

Talking to Children Who Have Been Affected by Suicide or an Attempted Suicide of Someone They Know

Together We Can. 

*Suicide Prevention Information for Veterans,
Their Families, and Caregivers*

Talking to Children About Suicide

Suicide is a difficult topic to discuss. When the topic comes up with your child — maybe your child asks about it or has been affected by a suicide or an attempted suicide of someone they know — you may be inclined to avoid talking about it because it makes you feel uncomfortable. You may think your child isn't ready to have such conversations or feel the need to protect your child. You may also want to minimize or shield them from the truth.

These are all understandable feelings and concerns. But avoiding the discussion, hiding the truth, or pretending it did not happen can prolong or worsen any anxiety, sadness, pain, guilt, rejection, or shame your child may be feeling. It can also undermine your child's trust in you.

It's important to have age-appropriate discussions with your child about suicide. Talking directly with your child about suicide and letting them know it's OK to talk about it can help them feel better during a confusing and emotional time. A mental health professional can offer more guidance on how to approach the conversation with your child. They can also help your child work through questions and feelings.

How To Talk to Your Child About Suicide

When deciding how to talk to your child about suicide, consider what and how much information they will be able to understand. You can also ask your child what (if anything) they have already heard about suicide. Asking your child what they know can help you correct any false information and help you know where to start the conversation. The level of information that you provide should be appropriate for your child's age and maturity and be guided by the questions your child has about suicide. The guidance in this document offers suggestions for talking to children at different ages, but there is no one-size-fits-all approach to talking about suicide.

Preschool-Age Children

Keep the conversation simple and focused on the questions your child asks. Try to use concrete language, like "death," "tried to die," and "died." Avoid euphemisms like "loss" and "went to sleep." Children at this age need to be reassured and feel safe but don't need to know all the details of the suicide or attempt. It's helpful to let your child's questions guide the conversation and to leave the topic open for later questions. Creative play, such as art or music, may be a helpful way for young children to explore and express their feelings. For example, you and your child could draw together and discuss the artwork. Or you could use toys to discuss how the child is feeling.

School-Age Children

Explain the suicide or attempt in terms your child can understand, allowing their questions to guide the conversation. Again, try to use concrete language. And use the term "suicide" in the discussion. School-age children may be sensitive to changes in their household and may have trouble expressing their feelings. Give your child a sense of stability by keeping their daily routine as close to normal as possible. Children of this age may also blame themselves or feel like they did something that contributed to the suicide or attempt. It's important to reassure your child that this is not the case and that they can come to you with questions at any time.

Teenage Children

Be open and honest. Just like younger children, teens need reassurance and may blame themselves for the suicide or attempt. However, your teenager may understand more than a younger child would about the situation. And they may be able to express how they're feeling or what they need from you to feel supported. Some teens may not be willing to discuss their feelings or ask questions. Continue giving your teenager opportunities to talk about anything bothering them. Teens who feel supported and can engage in conversations about suicide are better able to process their feelings.

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More Information About Talking to Your Child About Suicide

The information provided here is only a brief overview of age-specific guidance for talking to children about suicide and attempted suicide. For more information, visit www.mirecc.va.gov/visn19/talk2kids.

The Sesame Street for Military Families website (sesamestreetformilitaryfamilies.org/topic/grief) is also a good resource, with videos and activities to help families and children through the grieving process.

Be There for a Veteran in Your Life

You don't need special training to **Be There** for someone who may be in crisis. Everyone can play a role in preventing Veteran suicide. Approaching the subject may seem difficult, but it is crucial to start the conversation. For more information, visit BeThereForVeterans.com.



Know the Signs

Signs of a suicidal crisis may vary for each person but could include changes in mood and activities, an increase in alcohol or drug use, expressions of hopelessness, agitation, or withdrawal from others. If you notice these behaviors, **Be There** for the person in need.



Ask the Question

VA, in collaboration with PsychArmor Institute (psycharmor.org), developed the S.A.V.E. online training video, which describes how you can act with care and compassion if you encounter a Veteran who is in suicidal crisis.

S – Recognize the **signs** of suicidal thinking.

A – **Ask** the question: Are you thinking of ending your life?

V – **Validate** the Veteran's experience.

E – **Encourage** treatment and **expedite** getting help.

Access the S.A.V.E. training at BeThereForVeterans.com.



Get Immediate Help



Veterans who are in crisis or having thoughts of suicide, and those who know a Veteran in crisis, should contact the Veterans Crisis Line for confidential support available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year:

- Call **1-800-273-8255** and **Press 1**.
- Send a text message to **838255**.
- Chat online VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat.

For more ways to find help, visit VeteransCrisisLine.net/Get-Help/Local-Resources.

Resources for Veterans, Families, Friends, and Caregivers

- **Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS)** offers care to those grieving the loss of a loved one who died by suicide. Call 800-959-8277 or visit taps.org/suicide.
- **VA Caregiver Support** can connect you with a local Caregiver Support Coordinator and offer additional resources. Visit www.caregiver.va.gov or call 855-260-3274.
- **Rocky Mountain Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Center** provides guides on how to talk to children of various ages about a suicide or suicide attempt in the family. Information on resources, support, and counseling for Veterans and their families can be found at www.mirecc.va.gov/visn19/talk2kids.