

HELPING A YOUNG PERSON WHO HAS SUICIDAL THOUGHTS

*This document has been produced by
Clyst Vale Community College
Counselling Service.*

This document is not intended to be a definitive guide, but does hope to provide support to families with a suicidal young person.

The counsellors at CVCC take a student's disclosure of suicidal feelings very seriously. This is usually one of the events that we regularly inform the school about. Our guide for informing the school of a disclosure is based upon our ethical code, which usually includes:

- The young person has shared they have suicidal feelings
- They have had persistent and unbidden suicidal thoughts for some time
- The student has revealed they have a plan to carry out a suicide attempt

Why is my child feeling suicidal?

Usually a student who has suicidal thoughts may be depressed or suffering from anxiety. There are many reasons why they could be feeling this way, for instance: being bullied, feeling unloved or unacknowledged, dealing with family issues such as parental separation, long term illness either relating to themselves or family members or friends, issues with friendships, a poor self-esteem, abuse. This list is not definitive. The young person may be trying to deal with a personal problem that they cannot resolve, such as sexual orientation, issues involving lack of control (parental disputes etc).

What does 'suicidal' mean?

By suicidal the counsellors mean the young person has had thoughts of killing themselves. The intensity of these thoughts and likelihood of a suicide attempt being carried out is usually unknown and we have to use our judgement as best we can to gauge risk, but this is not an exact science.

Is it just a cry for help?

As adults, many of us may have experienced a thought to kill ourselves at some point. Did we really mean it? Or did we find ourself turning to these thoughts out of desperation or confusion? Just because we had these thoughts does not mean we went on to make a suicide attempt. Having suicidal thoughts is usually an indicator that something is wrong with our world and needs to be sorted out. Young people often lack the emotional and intellectual ability to resolve problems.

What can I do to help?

As a parent you are probably best placed to be the most help.

Firstly, take their thoughts seriously rather than dismiss them as being stupid or attention seeking. Our own fear might lead us to dismiss the issue.

Create a space and time to talk with your child away from distractions and give them the necessary time to have in-depth conversations, free from interruption and at a location the young person feels safe and comfortable with.

LISTEN to your child. It might seem trivial, but listening without judging your child may be *the* one most important thing you can do to help them.

Try not to become angry, be prepared to hear anything, don't interrupt – zip it and open your ears.

Whatever issue your child shares with you try to understand it from their point of view, not yours.

Avoid being derogatory, putting your child down, judging them, belittling them or giving them the impression you are disappointed with them.

Is it my fault?

This is probably a normal response to discovering your child is bitterly unhappy. But feeling guilty is not helpful. Guilt is likely to get in the way of helping your child. Try to put it aside. Remember, whatever happened in the past can't be changed, however right now you can do things differently.

Working with the counsellor

Sadly a young person will often feel betrayed by their counsellor, who has chosen to share intimate knowledge about them with the school. This is unavoidable since we must follow an ethical framework and school policies that require us to share our concerns. A student will often stop coming to see their counsellor after disclosing suicidal thoughts and finding out the counsellor has told someone else. We usually inform the student what we intend to do, but this doesn't stop the student feeling betrayed. Wherever possible the student needs to be encouraged to continue working with the counsellor.

Medical help

Making an appointment for your child to see a doctor is probably a good move. Sometimes suicidal thoughts are indicative of deeper psychological issues that even a fully trained counsellor cannot resolve. A doctor can set up appointments with a psychiatrist and other mental health team workers. There is a specific young person's mental health team, CAMHS, your doctor will inform. Your child may be so depressed immediate pharmaceutical help, such as antidepressants, is called for. Only your doctor can provide these. As counsellors we cannot claim we can correctly diagnose or dictate the best treatment for your child.

Talk to the counsellors

Counsellors operate under a confidentiality clause similar to other medical professionals. This means we may not be able to reveal intimate facts of your child's concerns. However, we are prepared to speak with you and will offer guidance where we can.

Precautions

If your child has expressed a means to attempt suicide your counsellor may be able to share this with you. Removing medicines, knives etc. should be done with as little drama as possible.

What next?

There are several good organisations and websites that offer parents and young people support such as:

www.youngminds.co.uk

The Samaritans - www.samaritans.org.uk (08457 90 90 90)

Childline - www.childline.org.uk (0800 1111)

Young Devon - <http://www.dya.org.uk> (01392 331666)

<http://www.papyrus.org.uk>

Family therapy

If issues lie within the family dynamics, family therapy might be in order, your doctor can advise you. Even if you think everything is fine and there's no need for family therapy, family therapy is useful to help identify issues the young person may be struggling with, even if for you they are minor or inconsequential.