



Kenya Child and Adolescent Mental Health Bulletin #4

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It's Time to Talk About it:

I Think My Friend is Suicidal. What Should I Do?

Introduction

People who think of suicide have mixed feelings about this. Virtually nobody just wants to die. Most people mainly want peace, being away for a moment, and escaping the difficulties. And above all: they don't want to live on like this. Suicidal thoughts almost never arise as a result of one single cause. Usually there are several factors that together lead to a life too difficult to live and looking for a way out.

There are various risk factors for suicide. For example, someone may be depressed, not emotionally strong, or have experienced something bad in childhood. A specific event like losing a job or difficulties at school can be the trigger to die by suicide.

Thinking about suicide is not a disaster. It just means it's time to deal with difficulties in a different way. It can help someone to look for new solutions. Even the smallest steps in that direction will help this individual. Because small steps can sometimes make a big difference.

It really helps someone who is suicidal to share feelings and thoughts with someone else. These thoughts and feelings may look familiar to the other person and sharing them can relieve the burden. You may find out that there are solutions that he/she hadn't thought of before.

If someone has thoughts of suicide, it is very important for them to talk to someone else about it. That can be a friend, family member, classmate, or colleague. But also, a medical or psychological professional.

In this bulletin we give some suggestions on what you can do to prevent suicide.

Recognizing Signals for Suicide

Take any suicidal behavior seriously.

It's not just a warning sign about suicide, it's a cry for help

People who think of suicide often start behaving differently:

- They avoid contact
- They display reckless behavior
- They are gloomy or sad
- They give away special items to family or friends
- They become sensitive and reactive to criticism
- They withdraw from friends, families, and other activities
- They might seek out the means of killing themselves, e.g. buy a weapon, poison etc.

They also often give verbal signals:

- "You won't bother me anymore"
- "I don't have to do it all anymore"
- "I'll be better off dead"
- "I wish I was never born"
- "I feel like I'm just taking up space"

Certain events and circumstances increase the chance of suicide:

- Previous suicide attempts
- Recent loss, for example of job or relationship
- Having someone die by suicide their environment
- Mental health problems

Ask the question

It is a myth that asking a suicidal person questions about suicide will increase the chance of them harming themselves.

Asking questions actually means you care.

If you think someone is thinking of suicide, then ask about it. Choose the question that suits you. Or choose your own words, but make sure you are clear. Proper questions are:

"You seem a bit down lately. Can we talk about it?"

"Do you ever think: I don't need it anymore?"

"Do you ever think about suicide?"

"Do you ever think: I don't want to live like this anymore?"

If the answer to any of the questions is yes, take it seriously and do not make their situations seem minimal by comparing their scenarios with others who had worse problems but did not think about taking their own lives. What others in the same situation do is irrelevant at this point.

Instead let them know that you are there for them and that you will go through the situation together. If depression is the cause their suicidal thoughts let them know that depression is treatable, and they can get help.

Listen, show understanding

If someone says they think of suicide, ask about the feelings, thoughts, and their plans. Listen openly and without judgment.

For example, you can ask:

"How come you feel this way? "

"You must feel helpless. Is that right?"

"How often do you think of suicide?"

"Have you thought about how you are going to do that?"

You can also ask the person feeling suicidal if they have worked out how they will do it. If they do not have a plan yet, reassure them that you will work together to get help and they will be fine.

If they say that they have a plan, get the details of how they plan to do it. E.g. Where, how, and when. This information may help you be to in the look out and keep the environment safe for them. Most importantly, ask for help immediately by visiting a doctor or a mental health professional. Do not leave the person alone. Stay vigilant, stay close to them, and get help.

Seek help together

If someone thinks of suicide, it is important that this person gets the right help.

- Do not assume that the other person will seek help or that the suicidal thought will pass by themselves.
- Suggest seeking help together.
- Offer to contact a doctor or a psychologist or a crisis intervention service. But it also often works to think together about what the most suitable form of assistance would be.

Take good care of yourself

It can be emotionally draining if you know that someone in your direct environment thinks of suicide.

You can take good care of yourself by:

- making sure you have a support system yourself
- telling your story to someone else, for example with friends or your general practitioner
- by not promising to keep the situation of the person secret
- by relaxation and distraction

Facts and Myths about Suicide

There are many misunderstandings about suicide. For example:

"Talking about suicide gives someone an idea"

This is a myth. It does not give the other person ideas. By talking about it you show that you care about someone. Talking about it helps to eliminate loneliness and takes tension away.

"Suicide happens suddenly"

This is a myth. It seems to the environment often to occur suddenly, but in between the first thought suicide and the final attempt lays almost always a long process.

"Talking about suicide can help someone turn over to feel better"

This is a fact. Talking helps. Talking about their suicidal thoughts is for many people a first step to help.

Do's and Don'ts

Talking about suicide can save a life. A talk about suicide has a number of do's and don'ts.

Don'ts

Don't talk. Show understanding, but also make clear that suicide is not a solution.

Do not advise. For someone with severe difficulties, solutions that look your simple to you often seem like one big challenge for them.

Do not judge. Judgements may cause someone not wanting to talk anymore. There is not right or wrong when someone feels suicidal.



Do's

Name the word. Using the word suicide is allowed. If you suspect that the other thinks of suicide, then name it.

Ask further. By continuing the conversation, you may find out what someone exactly means.

Take safety measures. Help the individual to create a safe situation and always discuss the possibilities for help.