

This Back-to-School Season, Talk to Your Teens About Suicide

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With the air turning crisp and the leaves changing colors, fall has officially arrived – and so has National Suicide Prevention Month, which is recognized every September. It's the perfect time to talk to have a conversation with your teen about suicide.

So often in society, we talk about suicide only after a celebrity (like Anthony Bourdain or Kate Spade) dies. But the suicide rate, both nationally and in this state, has been increasing quietly and steadily for the last several decades. A 2018 study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that the suicide rate in Minnesota jumped 40.6 percent over 18 years. And according to The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, for every completed suicide, 25 people attempt it.

Suicide is a real problem in our communities. One important way to reverse this devastating trend is simply to talk about it – and to start conversations about it with our young people. The beginning of the school year is a great time to talk about suicide with your teens and, in doing so, normalize this scary topic. By being proactive, communities can help prevent future suicides from ever occurring.

How to Start the Conversation

Pick a time when you know your teen isn't too stressed or overwhelmed; for example, the morning of their first test of the school year might not be the best option. Instead, try to select a time when you know you'll have at least 15-30 minutes alone together – like after you've picked them up from a sporting practice and you're on your way home. Begin by saying something like, "I'd like to talk to you about an important topic, suicide, because I want you to feel prepared if you or a friend are ever having those thoughts."

Ask What They Know/Think About Suicide

Suicide is a complex and difficult topic to discuss. Begin by asking them what they know about this issue – what do people at school or on social media say about suicide? Do they like the song "800-273-TALK" by the singer Logic? What was their reaction when Spade and Bourdain recently died by suicide? Share with them some of your own thoughts too – for example, "the death of Kate Spade really showed me that just because someone's life looks perfect on the outside, that doesn't mean they can't still struggle on the inside."

Review the Warning Signs of Suicide

Briefly review with them some of the warning signs of suicide: talking about wanting to die or kill oneself; feeling hopeless or talking about having no purpose; sleeping too little or too much; withdrawing or feeling isolated; or acting depressed, agitated, or reckless. Encourage your teen to keep an eye out for these warning signs in either themselves or a friend, and to reach out for help immediately – either to you or another adult – if they notice them.

Ask Them to Save Crisis Line Contact Information in their Phones

It's a great idea to have your teen save the contact info for crisis hotlines in their phones. Hopefully, they'll never need it (either for themselves or a friend). But just in case they do, they'll always have it nearby. To start a text conversation with a crisis counselor, your teen can text MN to 741-741. Or to speak with a crisis counselor on the phone, your teen can call 1-800-273-TALK.

Remind Them That You're Always Here to Talk

Close the conversation by asking your teen if they have any more questions they want to ask or thoughts they want to share. Then, remind them that you are always here to talk and that help is always available. Make sure they know that, even though suicide is still a taboo subject in society, it isn't a taboo subject in your household. Thank them for talking with you and feel proud that you've been proactive in addressing suicide with your teenager.