

How to Answer Questions Teens Ask About Suicide

Question: What if my friend refuses to talk with someone and says if I tell anyone he's thinking of suicide, he'll kill himself for sure?

Answer: This is not an unusual response. It is a form of testing and can be interpreted as a question. The suicidal person will be unsure of anyone who wants to help. Some will be more unsure than others. This response is from a person who is not quick to trust because of previous hurts and betrayals by others of his confidence. Still, what this person is checking out about the friend who wants to help is how much they are willing to fight to save their life. If the friend agrees not to tell anyone, they will lose his respect. What needs to be said to the potentially suicidal person in this situation? A good response to the threat is: *“Look, you let me know you were feeling suicidal. If you didn't want help, you would never have said anything to me, so I'm not going to let it go. Come on. Both of us will go see someone.”* This kind of response lets the person know how serious we are and how much we care. It brings them back in touch with that part that wants to live. In most cases they will agree to see someone after hearing this. If they still insist on not talking and take off, it is critical that someone who can get to that youngster be told immediately. Kids need to know exactly who they can tell and in what situations. When in school, there are the teachers, counselors, etc. When out of school, there are their own parents, police, and the phone operator for the Suicide Prevention Center, etc. Make sure they know where to go for help immediately. Schools can work out an arrangement with a 24-hour prevention center so that when kids call and identify the school they attend, the center can, if necessary, notify an identified person in the school.

Question: What do I do if I want to break up with a boyfriend but he says he'll kill himself if I do?

Answer: When this occurs, the suicidal person is often very angry but unable to direct the anger appropriately. He/she is also devastated by the “rejection.” In most cases, the breakup brings to the surface feelings around a much earlier rejection by a parent that the suicidal person is unable to separate out emotionally from the current situation, or is not consciously aware that the tremendous hurt he/she feels now goes back to a time long before the girl/boyfriend. The friend who is breaking up with this person who is doing the threatening will also experience a lot of anger for such a drastic retaliation as well as fear that it may actually happen. The tendency is to act on the anger and say something like, “Go ahead,” or “That's your problem, not mine.” Sometimes the person reacts to the fear and either becomes immobilized or gives in to promising not to tell. About the only response in this situation is something like: **“ I know you're really upset; so am I, but I can't keep going out with you. You make me really mad when you dump suicide on me, but you are also making it clear that you really are hurt, too. Both you and I need to go talk to someone. I don't want you to hurt yourself, but I can't lie to you and say I want to keep going out with you, either. If you don't go with me to talk this out with someone, I'll have to tell someone, because I'm still your friend and I don't want you to hurt yourself.”** If they are still talking suicide after this, it is imperative that someone is told. It's helpful to let students know that if they do this much, they have done as much as they can possibly do. Stress the importance of telling someone, as this will help relieve them of the horrendous burden of guilt should the person kill him/herself. A promise to talk to someone is not enough in this situation. They must talk with someone immediately. Once contact is made with a professional, they can take over, and the responsibility of the friend has ended. They were honest and did all they could possibly do.

Question: What do I do when no one believes me or does anything if I tell them about a friend I think is thinking about suicide?

Answer: The only thing to do when an adult, whether a parent or counselor, refuses to believe someone is contemplating suicide is to immediately go to someone else who will listen and do something.

Question: What if the counselor my friend is seeing isn't helping?

Answer: Sometimes counselors and therapists are thought to be miracle workers, and clients are said to be resistant or at fault if they are not making progress. There is no therapist/counselor who can work well with everyone. Personality clashes happen; backgrounds get in the way, and some problems are simply outside of the therapist's skill and knowledge. Yes, it is true that sometimes clients unknowingly sabotage counseling, but it is also true that even the best therapist is unable to help some people who would do better with another counselor. If counseling doesn't seem to be helping, first let the counselor know. A good counselor will agree and suggest taking another direction for a period of time and if that doesn't help, recommend another counselor. A good counselor will also recognize the need for an immediate referral if it is felt that continuing a while longer will not be helpful. The counselor who does not do this, but quickly says the problem is with the client, is likely not to be the therapist to continue to see. Remember, the suicidal person often does not want to die, they just want the hurt to end.

