

HOW TO BEGIN THE CONVERSATION WITH PARENTS

Imagine being a parent and having a teacher or a counselor-or anyone for that matter- tell you that your child may be suicidal. Perhaps you suspected something wasn't right; perhaps the news seems to come out of the blue. Either way, your first reaction may leave you feeling shocked, angry, confused... any one of a number of feelings that need to be acknowledged and validated before you're going to be able to move on to problem-solving about what to do.

"I knew my son wasn't acting like his old self but I couldn't let my mind go to the possibility that he might be thinking about suicide- that was just too scary for me"

And because those of us who may be giving this information to parents are generally advocating for the child, we may forget about the importance of addressing the feelings of the parents first. There is no 'normal' range of emotions in response to this information, so it's important to step back and really listen to the parental response without being defensive or judgmental. Remember, you are telling these people that their child may want to die and that's difficult information to absorb. Put yourself in their shoes and think about what might help you absorb this news.

● **WHAT TO SAY AND DO?**

Here's a few suggestions:

- *Talk with the youth about the reasons for sharing your concerns with his/her parents.* There is no confidentiality when it comes to questions about suicide but if you ask the youth's help in approaching this parental conversation, you may defuse some of the youth's anxiety about involving parents. You might get some useful information that can help you anticipate parental response.
- *Provide observable data to support your concerns.* The more organized you are in outlining the facts you have accumulated, the easier it will be for parents, especially those in shock, to follow along and accept your recommendations.

What YOU Need To Do First . . .

Sometimes we're so intent on helping others, that we forget to pay attention to our own thoughts and feelings. Suicide is one topic where it's important to take a step back to look at our values, attitudes, and experiences before we try to help someone else sort through theirs.

This process of introspection isn't designed to make us change what we think or feel, but to simply make us better aware of ourselves and some of the our biases and judgments about suicide that may unconsciously color how we act.

Remember, our beliefs and values are neither right nor wrong- they are simply principles by which we judge our own behaviors.

Particularly in relation to suicide, which is a challenging topic to discuss, removing our own perspectives can make that conversation a little bit easier.

- *Allow parents time to react to what you've just told them.*
It's important for you to keep in mind that your job isn't to take away the shock of what they've just been told but to help them act in spite of it.
- *Talk always needs to be followed up by action.* Once you've validated the initial response of the parents and presented the facts that support your observations, begin to *develop an action plan.*
- Most action plans usually involve a *referral to a mental health professional* for a more complete assessment of risk. Sometimes, though, you may have worries about the youth's immediate risk for suicide. In those instances, your recommendation will be to send them to the appropriate crisis services.
- *Give them information about the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline* before they leave. Explain that this is a 24/7 service staffed by people who have had special training in responding to questions and concerns about suicide risk. That phone number is 1- 800-273-8255 (TALK).
- Another often neglected step in a parental meeting is *to ask the family to remove any firearms or medication from the home until the crisis is over.* If parents give you push-back on this, remind them that you're concerned about their child's safety. That should put you all on the same page.
- Understand that there's still more work to do once your meeting with the parents is completed. Almost as important as the referral you have made is your *follow-up.* *That means you want to reach out to the family after a few days to find out what happened and how they are doing.* This may seem like an unnecessary step but research is showing that follow-up after referral may be a key component in the success of any subsequent mental health treatment.

As you can see, the process of talking with parents about their at-risk child starts with your personal value assessment, and it ends with you, too. It's important for your mental health that you share this experience with a trusted colleague.

This type of intervention takes a lot of personal energy and it's important for you to get some support.

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

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO REMEMBER?.....

- Look at the values and beliefs you hold about suicide, acknowledge them, and put them aside.
- Do your homework. Collect as many facts as you can to support your concerns about this youth.
- Take a deep breath before you begin the conversation.
- Expect a reaction from parents that you'll need to validate and try to understand
- Make sure you have dealt with their feelings before you move on to your discussion about their child.
- Allow time to discuss parental concerns
- Be sure to come up with a feasible action plan
- Before they leave, ask them to clear their home of dangerous objects for their child's safety
- Give them the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline number- 1-800-273-8255 (TALK).
- Follow-up