can be very difficult to handle, as they have not yet developed the skills needed to deal with these stresses. A loss that seems minor to an adult can feel life-threatening to teens if they cannot find a way to cope with the feelings or find a solution. Also, they feel the need to solve the problem as fast as they can in a culture obsessed with "now" (e-mail, voice mail, cell phones, pagers, etc.). For teens, each day is as big as it gets.

Q: Why do people choose to die by suicide?

A: Suicidal behavior is one of the most complicated human behaviors. This question cannot be answered briefly. There is no research that shows that a certain set of risk factors can accurately predict the likelihood of imminent danger of suicide for any one person. It is fair to say that suicidal people are experiencing varying degrees of outside stresses, internal conflict, and neurobiological dysfunction, and these factors contribute to their state of mind. Depression, anxiety, conduct disorders, and substance abuse all contribute to the possibility of suicide, but they do not cause suicide. A "final straw" for suicide is usually the last thing that a person who kills himself or herself is thinking about, and many left behind want to blame that person or event, but the "final straw" was *not* the cause of the suicide. Many people who

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Q: I think my child may be suicidal. What do I say to him?

A: Suicide can be a difficult topic to discuss, especially with teens. Some possible conversation starters include:

- You haven't seemed like yourself recently. What's been going on?
- I know that some difficult things have happened recently. I'm concerned about how you're feeling.

Once you've opened up conversation, it's important to ask directly about suicidal intent. The following questions may be useful.

- Do you feel like things will never get better?
- Have you been feeling like killing yourself is an answer to your problem?
- Have you ever thought about suicide? Are you suicidal now?

If your child is suicidal, it is important to remove all lethal means from the household and get help. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-TALK) can be accessed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and will help you to determine what type of intervention is necessary. Even if your child does not indicate that he or she is feeling suicidal, seeking out help is always an option—from a school counselor, professional counselor, clergy person, and so forth.

Q: What should I do if my teen is talking about killing herself?

A: *Lifelines* recommends you follow the same three basic suicide intervention steps that have been outlined for school faculty, staff, and students:

1. Show you care: listen carefully.
2. Ask about suicide: ask directly in a caring, nonconfrontational way.
3. Get help: stay with the person; call your local crisis line, the national hotline, or other source of help.

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What Can Parents Do?

Parents can become informed about the warning signs of suicide that they may see in their teens or their teens' friends. These are general signs that a teen may be troubled. There is no list of definite, specific signs that a teen may be thinking about hurting himself or herself. Parents should not hesitate to err in the direction of over- versus underreacting. Warning signs are listed on the FACTS sheet you received.

In addition to these warning signs, parents should monitor teens' computers to see if they are accessing or developing Web sites with themes of death or destruction.

It is important to understand that suicide is a **crisis in communication.** When you sense that your teen is troubled, what will probably help the most is to have already established helpful patterns of communication. Here are ways to establish and maintain communication between you and your teen:

1. Create occasions for communication.
   - No TV during dinner.
   - At times, no radio in the car.
   - Do chores together.
   - Stop by just before bedtime—teens are more relaxed and less guarded at this time.
   - Share information about your day and feelings. (Often parents don't engage in small talk with their kids. Instead most of their communication consists of questions and "tidying up" kids' behavior.)
   - Find common interests/activities.

2. When you talk with your teen:
   - Really listen.
   - Try to understand his or her viewpoint first, before trying to provide an alternate viewpoint.
   - Accept your teen's feelings and concerns rather than evaluate. (Avoid statements such as "You shouldn't get upset over that!" and "If you had made a decision earlier, this wouldn't have happened!")
   - Don't minimize. (Avoid statements such as "Everyone feels that way." and "Don't let little things like that get to you.")
   - Recall that your teen sees his or her experience as unique. Acknowledge this and then let him or her know that others may have also struggled with these concerns.

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Starting the Conversation

Talking with your child about suicide is as important as talking about drugs and alcohol and safe driving. However, it can be difficult to bring up this subject with your child. Below are tips for talking with your child about suicide.

1. **Pick a good time.** You want your child's full attention, so choose a time when there are minimal distractions and a reasonable degree of privacy.

2. **Be conversational.** Remember that your goal is to have a conversation with your child, not deliver a lecture. It always helps to have a "reference point"—such as an event or a news story or the school's *Lifelines* classes—to start the conversation.
("I was reading in the newspaper that the rate of suicide for teens has increased . . ." or "I noticed on the school's Web site that the school is having a suicide prevention workshop for the teachers . . .")

3. **Be honest.** If this is a hard subject for you to talk about, acknowledge it. ("You know, I never thought I'd be talking with you about suicide. It's a topic I've never been really comfortable with . . .") By acknowledging your discomfort, you give your child permission to acknowledge his or her discomfort, too.

4. **Be direct.** Ask open-ended questions to clarify your child's responses. ("Tell me how you feel talking about suicide." "What do you think about suicide?" "What have you learned about suicide in school?")