Question: I would feel dumb asking a friend if they are suicidal. What if they weren't? Won't they think I'm crazy?

Answer: Yes they may call you crazy, but not really think you're crazy. By asking, you are showing how much you care, how much you pay attention to them, and how much courage you have to risk being wrong rather than assume they can handle things.

Question: What if someone wants to die because things are bad and aren't likely to change – shouldn't they have the right to die?

Answer: Ultimately, the person does make the final choice as to whether they will live or end their life. It is critical to remember, however, that the person who is certain that suicide is the only way usually does not tell anyone or leave clues. Those who leave clues or talk to you about ending their life are crying out for help. If the response to their cry is "That's your choice," it may be interpreted as a rejection, and as a decision on your part not to get involved because you think they are not worth saving. Remember, the suicidal person often does not want to die; they just want the hurt to end and know of no other way or have not had the experience of someone being there for them when they need it most.

Question: How do I get my friend to talk when he/she says it doesn't help to talk?

Answer: Sometimes people find it difficult to talk because they are confused and don't know what they are thinking. Sometimes they are scared that they will say something to upset the listener. There may also be a fear that as they talk, they may not like what they hear themselves say. Silence is a difficult situation to deal with because the silent person is in control. It leaves the listener feeling frustrated,

angry, and anxious about what to say or do. It helps in this situation to let the person know their silence probably has protected them before from people who were insensitive, mean, critical, or made them feel what they had said was crazy, stupid, or not serious enough to get so uptight over. If you can let the person know you understand this and that you're not one of these people and ask them who hurt them so badly that they feel like suicide, they are likely to open up. If this doesn't help, and they continue their silence, get help.

Question: Why should I call a suicide prevention center? What can they do over the phone?

Answer: The counselors at these centers are trained to talk with people in crisis. They generally know what to say, how to say it, and when. They can also call others to come to the aid of a person in need, or if you are calling about a friend, the counselor can call the friend directly. It needs to be made clear, however, that in some centers the philosophy is that a person has a right to choose whether they live or die. This attitude is not one that I personally support because psychologically, the person in need is desperately hoping someone will stop them from ending their life. To say to the person that it is their choice is to ignore their cry for help and not understand the psychological dynamics. Ultimately, it can become the reason for their attempt and death. We must try.

Question: What about someone who draws pictures of a body hanging?

Answer: Remember that any reference to dying, verbal or written, can be a clue that the person is suicidal. Drawing pictures of death does not always indicate suicide, but this can't be determined until the person is asked about suicide. Drawings should be taken seriously.

Question: I know someone who jokes about it. What do I do?

Answer: Suicide is no joke. Even people who joke about it are serious. The joking is sometimes unknowingly used because the person knows of no other way to communicate. These people often joke about everything that is serious to them.

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Question: This girl I know never does anything she threatens to do when she's mad. How do I know if she'll do something dumb one of these times? I get tired of her.

Answer: This kind of person makes us angry after awhile. We tend not to listen to them, or even want to spend time with them. This is a normal reaction. The anger comes from our own fear that the one time we don't take the person seriously; they'll do something drastic. That's a lot of pressure and makes us feel like we can't win. The fact is that each threat must be taken seriously because the risk is high if it is ignored. It helps to sometimes say to this person, **"You upset me when you keep threatening to kill yourself. I know you're mad, but why would you want to give the person you're mad at the satisfaction of saying you're crazy because of your suicide threats? It really doesn't help, and killing yourself is not likely to change much of anything. Let's go talk to someone who can help straighten things out."** This may or may not help. The threat still needs to be taken seriously. If you don't feel comfortable dealing with the person, then tell someone else who can get to them.