

Starting a Conversation About Suicide

Foundational Skills for Students



Ministry of
Advanced Education
and Skills Training



University
of Victoria



BCcampus
Learning. Doing. Leading.



Territory Acknowledgement

Session Objectives

By the end of this session, you will be able to:

- Explain myths and misunderstood ideas about suicide.
- Recognize the different signs that indicate someone is in distress or at risk of suicide.
- Ask if a person is considering suicide, express support, and refer the person to appropriate resources.
- Discuss roles and boundaries when responding to a person considering suicide.

Understanding Your Role

- You are not expected to be a counsellor or solve another person's problems.
- You *can* help your peers by listening to them and connecting them with support services. The goal is to keep the person safe.

Practical Information

- Session is approximately two hours long.
- Questions and reflections are encouraged.
- Everyone will receive handouts with resources and contact information for counsellors and crisis lines.
- If online, remember to use the mute button.
- If online, leaving your camera on is optional.

Crisis Lines

- B.C. Suicide Line: 1-800-784-2433
- Mental Health Support Line: 310-6789
- Here2Talk: 1-877-857-3397 (24-hour phone and chat counselling support for B.C. post-secondary students)
- KUU-US Crisis Line: 1-800-588-8717 (a 24-hour crisis line for Indigenous people)

Support and Self-Care

- Take any actions you need for your own well-being:
 - Pause.
 - Ground yourself.
 - Take a break or leave (give a thumbs-up as you're leaving so we know you're okay).
- Share only if you are comfortable.
- If you need further support, reach out after the session.



Group Guidelines



Reflection: Assessing Confidence

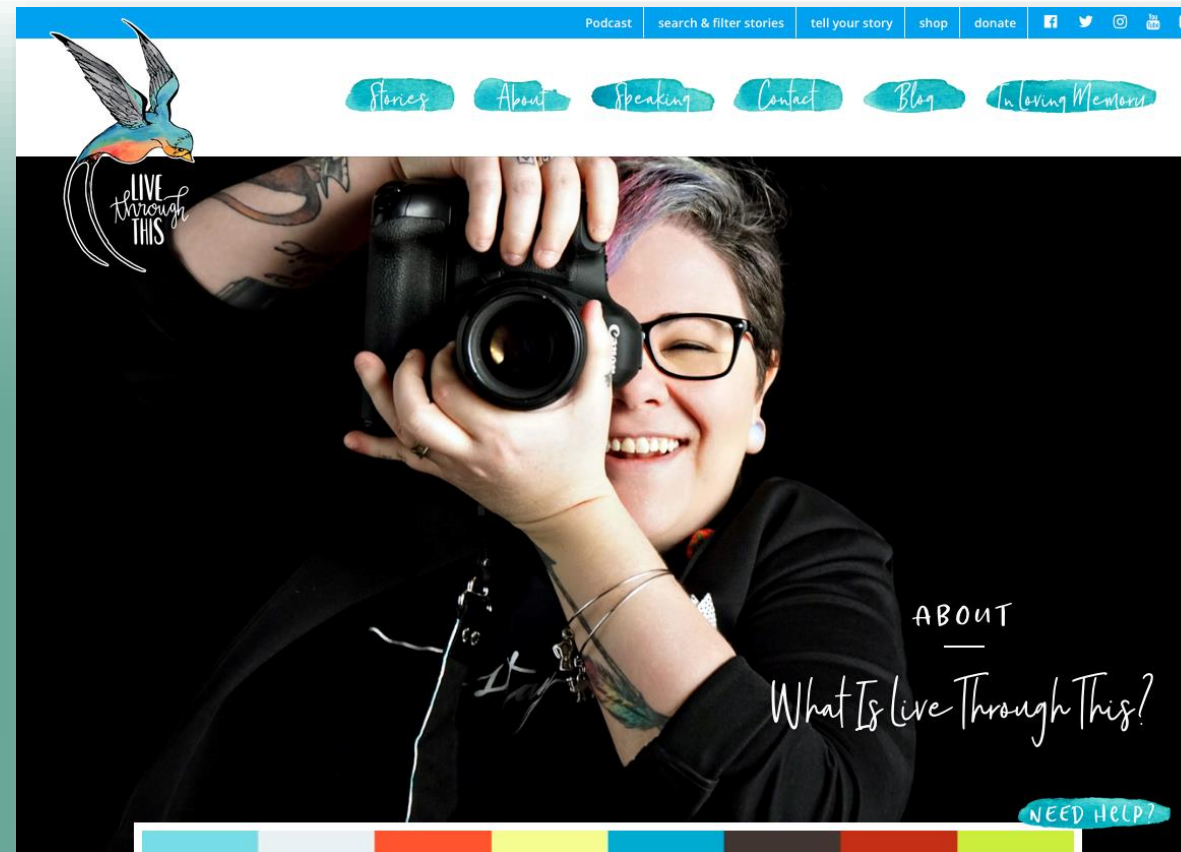


On a scale of 1 to 10, how confident do you feel about talking to someone who says they are suicidal?