5. **Listen to what your child has to say.** You've brought up the topic. You're interested in his or her responses, so simply listen to your child's answers. Don't interrupt or interject your opinion unless asked.

6. **If you hear something that worries you, ask for more information.** ("You say that one of your friends has talked about suicide. Tell me more.")

7. **Open the door to revisit the conversation.** Suicide isn't a one-time discussion topic. Once you've made it okay to talk about, it should be easier to bring up again. If you've heard something that concerns you, make sure to ask about it again.

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Lifelines

Addressing Worrisome Behaviors

As parents, your role in suicide prevention is crucial. You know your child's moods and behaviors better than anyone else. If certain behaviors concern you, it's important to take these worries seriously. Here are guidelines to follow when addressing worrisome behaviors with your child:

- **Don't worry about overreacting.** Sit with your child and let him or her know about your concerns. ("You said something that worries me." or "You don't seem to be yourself lately.")
- **Be specific about your concerns.** ("I've noticed you aren't spending as much time with your friends and you seem annoyed when they call you." or "You spend hours doing your homework, but every time I check on you, you're just staring into space." or "Your teacher called and said you're failing English because you're late to class almost every day.")
- **Expect your child to discount your concerns.** ("All the kids are having trouble getting homework finished." or "My friends are annoying." or "That teacher fails everybody.") Explain that you're not concerned about everybody in the class. You are concerned about your child. Be prepared to offer more than one example; the more evidence you have, the harder it will be for your child to minimize your examples.
- **If your child says anything that even hints at thoughts of suicide, ask about it.** For example, statements like "Sometimes I'm not sure life is worth living." or "I just can't take it much more." *must* be explored further! *You cannot plant the idea of suicide in your child's mind by asking about it!* In asking about thoughts of suicide, you open up the lines of communication as well as introduce the idea of help-seeking behavior by asking to hear more about your child's distressing thoughts.
- **Act immediately if you have concerns about suicide.** Get your child to a mental health professional as soon as possible for an evaluation. There are several ways to do this. Refer to the list of local resources you received from the school.
- **Whatever resource you choose, indicate the urgency of the situation.** Make sure to use the phrase "at risk for suicide." ("I'm concerned that my son may be at risk for suicide and I'd like to schedule an evaluation as soon as possible.") Although the evaluation might determine that your child is not at immediate risk for suicide, this is an assessment you'd like to have made quickly, and it is a decision that is best left to a trained mental health professional.

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Talking with Your Child about Suicide

Every parent would like to believe that suicide is not relevant to them or their family or friends. Unfortunately, it's very relevant for all of us. Suicide is the third-leading cause of death for youths aged fifteen to nineteen, and the second-leading cause of death for college-aged students. Even more disturbing are national surveys that tell us that in any given year, approximately 20 percent of high school students admit to thinking about suicide and 8.5 percent acknowledge actually making an attempt. The unfortunate truth is that suicide can happen to *any* kid in *any* family at *any* time!

So how do you deal with this reality? Once you acknowledge that suicide is as much a risk for your child as not wearing a seat belt while driving, using alcohol or drugs, or engaging in risky sexual behavior, you've taken the first step in youth suicide prevention. You talk to your children about these other behaviors that can put them at personal risk, and suicide is no different. It's something you *can* and *should* talk about with your children.

Contrary to myth, talking about suicide *cannot* plant the idea in someone's head. It actually can open up communication about a topic that is often kept a secret. Secrets that are exposed to the rational light of day are often less powerful and scary, and they can be addressed. This conversation also gives your child permission to bring up the subject again in the future.

If it isn't prompted by something your child is saying or doing that worries you, approach this topic in the same way as other subjects that are important to you but that you realize may or may not be important to your child:

- Timing is everything! Pick a time when you have the best chance of getting your child's attention. Sometimes a car ride, for example, assures you of a captive, attentive audience. Or a suicide that has received media attention can provide the perfect opportunity to bring up the topic.
- Think about what you want to say ahead of time and rehearse a script if necessary. It always helps to have a reference point: "I was reading in the paper that youth suicide has been increasing . . ." or "I saw that your school is having a program for the teachers on suicide prevention."
- Be honest. If this is a hard subject for you to talk about, admit it! ("You know, I never thought this was something I'd be talking with you about, but I think it's really important.") By acknowledging your discomfort, you give your child permission to acknowledge his or her discomfort, too.
- Ask for your child's response. Be direct! ("What do you think about suicide? Is it something that any of your friends talk about?" or "The statistics make suicide sound pretty common. Have you ever thought about it? What about your friends?")
- Listen to what your child has to say. You've asked the questions, so simply consider your child's answers. If you hear something that worries you, be honest about that, too. ("What you're telling me has really gotten my attention and I want to ask you some more questions about it so I can understand it better, okay?")

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yourself about youth suicide—the factors that can help protect your child as well as those that may place him or her at risk.

And don't ever forget that your support, concern, and love can be important ingredients in the suicide prevention equation for your child!

This handout is provided courtesy of the *Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide*, www.sptsusa.org.

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