

When Your Child Has Suicidal Thoughts

Teenagers often tell therapists that they do not like to talk with their parents about their suicidal thoughts. Some teens do not tell their parents at all. There are many reasons why teens lock parents out. The biggest reason that teens give me for not talking to their parents about their suicidal thoughts is a conviction that their parents will “freak out.”

While extreme fear, sadness, and concern (what teens might call “freaking out”) are natural responses for parents who learn that their child wants to end their life, teens need to know that they are safe, even welcome, to share their innermost thoughts about this most important topic.

If a teen is in immediate, extreme danger, they need to be taken to an emergency room for safety and help.

Also, keep in mind that when a teen tells a parent about suicidal thoughts, almost everyone does something, perhaps many things, on this list. Most of these responses are instinctual and understandable. Yet they also are not so helpful for

a teen who desperately needs to be listened to, understood, and in many cases taken for help afterward.

Below are 10 more reasons why teens may not turn to their parents for help at a time when they most need help from their parents. The list applies to parents of a teen who thinks of suicide but is not in immediate danger of acting on their thoughts.

1. Some parents offer reassurance or encouragement without first listening to what their child has to say. The parents may immediately say something along the lines of, “You don’t have any reason to think about suicide.” Teens who hear this often feel even more alone and misunderstood.
2. Some parents become so overwhelmed with sadness and fear that the child ends up consoling them, without ever feeling heard.
3. Some parents get angry with their child for thinking of (or attempting) suicide. “How could you do this to me?” they might ask.
4. Some parents take personally their child’s suicidal thoughts: “If you really loved me, you would never think of suicide.”
5. Some parents do not recognize that suicidal thoughts and behaviors frequently are a symptom of a mental illness like depression. These parents may blame their child, rather than the illness, for the suicidal thoughts and behaviors.
6. Some parents do not take seriously their teen’s crisis. They may refuse to take their child for counseling or, if the situation is especially dire, to a hospital. Or they may choose to keep loaded firearms in the house. These inactions can make the teen feel uncared for or unimportant.

7. On the other end of the spectrum, some parents overreact. They immediately rush their child to a hospital for evaluation without first listening to their child about their pain and plans.
8. Some parents dismiss their child's statements or actions as manipulative. "You just want attention," they might say. (Sometimes suicidal statements or attempts are, in fact, manipulative. Regardless, expression of suicidal thoughts and acts are a dangerous way to seek change from others, and the choice to do so in this way indicates a need for help.)
9. Some parents become impatient. They may ask the teen repeatedly, multiple times a day, if the teen is still thinking of suicide. This may cause the teen to say "no, no, I'm not" to stop being asked.
10. Some parents become overprotective. After their teen discloses suicidal thoughts, the parents do not want to let their child out of their sight. If the teen is especially unsafe, this might be appropriate (although if they are that unsafe, a hospital may be even safer).

First and foremost, it is important to listen.

Really listen.

It is a natural response to want to talk your teen out of suicide, to react with fear and anguish, to do anything to keep your child safe. And there is a time and place for all of those.

What teens need first is nonjudgmental listening and exploration of their pain.

See more at:

<http://www-speakingofsuicide.com/2013/05/29/parents-and-teens/#sthash.MT8vKcDu.dpuf>