

# Speaking to Your Teen About Suicide

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**By Timothy Rice, MD**

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The recent media reports of Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain's suicides have evoked many feelings. These can include of grief, frustration, sadness, and confusion. Often our feelings and reactions are mixed, complex, and layered.



If you're a parent and have heard the news of a publicized suicide, chances are your teen has also heard the news. Teens will have their own unique feelings and reactions. With less experience than adults in receiving and processing distressing news, teens are uniquely positioned to be helped by an informed and responsive parent.

Starting a conversation with your teen after a high-profile suicide in the media is a key opportunity. Though you don't have to wait for some tragic news to have this important conversation, these unfortunate events provide a special opportunity to create something meaningful and life-affirming from a loss. In doing so we may pay tribute to the deceased.

## **Talking To Teens About Suicide**

It's a common misconception that asking about suicidal thoughts will somehow plant these thoughts. This leads many parents to avoid this topic.

It is important for parents to know that no evidence suggests that appropriately asking about suicidal thoughts will increase the risk of developing suicidal thoughts.

Checking in with your teen provides knowledge that may inform the creation of an appropriate plan of help. Checking in shows that you are available to your teen on these matters in the future. By openly discussing your own emotional reactions and showing that you feel comfortable with these feelings, your teen can internalize this function and employ it if needed.

As most parents know, many teens push their parents away when trying to have even mundane conversations, let alone important ones. This is a normal developmental process as teens struggle to find a healthy independence and separateness from their parents. Often teens project a false sense of independence to protect themselves from needing their parents too much. It is easy for parents to feel rejected and to believe that their teen wants space and distance. This dance between parent and teen can make it difficult for parents to check in with their teenage children.

In the case of these recent suicides, teens may minimize their importance, or they may devalue attempts to reach out to them. If you can bear this reaction without personal hurt and show your consistent presence to them and openness, this can show your teen you are available to discuss tough issues and to provide help and support should these concerns ever become a personal reality for your teen.

Here are some tips about how to start a conversation with your teen on this difficult topic:

- Did you hear the news about Kate Spade? It was difficult for me to read the reports that she struggled for so many years. What do you think about it? (Provide a bounded self-disclosure to model for your teen an appropriate sharing of reactions to promote open disclosure of your teen's reaction as well).
- How did you feel when you heard the news? Did they talk about it at school today? Did anyone you know have any difficult reactions to this? (Teens are often more comfortable talking in displacement: they may prefer to express parts of their feelings or reactions through speaking of the real or imagined reactions of figures in their lives).
- Many times these individuals struggled with an underlying mood disorder such as depression, or were unable to feel a sense of belonging. Are these ever challenges for you? (Broaden the conversation from suicide to its underlying risk factors).
- I want you to know that I am (or we are) always here for you if you want to talk. I promise to listen with an open mind and heart. Is there anything that I could do to make myself more available to you? (Show presence and receptiveness).
- Have you ever thought about suicide? You can tell me and we can talk about it. (Ask directly and unambiguously to show you are not afraid).

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### **How to Respond If Your Teen Says They Have Thoughts of Suicide:**

First, it is important to understand that thinking of suicide is not inherently dangerous. Many, if not most people will find themselves thinking at some point that the world would be better off without them. However, finding out if those thoughts exist is an important step to ensuring your teen receives appropriate help.

If your teen has said they have thought about suicide, it is time to gently dig deeper by asking general questions about what happened or what they were feeling that lead to those thoughts, and how they are feeling now. Ask about any recent stress factors in their life like any personal loss for the teen or the family.

The next questions are perhaps the scariest, but also the most important to ask, and how you respond even more vital. Ask about whether they have made any plans or thought about how they might attempt a suicide, and how often they think about it. It is important not to over-react or under-react. Make your goal to gather information and be an understanding, empathetic listener while also remaining a concerned parent.

If your child has expressed thoughts of suicide, said they think about it often, have thought about a method or made a plan, and have had recent stressors, these are significant concerns. Take some time to read for additional warning signs and risk factors such as changes in behavior, withdrawing from friends or hobbies, starting or increasing drug/alcohol use, or changes in appetite or weight. Also consider if there is a family history of mood disorders, suicide, or substance use disorders. If you are worried, call your pediatrician or a mental health counselor.

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Because risk assessment is a very individualized process, no content, including that of this article, should be taken as a substitute for a face-to-face visit with a professional. Another resource is the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1.800.273.8255.