Why Talk About Suicide?

Video: Live Through This



Myths and Misunderstood Ideas

1. People who talk about suicide are only trying to get attention. They won't really do it.
2. Talking to a person about suicide will encourage suicide.
3. If someone is seriously contemplating suicide, they don't want to make a decision to live.
4. Most suicides happen without warning.

Suicide and Post-Secondary Students

In 2019, a survey of Canadian post-secondary students found:

- 10.1% had seriously considered suicide within the previous 12 months.
- 1.9% had attempted suicide within the previous 12 months.
- 6.0% intentionally cut, burned, bruised, or otherwise injured self within the previous 12 months.

Source: American College Health Association (2019), *American College Health Association – National College Health Assessment II: Canadian Reference Group, Data report, Spring 2019*, American College Health Association, https://www.acha.org/documents/ncha/NCHA-II_SPRING_2019_CANADIAN_REFERENCE_GROUP_DATA_REPORT.pdf

What the Stats Don't Tell Us



Factors That Increase Risk of Suicide

- Prior suicide attempt
- Trauma
- Triggering life events
- Mental illness
- Alcohol or drug addiction
- Chronic physical illness
- Barriers to accessing care
- Lack of support from family, friends, community
- Personal identity struggles (cultural, sexual)
- Feelings of isolation
- Systemic discrimination
- Social media

Protective Factors

- Access to appropriate mental health services and support
- A sense of hope, purpose, belonging, and meaning
- A sense of belonging and connectedness with family, culture, community, and friends
- Supportive environments and healthy relationships
- Skill in problem solving, conflict resolution, and non-violent handling of disputes

The background of the slide features a high-angle, low-key photograph of several people walking on a brick-paved surface. The scene is captured in silhouette against a bright, overexposed background, creating a sense of movement and anonymity. The brick pattern is clearly visible, adding texture to the composition. A dark teal horizontal band is overlaid across the middle of the image, serving as a backdrop for the title text.

Marginalized Groups

Cultural Safety

By providing a culturally safe environment, we can all play a role in ensuring that each student feels that their personal, social, and cultural identity is respected and valued.

Discussion

- How do you react to hearing this information about suicide?
- Have you found yourself in a situation where you were trying to support someone with these concerns or other serious concerns?
- What's it like for you when you're trying to help someone else out?
- What do you need in order to feel more helpful to others?

Your Feelings and Attitudes



What Questions and Worries Do You Have?



Imagine that you are about to ask someone if they are thinking about suicide.

What questions, thoughts, beliefs, worries, or feelings come up for you?

What are your worst fears?

What Do You Need to Take into Consideration?

- Are you emotionally ready to have this conversation?
- Should you first reach out to a counsellor, Elder, supervisor, or someone else who can provide support?
- Where will you have the conversation? Is the timing right?
- What is your relationship with the person?

Self-Awareness and Self-Care

- Self-awareness is crucial. Ask yourself:
 - Given my own history and background and current life events, is this the best time for me to be having this conversation with someone?
 - Am I able to ground myself?
 - Do I need to find a way to pass the conversation to someone else?

A photograph of a wooden boardwalk path winding through a lush, green forest. The path is made of weathered wooden planks and is surrounded by dense foliage, including ferns and various green plants. The background shows tall, thin trees with a canopy of green leaves, suggesting a deep forest setting. The overall atmosphere is serene and natural.

Recognizing the Signs

Thoughts

They may be thinking:

- I can't do anything right.
- I just can't take it anymore.
- I can't carry on like this.
- I wish I were dead.
- People will be better off without me.
- No one can do anything to help me.

Feelings

They may be feeling:

- Helpless
- Hopeless
- Worthless
- Angry
- Guilty
- Lonely
- Sad
- Trapped

Statements

Direct

- “I’m going to end it all.”
- “I’d be better off dead.”
- “If X happens (or doesn’t), I’m going to kill myself.”

Indirect

- “Everyone would be better off without me.”
- “My life has no purpose. I’ve lost hope.”
- “Nothing will ever change and I give up.”
- “I can’t do this anymore.”

