This fact sheet for pre-service teachers discusses guidelines for responding to a young person who may be experiencing suicidal thoughts. You will also find other useful fact sheets, such as suicide statistics and suicide prevention, on the Education section of the Response Ability website: www.responseability.org

**Warning Signs of Suicide**

While it is difficult to predict who will be at risk of suicide, there are some signs which may indicate that a person is thinking about ending their own life. If some of these signs occur in a young person, a teacher would be advised to talk to the person and if necessary refer them to the school counsellor or another professional for detailed risk assessment.

Some of the possible warning signs for suicidal behaviour include:

- the person has threatened to end their own life, verbally or in writing
- overt statements of suicidal intent eg 'Life isn't worth living …'
- less obvious statements that might refer to a decision to end life eg 'It's okay now, soon everything will be fine…'
- sudden changes in behaviour such as giving away prized possessions, writing farewell notes or making out a will
- persistent physiological complaints such as chronic headaches, weight loss, sleep problems, exhaustion, missing school or work
- emotional symptoms including withdrawal, seeming hopeless or helpless – or in adolescents, this may manifest as excessive anger and irritability
- changes in behaviour or academic performance in a young person, such as truancy and negative conduct, dramatic decline in achievements

**Your response**

Many people who try to end their own lives give verbal or non-verbal clues about their intent. Any suggestion of suicidal thoughts should always be taken seriously. If you think that a person may be so unhappy they might consider suicide, ask about suicidal thoughts – this won’t make them attempt suicide, but will help you to get appropriate help for them.

People are often concerned about raising this issue with someone who may be at risk, fearing that discussion may encourage a vulnerable person to act on thoughts of suicide. In fact, a troubled person may be relieved that somebody has recognised that life has become difficult for them.

Ask directly but compassionately, by saying something like... *Are things so bad for you that you’ve been thinking about hurting yourself?*

Even if the person says they are not having suicidal thoughts, the signs above may indicate difficulties with depression, anxiety or personal problems. The young person should be encouraged to speak to a professional about these issues, such as a school counsellor, psychologist, youth worker, GP or other health professional.

You should have some people or services in mind that you can recommend to young people and offer to help them get in touch. If possible, try to get a firm commitment from the young person that they will make or attend an appointment.
If a person does admit to having suicidal thoughts, it becomes urgent to put them in touch with a professional who has experience in assessing and responding to the risk of suicide.

Given that the young person has already opened up to you to discuss the situation, it is worth asking at this point whether they have a specific plan about harming themselves. People are at greatest risk if they have thought about a specific plan, it involves a highly lethal method, and they have access to whatever they will need to carry it out. ...Have you been thinking about how you might do that? Do you have access to .... ?

If you feel there may be a high risk of the person harming themselves or leaving without getting further help, ensure that you or another adult stays with them. If in doubt, it is wise to do this as a precaution. Quietly and calmly advise other staff in the school who need to know – such as the school counsellor and/or the Principal. Tell the student why you need to do this and invite the student to be present and involved – for example, accompany the student to the school counsellor or Principal and invite the student to tell the story themselves, so that the school can organise appropriate help and support.

Then, you or other staff should arrange to contact the young person’s family and if necessary refer to an external mental health professional – preferably with the consent of the young person. The details of this referral will be influenced by your school’s policy, the young person’s and family’s preferences and by how immediate the threat seems to be. In some cases, the young person might go home with their family and arrange to see a general practitioner; in more serious or urgent cases, the person might attend a local hospital to visit their mental health or emergency service.

It should be noted that contacting a young person’s family may not always be in his or her best interest. If the young person’s relationship with a parent or guardian is particularly problematic or even abusive, this may be a contributing factor to depression or suicidality.

On occasion it may be preferable for the school to refer a young person directly to a health professional. Such decisions will depend upon your school policy and the counsellor or Principal’s assessment of the situation.

You may find yourself sitting with the young person, while waiting for a school counsellor, family member or other help to arrive. If they want to continue to talk about their feelings, listen to them calmly and attentively. Treat them with compassion and avoid any comments which might seem dismissive or judgemental. Remember that it can take a good deal of courage for a young person to speak to you about such personal issues. Try not to become too involved in their problems, but simply sit with them and listen until help arrives.

Looking after Yourself

Responding to a student at risk of suicide might be a confronting and distressing experience. It is not uncommon to have some sort of emotional reaction or ‘let down’ after helping someone else through a crisis. This usually resolves as time passes; if you have any lingering troubling feelings, consider talking with a professional about your emotions.

A school counsellor may be able to assist you, or your school might provide access to support services for staff. You could approach a staff member you report to or have a rapport with, to find out if there is someone you might talk to. Alternatively, speak to a counsellor or psychologist.
in the community or perhaps contact a telephone service such as Lifeline (13 11 14). Keep in mind that it is just as important to look after yourself as it is to be responsive to the needs of others.

Response to Suicide Risk – some points to remember:

Don’t panic, ignore the situation, act shocked, make them feel guilty, threaten or be angry with them, dismiss their problems, and don’t promise to keep the situation secret.

Do ask if they have a plan to act on their thoughts, take them seriously, stay calm; if they seem very distressed or close to hurting themselves, remove weapons, car keys or other items they might use, and make sure someone stays with them.

Get help - seek urgent professional support for the person by linking them with a school counsellor, GP, mental health worker or other professional AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. If there is an immediate risk, contact a mental health crisis team or emergency department at your local hospital.

What about Confidentiality?

Sometimes a young person might disclose suicidal thoughts or behaviour but ask you not to tell anyone. The risk of suicide is one of a few situations where you MUST break confidentiality. You have to tell others (but only those who need to know) if there is a risk of violence, abuse, suicide or self-harm. Never promise to keep such issues secret.

You may need to explain this to the young person firmly but in an understanding way – either in general terms, or when you expect a disclosure, or even after they have told you they are thinking about suicide. Think about what language you could use in such a situation. Something suitable could be:

I want you to trust me and be able to talk to me - in general, I won’t pass on things you tell me in confidence. But if I think someone’s going to get seriously hurt, I have to tell someone else about it, so we can help. It’s part of my job as a teacher.
Sources


