

HOW TO BEGIN THE CONVERSATION WITH YOUTH

- ***UNDERSTANDING SUICIDE***

The public health definition of suicide describes it as self-injurious behavior completed with the intention of dying. The important word in this definition- intention- is why some self-injurious behaviors like cutting or drug use- are not considered suicide attempts, unless the person doing them admits their intention is to die. The following definition is behavioral and it gives us some insight into what's going on with a person who is thinking about taking his/her life:

"Suicide is an attempt to solve a problem of intense emotional pain with impaired problem skills."

Kalafat & Underwood, 1989

This definition reminds us that suicide is a response to something happening in a person's life that is emotionally painful and their response- suicide-results from an impaired ability to cope. Sound like psychological mumbo- jumbo? Let's take that definition apart by identifying some of the elements of suicidal thinking.

- The place to start is to recognize that people thinking about suicide are usually *experiencing a lot of problems* in their lives. Suicide is typically not just a response to a 'bad day'; the person has been *thinking about suicide for a while, struggling, perhaps, with whether or not they can actually see themselves taking their own life*. That tells us that window of prevention may be open a crack if we can recognize some of the warning signs.
- Then, unfortunately, the person experiences more problems and gets to a *tipping point where the only solution seems like death*. Remember, though, that *death is seen as the solution to the problem*. If we think of suicide from that perspective, we can recognize that it's more about solving a problem than dying. So the question we can ask then is: ***"What's going on in your life right now that has you feeling so miserable you wish you were dead?"***

- If the answer seems confusing to us, remember that a *suicidal person isn't thinking clearly*. The accumulation of problems has caused a crisis for them. Most of us don't do our best problem solving when we feel like we don't have the skills to do whatever the environment is demanding of us. That what's creates a crisis. When we think we're in a *crisis*, our brain sends signals to our body to go into 'fight or flight' mode. We can *feel scared, worried, out of control, hopeless- a wide range of feelings that can make clear thinking and decision making extremely difficult*. Our thinking becomes emotional and can even be irrational. When we are calm, it's easier to keep our thoughts in perspective. Being in the crisis of suicide makes us feel like our thinking is tumbling out of control into a narrowing tunnel. As the walls close in, our *problem-solving options fall away and we get closer and closer to the only solution that seems left: death*.

● **WHAT TO SAY AND DO?**

- **How to help someone deal with those crisis thoughts and feelings?** What helps in any crisis is to let the person talk about their feelings, and to simply **LISTEN** to what they have to say. Second nature may tell us to say something to try to make them feel better- of course we don't want them to die! - but the *best response is to let them talk out their feelings*. Once they've had a chance to express their desperation, they're in a better position to listen to what we have to say.
- **What do we say?** Because suicidal people are usually so focused on dying as a way to end the emotional pain they are feeling in their lives, *they may forget that they do have reasons for living*. *Ask them about that- you'll shift the conversation from talk about death to talk about life*. And, *if they truly have nothing left to live for, you need to get them to a mental health professional immediately*.
- The last piece of information about *suicide* is that *it's usually a form of communication*. The suicidal person is trying to send someone a message. **Ask what that message is and who they want to send it to**.

WHAT NOT TO SAY

Even though it might seem comforting, telling someone that suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem, or "life will get better" or "it's a phase" is generally not helpful. These are trite clichés that makes it seem like we don't understand how terrible they are feeling and are minimizing their problem. Especially with youth, the permanence of a problem is in their eyes and, at the time, it may FEEL to them like the pain from the loss of their first love, for example, will last forever. Go where they are, acknowledge how they are feeling, then suggest perhaps if you put your heads together you can figure out another way to deal with the situation.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline Number- 1-800-273-8255