

Approaches with Suicidal Students

General Guidelines for counselors, school psychologists, administrators and the Community Resource Coordinator to follow when a number of warning signs of suicide are seen in a person and there is a suspicion that an individual may be suicidal.

Do NOT let the student out of your sight

Assess the degree of risk and level of "lethality" - These factors can be determined by talking to the person and directly questioning the person about two primary issues:

1. Have you been having self-destructive or suicidal thoughts or wishes?
2. Do you have a plan for killing or hurting yourself?
3. What are you going to do or would you do to kill/hurt yourself and do you have the means available to you?
4. Where are you going to go to you kill/hurt yourself?
5. When will or would you kill/hurt yourself?

The more specific the details of the plan → the higher the degree of risk

The greater the lethality (speed with which death would occur and destructiveness) of the proposed method of killing or hurting himself/herself → the greater the degree of risk. (Note: If a person believes a relatively non-lethal method is lethal, the more seriously their intention should be taken.)

The less the potential for rescue (i.e., the greater the distance the person would be from helping resources or from others who could help him/her) → the greater the degree of risk.

The sooner the person intends to implement his/her plans → the greater the degree of risk. (NOTE: Adolescents and distraught individuals may have a distorted view of time and this should be taken into consideration and explored.)

Prevent the person from implementing his/her plan - Do not leave the person alone. See that there is someone who can stay with the person after they leave you. Prevent the person from gaining access to the means of killing himself/herself that they have chosen (or any others that might be substituted for it) and from implementing his/her plan. Sometimes suicidal people prefer one means or plan over others and will not proceed with their suicide attempt if their original plan is no longer possible. Do NOT, however, attempt to physically restrain or disarm an armed (with a dangerous weapon) person. Try to get the person to discard the weapon by demanding that he/she do so. When lethality is high, there is a greater need for you to be assertive and directive; suicidal individuals may be willing to take direction from others because of their ambivalence and confusion.

Try to establish a relationship with the person - Reinforce the person for coming to you or for acknowledging and sharing his/her problems if they have done so. Listen to the

person and acknowledge his/her depression, pain and unhappiness. Be accepting, non-judgmental, warm, supportive, and friendly, yet directive. Exude confidence and concern and communicate that you are a capable professional who will be able to help. Reassure the person that he/she has people to turn to that will listen and help, his/her feelings of distress can be helped, and his/her problems can be addressed and solved. Do NOT lecture or point out all the reasons the person has to live and feel differently or sound shocked by anything that he/she tells you. Do NOT engage in a debate with the person or mistakenly "play into his/her hands." For example, do not stress the effects the suicide will have on his/her family because that may be what he/she hopes to accomplish.

Identify the person's major problem(s) - Identify, assess and rank the current problems and stressors in the person's life, but do not dwell on them. The person may be confused or have some misperceptions and you can help the person better organize and understand his/her feelings and perceptions and try to correct any distortions by discussing the reality of the situation. This will help the person not to see suicide as reasonable or the only choice. After exploring the situation, emphasize the temporary nature of the problem(s) and the person's most desirable alternatives. Try to make a summary statement of the problem to which the person can agree. You can ask other questions, such as:

Have you ever attempted suicide before?

What has been keeping you alive so far?

What's your hurry?

Why kill yourself now?

What do you feel the likelihood is that you will kill yourself?

What do you think the future holds in store for you?

Assess, identify, and mobilize the person's resources - Discuss the person's previously successful coping strategies and whether they might work again. Help the person identify, evaluate, and prioritize possible solutions to his/her problems. Find out what is still meaningful to the person, and if positive, stress its importance. Determine who the significant other(s) is/are in the person's life and if that person is available and would be helpful or hostile. Identify any others that could be supportive. Surround the person with all identified and available resources and support, especially significant others if they are not hostile.

Consult with and refer the person to mental health professionals - Call a suicide or crisis service (i.e., Warren/Clinton County Crisis Line (877) 695-6333) when the situation is an emergency. You or another school employee must contact the person's family and notify them of the concerns and situation. If a referral to an outside resource (See Referral Sources, pages 40-42) is appropriate, make sure that the person or their parents or guardians makes the contact and that the person actually begins receiving services. ACT QUICKLY AND FOLLOW-UP.

Document - Maintain a confidential, written record of actions taken. This will help assure that appropriate assessment, monitoring and support are provided as well as document the school's efforts to intervene and protect the student.

(Adapted from Parkway School District's Crisis Intervention Manual)