

Tips to talking about suicide and depression

Here are a few points to help you have this important and tough chat with your students:

1. Review the facts first. Chances are the suicide story will be discussed at school or amongst your students' peers, so review the story before you talk. More often than not, the stories your child hears won't be accurate and can fuel anxiety. That's why you need to clarify the real facts.

2. Begin with a simple question or direct statement. A few ways to start the dialogue: *"Have you heard the sad news about the girls who killed themselves?"* or *"What are your friends saying?"* or *"Let's talk about what you just saw on the news."*

3. Be honest and direct, but careful. Give the details your students need to know. Withhold facts or details that are not in your students best interests. Be prepared for lots of questions — or none at all. Clear up any misunderstandings about suicide, depression or death that your students may have. If you don't have an answer, just admit you don't know and say you'll get back with the answer. The key is to keep that conversation going!

4. Describe depression. *"I want to talk to you about suicide and depression"*. Your talking points might include stressing that depression is *not* a phase, nor something kids can shrug off by themselves. Depression is a serious disease that needs a medical doctor.

To help your students see the difference between normal sadness and depression, apply the word "too" to your talk: *The sadness is too deep. The depression lasts too long or happens too often. It interferes with too many other areas of your life such as your home, school, friends.* The best news is, when diagnosed early and properly treated, kids almost always feel better.

Stress to your students: "If you ever feel so sad or scared or helpless, please come and tell me so we can work together to make things right. Depression is treatable."

5. Be prepared to be unprepared. There is no way of predicting how your students will respond to such a tough subject. The key is to answer any or all questions as they emerge. Let your teen know you are *always* available to listen or help.

6. Talk about cyber-bullying. Emphasize that you recognize bullying and cyberbullying is a growing and serious problem. Ask how often bullying is happening at school, what the school's bullying policy is and how safe your students feel. Stress that cyber-bullying is painful and that intentionally causing another child pain is *never* acceptable.

Use your chat as the opportunity to review your rules about the Internet and cell phone. Talk about the dangers posting anything that is hurtful — that there are no take backs and that hurtful actions can have horrific consequences.

Also stress that if your student is ever cyber-bullied to please come and tell you. Beware that tweens or teens say they fear telling parents because they do not want computer privileges removed. Be careful so you do not sound too punitive. Instead, stress that the child should print out the evidence and you will contact the server to change the passwords. Other blogs cover cyber-safety issues, how to monitor your child's online history and signs your child is cyber-bullied.

7. Teach “Tattling” vs “Reporting.” When it comes to preventing tragedies, kids may well be the best metal detectors: *the majority of adolescents who commit homicide or suicide share their intentions with a peer.* Impress on your students the importance of telling an adult “legitimate concerns” with the guarantee that their report will be taken seriously. Telling an adult that someone is hurt or could get in trouble is not the same as tattling: It's acting responsibly. Explain that reporting is not to get a friend in trouble but to help them stay out of trouble or harm.

8. Discuss “safety nets.” Identify adults your child feels safe with, other people they can talk to when issues arise. Stress that people are always available to help your children or their friends with any kind of trouble. Mention the 24-hour confidential USA National Suicide hotline: 800-784-2433 or 800-273-8255, with trained people who can listen and help kids any hour of any day. Above all, emphasize: “No problem is so great that it can't be solved.”