Physical Signs

- Lack of interest in appearance and hygiene
- Sleep disturbances
- Change in weight or loss of appetite
- Physical health complaints

Stressful Events or Loss

What stressful events do you think might contribute to a person contemplating suicide?

Actions

- Withdrawing
- Loss of interest in favourite activities
- Misuse of drugs or alcohol
- Reckless behaviour
- Extreme behavioural changes
- Impulsivity
- Self-harm

Suicide and Self-Harm

- Self-harm does not necessarily mean a person is thinking about suicide. Self-harm may be a coping mechanism.
- While not the same as suicide, self-harm can lead to suicidal behaviours.
- It is important that anyone who self-harms sees a counsellor.

Sometimes There Are No Signs

Sometimes, no matter what we do, a person may still take their own life.

We may have many mixed emotions –

- Guilt
- Shame
- Blame
- Anger...to name a few.

Which brings us back to the importance of resiliency, self-care, and supporting each other.

A photograph of two women sitting on a boat. The woman on the left is looking towards the right, with her hand near her head. The woman on the right is looking towards the left. The image is overlaid with a green semi-transparent band in the center. The text 'How to Respond' is written in white, bold, sans-serif font within this band.

How to Respond

What Does a Person in Distress Need?

To be heard
and not judged.

What Can You Do?

The most effective intervention is to listen with empathy and be non-judgmental.

Being patient, calm, and accepting are more important than having the perfect words.

Keep in Mind

Sometimes just a few genuine words of concern and understanding can make a big difference and help a person connect with a counsellor or the best person to help them.

Start with What You Noticed



- “I noticed that you’re not hanging out with us anymore. I wondered how things are going.”
- “I noticed that you stopped coming to class. How are you doing?”
- “I can see you’re really overwhelmed. I wanted to check in.”

Ask Directly and Clearly

“At this point, I need to ask you something. Are you feeling so bad that you’re considering suicide?”

“I might be way off base, but when you said there is no point in continuing, I wondered what you meant...”

“That sounds like a lot for one person to take. Has it made you think about killing yourself to escape?”

What If They Say No?

You've shown you are ready, willing, and able to engage in a serious conversation.

When a person says no, they usually will explain why not.

- They didn't really mean it to come across that way.
- They have thought about it but would never act on it.
- They have many reasons to live.

What If They Say Yes?

- Take the person seriously. Let them know you think this is important to talk about.
- Listen without judgment and give them your complete attention.
- Acknowledge their thoughts and feelings with compassion.
- Ask if they have other people they can talk to. Have they talked to anyone else?
- Ask them what they need to be safe.

Consider the Risk

Ask them:

- How often are you thinking about this?
- Do you have a plan? Have you thought about how you would kill yourself?
- Have you thought about when?



Remember

The goal is to keep the other person safe.

Now is not the time to solve all problems.

Responding Online

- If an online classmate says or posts something that concerns you during an online course, you can still check on them.
- Message them privately and ask how they're doing or if they would like to talk.

How to Refer



Introducing Supports and Resources

- Look for a natural point in the conversation to mention resources. You could say:
 - “We need extra help. I want to connect you with someone who can help you keep safe.”
 - If they are reluctant: “I have to do this. I’m not going to take a chance on losing you.”
- Tell them that seeking help is a sign of strength and courage.

Campus Resources

- Counselling services
- Campus security
- Student services
- Indigenous student services
- Health/medical services
- International student services
- Accessible learning services
- Pride centre for LGBTQ2S+ students
- Sexualized violence resource centre

Provincial Resources

- B.C. Suicide Line: 1-800-784-2433
- Mental Health Support Line: 310-6789
- Here2Talk: 1-877-857-3397 (24-hour phone and chat counselling support for B.C. post-secondary students)
- KUU-US Crisis Line: 1-800-588-8717 (a 24-hour crisis line for Indigenous people)

What about Social Media?

- There is evidence that social media can influence suicide-related behaviour.
- It is also possible to help someone through social media.
- Treat people online the same way you would treat them in person.

Talking About Suicide: Summary

- Ask directly about suicide. Stay calm and listen.
- Acknowledge how the person is feeling and let them know you want to help.
- Ask about personal supports. Do they have other people they can talk to? Have they talked to anyone else?
- Provide information about resources. Connect them with supports or professional help.
- If something still doesn't feel right, consult with your student centre, supervisor, campus security, or campus resources.

