



Communication Tips

Being Approachable

What staff members do teens see as approachable? Teens identify the following qualities:

Honest	Genuine	Available
Humorous	Trustworthy	Non-judgmental
Empathetic	Friendly	Knowledgeable
Professional	Familiar	Relates to teens

Teens say that one of the most important qualities is that the staff member is willing to listen and respond in a supportive way. Teens say that an effective listener is someone who...

- Understands what teens face every day
- Will really listen and not interrupt you to problem-solve
- Pays careful attention -- won't brush you off
- Is willing to put themselves in your shoes and can relate to how you are feeling

Here are some tips for effective communication:

1. Check and Explore

Make time to talk with the student privately. As you are listening, check and explore the teen's point of view. Do this to gather information or to express interest, not to confront. These are open ended questions, beginning with an observation followed by words such as "what," "who," "have," and "how."

- You seem tired lately. How are you feeling?
- It sounds like you are feeling really stressed. Who have you talked with about this?
- Have you had thoughts of harming or killing yourself?

2. Listen – validate their experience and show empathy

As best you can, put yourself in the student's shoes. Connect with the thoughts and feelings they have expressed. Acknowledge and validate their experience. Be sure your voice tone and facial expression reflects their feeling. Avoid jumping in with ideas or possible solutions.

- It sounds like sometimes you feel overwhelmed with your schoolwork.
- You feel like you don't have any friends, like you're all alone?
- I can see that this is very upsetting to you.

3. Always ensure the student's safety

If the student is in crisis, escort him or her immediately to your school crisis contact or send for the crisis contact to come to you. A suicidal crisis is a chaotic situation, and the student will respond best to calm and clear communication. State clearly and confidently what is happening next.

- Let's go talk with Ms. Gonzales. She can help you figure out what to do next.
- Come with me to see Ms. Gonzales. She is really good at helping students find their way through difficult situations.
- I am going to ask Ms. Gonzales to join us. She has the training and expertise to best support you in this situation.



Respond Summary

How do you RESPOND effectively?

Make time to connect with the student and then:

- Speak privately. Find a place to talk where you won't be interrupted.
- Engage in a calm, supportive way. Don't panic or rush the conversation. Relax and make eye contact with the student.
- Listen without interrupting and acknowledge the student's experience.
- Show empathy. Put yourself in the student's shoes and do your best to reflect, with your voice tone and body language, how the student is feeling.
- Be direct. Talk openly with the student. Don't be afraid to ask directly if the student is considering suicide. By asking, you allow open communication and provide hope.
- Always ensure the student's safety. If the student is at risk for suicide, never leave the student alone or send the student away.
- Know how to contact a crisis team member. Know who your crisis contacts are and when they are available.



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Myths & Facts about Suicide

MYTH Only depressed kids attempt suicide.

FACT Although the number one contributing cause of suicide is depression, teens don't have to be clinically depressed to have suicidal feelings or to attempt suicide. Even feeling extremely "bummed out" for a relatively short period of time can lead to impulsive suicide attempts.

MYTH Teens who talk about suicide don't kill themselves.

FACT Teens who are thinking about suicide usually find some way of communicating their pain to others – often by speaking indirectly about their intentions. Most suicidal people will admit to their feelings if questioned directly.

MYTH There is really nothing you can do to help someone who's truly suicidal.

FACT Most people who are suicidal don't really want their lives to end – they just want the pain to end. The understanding, support, and hope that you offer can be their most important lifeline. Teenage suicide accounts for 12% of all teenage deaths (almost 2,000 teens kill themselves each year, and many more attempt suicide.) Many of these deaths could be prevented with intervention.

MYTH Discussing suicide may cause someone to consider it or make things worse.

FACT Asking someone if they are suicidal will never give them an idea that they haven't thought about already. Most suicidal people are truthful and relieved when questioned about their feelings and intentions. Doing so can be the first step in helping them to choose to live.

MYTH Most teens who are clinically depressed do not actually consider suicide.

FACT Most teenagers who are clinically depressed do think about suicide – and between 15% to 30% of those teenagers who think about it, attempt suicide. About 2,000 teenagers kill themselves each year, making suicide the 3rd leading cause of death among teenagers.

MYTH Most suicide attempts occur without any warning signs or clues.

FACT According to research studies, up to 75% of those who die by suicide, communicate their suicidal intentions to others either directly or indirectly in the weeks before their death.



Myths & Facts about Teen Depression

MYTH Teens who claim to be depressed are weak and moody and just need to pull themselves together.

FACT Depression is not a weakness, but a serious health disorder. Both young people and adults who are depressed need professional treatment.

MYTH There is nothing anyone can do to help people who are depressed – they just need to work through it.

FACT A trained therapist or counselor can help them learn more positive ways to think about themselves, change behavior, cope with problems or handle relationships. Also, a physician can prescribe medications to help relieve the symptoms of depression. For many people, a combination of psychological therapy and medication is beneficial.

MYTH Only adults can get truly depressed.

FACT Depression is epidemic among teens today. Up to 20% of young people will experience clinical depression during their teenage years. That's one out of every five teenagers.

MYTH People who are depressed mostly feel sad.

FACT Other symptoms of depression can be irritability, lack of energy, change in appetite, substance abuse, restlessness, racing thoughts, reckless behavior, too much or too little sleep, or otherwise unexplained physical ailments.

MYTH Telling someone to cheer up usually helps.

FACT Trying to cheer someone up might make them feel even more misunderstood and ashamed of their thoughts and feelings. It is important to listen well and take them seriously.

MYTH Most people with depression cannot be helped.

FACT Depression can be effectively treated in 90 percent of cases with a combination of medication and therapy. Unfortunately, only 1 in 3 people with depression will get help.

MYTH Depression does not run in families.

FACT Children with depression are more likely to have a family history of depression.

MYTH Once depression is treated, it goes away.

FACT Almost 75% of teenagers who experience an episode of clinical depression will experience another one in their lifetime.



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Recognize Summary

RECOGNIZE a student at risk for suicide

Early warning signs:

- Difficulties in school, such as poor grades, missed assignments or difficulties with peers.
- Low self-esteem. Teens may say they feel like a failure and have negative views about their competence and self-worth.
- Physical complaints such as stomachaches, headaches, fatigue, etc.
- Change in sleeping or eating patterns.
- Use or abuse of drugs or alcohol.
- Overly self-critical. Teens may complain of being a bad person or feeling horrible inside.
- Low energy. Teens may have trouble getting out of bed in the morning and seem tired most of the time.
- Withdrawal from normal activities.

Late warning signs:

- Neglecting personal appearance.
- Talk of suicide or death.
- Isolation from friends and family. Teens may avoid family gatherings and events. Teens who used to spend a lot of time with friends may now spend most of their time alone and without interests.
- Conduct problems or aggressive behavior.
- Extreme anxiety, agitation, or self-injury.
- Expressions of hopelessness or desperation. Teens may feel that life is not worth living and may believe that a negative situation will never change.
- Refusal of help.
- Giving away prized possessions.