

# How to Ask Someone About Suicide

## TEN TIPS

**#1 Lean in.** The only real way to know is to ask. If you observe behaviors or signs that worry you, ask. Suicidal thoughts are often significant red flags that something is wrong; varying degrees of intensity are common for people going through hard times. When you feel your “Spidey senses” tingle or you wonder, “Should I be worried?”—lean in. Ask.

**#2 Be prepared.** Walk into this conversation as a well-informed referral source. Make sure you know what you will do if the student answers “yes.” Never promise to keep it a secret. Be familiar with your school's protocol and resources so you can get them help.

**#3 Create a safe space.** Find a place for privacy and comfort. Depending on the situation, this may mean taking a walk outside or finding a quiet place to sit down. Take cues from the person about physical proximity and intensity of eye contact. Some people prefer to talk shoulder-to-shoulder, others face-to-face. If you’re sitting, make sure that your body language communicates openness and interest and that you’re seated on a parallel level with the person you’re talking to. Take time to turn off your phone and close the door as well, so you won’t be interrupted.

**#4 Start with, “I’ve noticed....”** Thank them for taking time to speak with you, and list the observations you’ve made that led you to be concerned. Speak about specific times and places where they were not themselves. Maybe you’ve noticed a change in mood, like they’re much more irritable than usual. Maybe you’ve noticed a change in behavior, like they’re sleeping in class. Maybe you’ve learned that they recently experienced a loss, family change, or breakup.



**#5 Ask open-ended questions.** To get the conversation going, ask open-ended questions like, "I'd like to understand more about what you're going through. Can you tell me more?"

**#6 Practice active listening.** Refrain from problem-solving and advice-giving. Instead, show them that they are being heard. Use minimal encouragers like nodding your head, and saying, "uh huh" and "and then what happened" to keep the conversation going.

**#7 Frame the question in empathy and compassion.** "You know, sometimes when people are going through what you're going through, they find themselves in unimaginable pain. Thoughts of suicide may enter their mind. Are you experiencing this at all?"

**#8 Assume that suicide is "on the menu."** Because suicidal thoughts are common for people who feel overwhelmed, you can say something like, "Sometimes when emotional pain is so intense, people think about suicide. I'm wondering how many times suicide might have crossed your mind, even if just fleeting in nature."

**# 9 Use direct language.** Using the word "suicide" in a direct way says, "We can talk about this here." It's important to use the direct language of "suicide" rather than "hurting yourself," because these are different questions.

**#10 If the answer is...**

**"No":** Notice any nonverbal cues. If they're defensive and can't keep eye contact, chances are something else is going on behind these behaviors. In these cases, you may need to persist by asking the question in different ways.

If the "no" really is a "no," people will likely express gratitude that you cared enough to reach out and will continue to talk about their troubles.

**Is not clear:** Sometimes people will respond with a question like, "What do you think?" or they'll say something like, "No, not really." Sometimes they won't answer the question at all and will just launch into another story. In these situations, the answer is usually "yes." Point this out: "When I asked you a direct question about suicide, you said XYZ, so am I correct to assume suicide is on your mind? I can appreciate the many reasons you might be hesitant to share this with me, but I'm hoping we can be as open as possible right now, so I can help you."

**Is "yes":** The first words out of your mouth should be, "Thank you." Express gratitude for the trust they have in you and for how they value your relationship. The second thing you should say is a sentiment of partnership—something like, "I'm on your team, and we'll figure this out together." The third thing to say is an offering of hope and help. Talk about the next steps in getting them the support they need. Provide choice when you can but doing nothing is NOT an option.