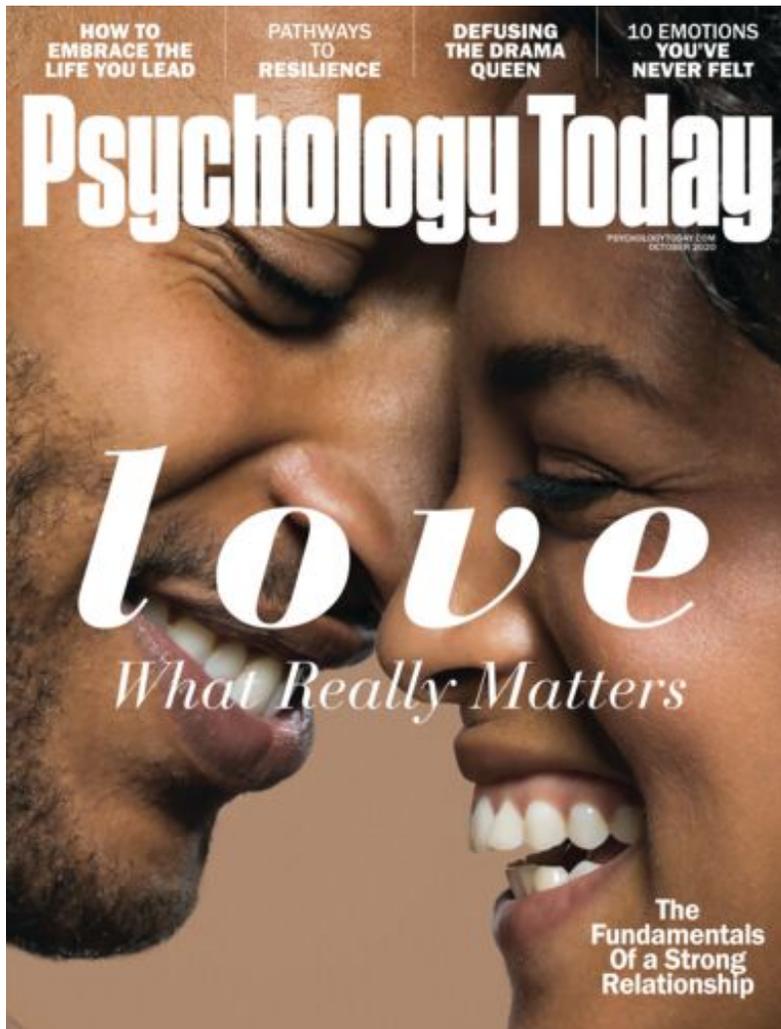
**About the Author:** Timothy Rice MD is an adult and child and adolescent psychiatrist in practice in New York, NY. He is currently the co-chair of the World Federation of Societies of Biological Psychiatry's Task Force on Men's Mental Health, where he focuses on safety and risk factor reduction with male children, adolescents, and young men. He is a member of the Association for Child Psychoanalysis, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, as well as the American Psychoanalytic Association, where he is Chair of the Child Advocacy Committee. His professional and research interests include the promotion of health and well-being in youth populations.

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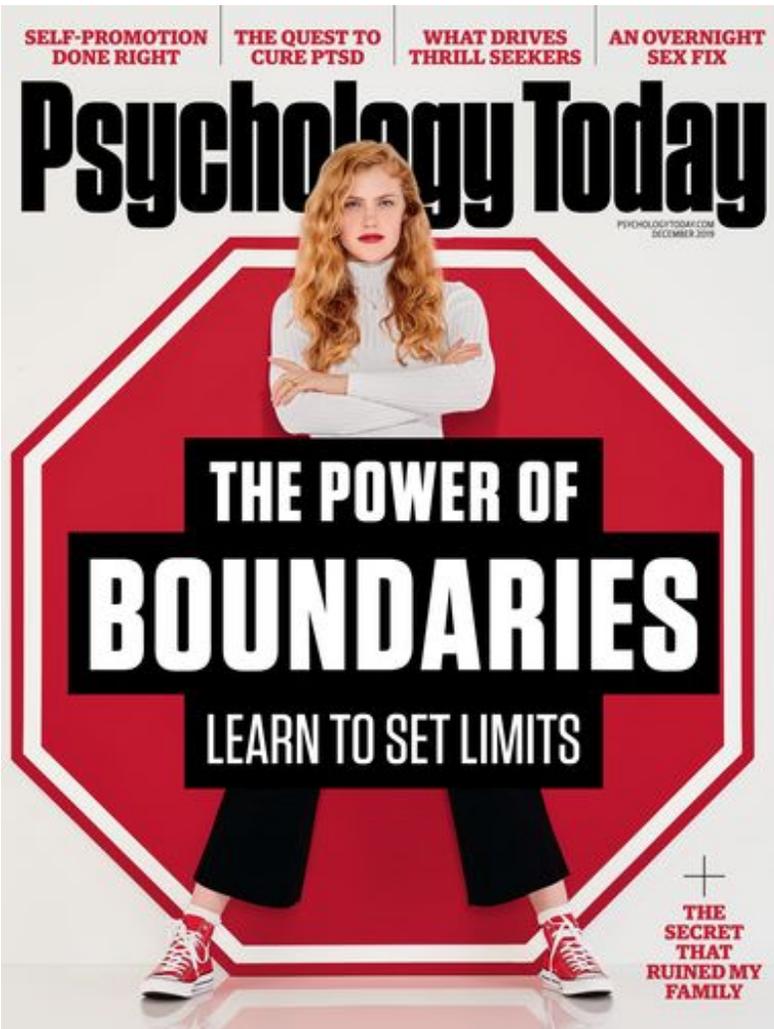
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