

Suicide

Why talk about suicide with middle schoolers?

According to the CDC...

- Suicide is the second leading cause of death in kids 10-14
- About one in five makes a suicide plan.
- Approximately one in three young people seriously consider suicide.
- If a kid is struggling with their sexuality or gender, their likelihood of attempting suicide increases by almost 300%.

That means if you know more than five teenagers, this conversation will be critically important to at least one of them.

In this phase...

As a volunteer, your role is to **encourage them on their personal journey** by reminding them that they are not bad or broken for having negative thoughts. You can also remind them that they have a safe place for any conversation and any questions.

Middle schoolers may not have the developed vocabulary to articulate their feelings. Since they are **motivated by acceptance**, they may agree with or play off of leading questions. Because they may give answers they think you're looking for, it's important to be the question-asker in this phase and focus on asking clarifying and open-ended questions.

In your conversations...

BEFORE YOUR CONVERSATIONS

- Connect with your leader to find out what policies your church and state have if a student shares they are struggling with suicidal thoughts and actions.
- Spend some time reflecting, journaling, praying, or doing breathing exercises in order to invest in your own spiritual and emotional health before leading this heavy conversation.
- Cue the parent or guardian that you are having this conversation.
- Remember, one of the leading causes of suicide is untreated depression. So, as a volunteer, familiarize yourself with signs of depression. The following signs may indicate a student is struggling:
 - Suddenly becomes hostile or irritable
 - New or worsening anxiety
 - Sudden decline in school performance
 - Tearfulness or frequent crying
 - Disturbance in normal sleep pattern:
 - Sleeping too much or too little.
 - Poor hygiene or change in general appearance
 - Withdrawal from friends or youth leaders.
 - Writing or speaking positively about death, even jokingly.
 - Comments such as, "You'd be better off if I were not here," "They would love me/miss me if I were gone," "I'm tired of this," "I'm over it," and "I can't do this anymore," or "I give up."

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DURING YOUR CONVERSATIONS:

- This a tough topic, so breathe. Remember to react on the inside and not the outside when a kid shares something big so they feel safe.
- Don't assume you know a student's personal history with this topic. Even if a kid doesn't express suicidal thoughts themselves, they may have a family member or friend who has.
- While sharing encouragement may be appropriate, be careful not only to offer spiritual solutions. Do not talk about depression or anxiety as a lack of faith, as they may already be dealing with shame about their struggle. A student may need extra support such as medicine or a medical professional, and talking about it negatively could be detrimental to a teenager in crisis.
- Do more listening than talking, and think of yourself as a question-asker, not an answer-giver. You do not have to have all of the answers or solutions, but instead, one of the best things you can do is just listen and empathize.
- Normalize the conversation. Try to make it simple, clear, and not super intense or emotional.
- Students may struggle to identify their feelings. Use a feelings wheel to help them give language to their emotions.

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AFTER YOUR CONVERSATIONS:

- It is important to follow up with any kid who is struggling. If a middle schooler shares suicidal ideation or self-harm or they are considering hurting themselves in any way, this is not a conversation you can keep to yourself. Know who you report to and that in many jurisdictions, you are legally required to do so. If you don't know who to tell, tell the school counselor. They are trained to handle reports like this.
- Some teenagers feel a degree of embarrassment or regret after sharing so vulnerably. After a sensitive conversation, it's important to interact normally with the student the next time you see them. By smiling, laughing, or just interacting as you normally would, you underscore the idea that your relationship is the same despite them having shared vulnerable information.
- Follow up with a parent or guardian with any information that would be helpful.

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TEN THINGS YOU CAN SAY:

1. "Thank you for telling me. Because I believe you and I care about you, I want to take some steps to make sure you're safe."
2. "How do you hurt?"
3. "Your brain was designed to keep you safe. So, if it's telling you to do something that isn't safe, it's okay to ask for help."
4. "I am so glad you told me."
5. "What are things you love about life? Is there anything that makes you feel hope?"
6. "I hear you. What you're feeling is valid because what you're going through is difficult. I hope you can show yourself some grace."
7. "This is a safe place. I may not have all the answers, but I promise to be here for you."
8. "Someone needs to know this. I believe you, so it can't stay a secret. Who would you like to know? Some options are guidance counselor, parent, or therapist?" (Before you say this, check with the policies for your ministry and state.)
9. "I am so sorry for what you are going through. Have you talked to your caregiver about how you're feeling?"
10. "You are loved."

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Rethinking Youth Ministry Podcast: Episode 99 - What's Going On in a Teenager's Brain in Moments of Despair and Grief
- Center for Disease Control - CDC Publications
- Book for Students: Beyond the Spiral: Why You Shouldn't Believe Everything Anxiety Tells You by Dr. Chinwé Williams and Will Hutcherson
- Book for Leaders/Parents: Seen: Despair and Anxiety in Kids and Teenagers and the Power of Connection by Dr. Chinwé Williams and Will Hutcherson
- 24/7 Crisis Text Line - Text HOME to 741741
- AdolescentHealth.org - Mental Health Resources for Adolescents and Young Adults
- YouTube: Brené Brown on Empathy

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SOURCES:

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