Scenario Walk-Through

Your friend is facing final exams and says to you, “It’s no use. I’ll never be able to pull this off.” As they speak, they hardly seem to stop to draw breath. They tell you they have a voice in their head that is always criticizing and saying they are worthless.

Your friend also mentions that they can’t concentrate or focus. They feel like they are failing and just can’t get back on track. They don’t see the point in continuing and say, “It’s not going to matter much longer anyway.”

What Helps People Recover?

- Knowing someone cares and listens
- Knowing there *is* help available
- Having a sense of
 - Purpose
 - Hope
 - Belonging
 - Meaning

Hopeful Messages

- There is help to get through this. One step at a time. One minute at a time.
- Please reach out for help. You are not alone, and **you matter.**
- HOPE (Hold On, Pain Ends)



Maintaining Boundaries

- Keep in mind that you are *not* expected to be a counsellor or to “fix” a person.

FAIR

- Fear: You feel afraid of what a person may do to themselves or others.
- Anger: Feeling angry is a sign that you need to take a step back.
- Ignorance: You don't know what more you can do for the person.
- Responsibility and resentment: You are starting to resent the responsibility you have taken on for the person.

Self-Care After a Difficult Conversation

Ask yourself:

- Have I let this go?
- Am I okay with this?
- Is there anything I need to do?
- Am I feeling overwhelmed and should I talk to a counsellor?

Practice Scenarios

- How might you respond and offer support to the student?
- What services might you suggest to the student?
- Who might you consult with?
- How does it feel to imagine offering support to the student in the scenario?

Scenario 1

An Indigenous student you are friends with is visibly upset. They disclose that a close relative has just died by suicide, and they are overwhelmed with feelings of grief and helplessness. They want to be home with their family and community, but they also have upcoming projects due in many of their courses. They express feelings of hopelessness and say, “I don’t think I can cope with this. I think it would be easier to just end it.”

Scenario 2

An international student you know from a few classes seems upset. They tell you that they had been sharing a basement suite with three other students, but the roommates have recently all moved out. They can't afford the rent and are about to become homeless. They tell you that the landlord has been entering the suite without permission and just threatened to seize all of their possessions in lieu of the rent that is now due. Your classmate explains that their family cannot afford to send more money for better housing and that they don't want to embarrass them by asking for help. They say they feel helpless and trapped. They also mention that they have been harming themselves and show you fresh cuts along the inside of their forearm. The cuts are slim and do not appear very deep, but they are not bandaged. Your classmate also expresses feelings of hopelessness and despair during the interaction.

Reassessing Your Confidence



On a scale of 1 to 10, how confident do you feel about talking to someone who says they are suicidal?

Reflection, Questions, and Comments



Taking Care of Yourself

- We help others best when we have enough energy and compassion to do so.
- What activities might you find helpful today?

Remember: You are not alone.

Media Attributions

- **Slides 1 and 10:** [Cedar Tree Needles](#) by [Adam Kring](#). [Unsplash License](#).
- **Slide 2:** [Lake in Dome Creek, B.C.](#) by [Jakub Fryš](#). [CC BY-SA 4.0 International license](#).
- **Slides 7:** [Flowers and the beach](#) by [Andrey](#) and [Lesya](#). [CC0 Public Domain](#).
- **Slides 9, 21, and 57 :** [reflections of heart](#) by [Álvaro Bueno](#). [CC BY 4.0 License](#).
- **Slide 11:** [What is Live Through This](#) by Dese'Rae L. Stage is licensed under a Standard YouTube License.
- **Slide 14:** [Iceberg in the Arctic with underside exposed](#) by [AWeith](#). [CC BY-SA 4.0 International license](#).
- **Slide 17:** [Silhouette](#). [CC0 Public Domain](#).
- **Slide 20:** [Person writing on white paper](#) by [NeONBRAND](#). [Unsplash License](#).
- **Slide 24:** [Wooden path through forest](#) by [Michal Kulesza](#). [CC0 Public Domain](#).
- **Slide 33:** [Friends Talking](#) by [Michael Coghlan](#). [CC BY-SA 2.0](#).
- **Slide 44:** [Referral Icon No Attribution](#) by Ahkâm.
- **Slide 52:** [Flower Road Crack](#) by [Leuchturn81](#). [Pixabay license](#).
- **Slide 58:** [Flower of an Indian Lotus](#) by Hong Zhang. [CC0 Public Domain](#).
- **Slide 59:** [Beach, sea, coast, sand, ocean, shore, wave, material, body of water, wind wave](#). [CC0 Public Domain](#).