

Press Release: Suicide Awareness Month- Part Two

A collaboration of publications produced by members of the Vermont Care Partners

How to Talk About Suicide - Having the Conversation

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Suicide is not something that people want to talk about or even think about, but people do think about it and it does happen. Thus, we must begin to have more open dialogue about the subject of suicide. We can all take a positive step towards helping others who may be struggling with thoughts of suicide by becoming more knowledgeable and confident about ways to broach this subject if we think someone may be at risk for self-harm or suicide.

One of the most misunderstood myths of suicide and suicide prevention is the idea that by asking someone if they are having thoughts of suicide, you are putting the idea in their head. People then assume this makes it more likely that the individual will act on this thought. However, research has borne out that the opposite is almost always true. If you ask someone if they are struggling with thoughts of suicide or if they are thinking of killing themselves, you are in fact giving them an outlet to vent the intense feelings and difficult thoughts they are having. This opening to talk about their frustrations and fears can help them feel less isolated and alone, which are major risk factors for someone who is experiencing suicidal thoughts.

Supported by this information, we can be more confident in approaching someone we are concerned for and starting a conversation with them about suicide. First, it is important to understand that asking the question can lead to an answer that requires one to be able to help the person in the moment and to possibly support them to seek help. Being prepared for the answer is important, as is being willing to reach out despite anxiety or fear on your part.

Once you have made the decision that you are truly concerned for a person based on their behavior or words, it is very important to be direct while also being non-confrontational and caring. You will want to use words that are comfortable to you. Some people may be comfortable with asking the person if they are thinking about killing themselves while others will be more comfortable asking if the person is feeling hopeless or if they think people would be better off without them. The most critical aspect of the conversation is to make sure you feel confident that you know whether they are considering suicide or not.

During the conversation, it is important to listen non-judgmentally and not react angrily or appear shocked by their answers. Always try to validate the person's pain and struggles, which can allow them to feel comfortable in speaking further with you. Do your best to speak slowly and calmly and give them your full attention during the discussion. When you know whether or not they are considering suicide, you can then help them identify the next steps to seeking help and staying safe. If their answer is yes

and they also have a plan and/or the means to harm themselves, this indicates a higher risk of them dying by suicide, and immediate help should be sought.

Sometimes an individual will not want to seek help or stay safe. In this case, it is critical to make sure they are not left alone and to call for medical and mental health support. If you are concerned for their immediate safety, you can call 911. Do not agree to keep what they have told you a secret, even if they express fears about what may happen if others find out. Err on the side of caution if you are unsure about whether to call or not; it is always better to be safe. You should also consider your own safety, and if you are concerned that the person you are helping may act impulsively, call 911.

Asking someone if they are thinking about suicide is a difficult thing to do, but it could save someone's life. While we are not accustomed to discussing this topic openly, it is important that we become more comfortable and confident in talking about the reality of suicide. By doing this, we can begin to help lessen the stigma associated with having suicidal thoughts thus making it more likely that people will seek the help they need and recover from a difficult but not permanent time in their life. By learning more about suicide, the signs and symptoms associated with it, and being prepared to ask if someone is considering suicide, you are taking real steps towards helping change the unfortunate trend of increasing suicide in our community and across Vermont.

The next article in this series will discuss the reality that suicide cuts across all segments of our communities. We have had an increasing trend in death by suicide over the past 20 years, and we must be open in our dialogue about this subject to bring more awareness to the causes and cures for this troubling pattern. We are all in this together.

For more information about suicide awareness and prevention, please visit the Vermont Suicide Prevention Center at www.vtspc.org or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org or by calling 1-800-273-8255. If you are a Veteran, call 1-800 - 273-8255 and Press 1. You can also use the Crisis Text Line by texting VT to 741741, and you will be connected with a live, trained counselor quickly. (learn more: www.crisistextline.org). Here in Chittenden County, call First Call at Howard Center 802-488-7777.

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