

# Suicide Prevention Discussion Guide

## Introduction

Suicide is the second leading cause of death for America's teenagers. (Accidents are first, and homicide is third.) Those that die by suicide often do not truly want to die, they want their pain and suffering to end and do not see another option. Unfortunately, many teens and young adults do not have the experience to realize that the overwhelming feelings they are experiencing will not last forever and will get better with the passage of time. Treatment is available for suicidal thoughts, depression, and other mental health concerns. Suicide is preventable.

In this video <https://vimeo.com/716186874>, Maria is already showing signs of depression and suicidal thoughts when she experiences several stressful things that seem to pile on top of each other, increasing her risk for suicide. One of her friends—Rick—recognizes signs that Maria is having a hard time and might be considering hurting herself or ending her life. Let's see how these young people respond to the situation.

## Play video

### Post Viewing Discussion Questions:

- ↘ What were some of the signs that Maria exhibited which led Rick to suspect that Maria was considering harming herself or taking her life?

Answer: Giving away items of importance to her, mentioning "secrets," saying "it will all be over soon," appearing sad and crying frequently.

- ↘ Recognizing that people respond to life's challenges in different ways, what are other signals that may indicate suicidal thoughts?

Answer: Talking or posting about death/suicide or feeling trapped or like a burden to others, saying goodbye or giving away important belongings, changes in behavior including withdrawing or isolating, changes in eating or sleeping habits, hopelessness—things seem so bad that they will never get better, severe mood swings or increased depression or anger, or even happiness and relief, which can sometimes signal that a person has made the decision to end their life.

- ↘ It's much easier for people who are not experiencing Maria's thoughts and feelings to problem-solve. Placing yourself in Maria's shoes, how might you have acted without resorting to suicide?

Answer: Maria may have benefited from finding an advocate—someone who could help her to sort out problems, set priorities, and address each problem. Given her parents' conflict, she probably felt unable to access her usual support system. She

needed an adult with whom to share her problems and advise her—another adult relative, spiritual leader, school counselor, teacher/coach, or parent of a close friend. She also needed mental health treatment and could ask to see a therapist/ counselor/ psychologist and psychiatrist.

Later in the video, we see Rick act on his concerns by calling a suicide prevention lifeline. The information he receives from the lifeline operator is very important:

- ↘ What was the most important information given to Rick by the operator?

Answer: Rick noticed several signs of depression in Maria, including being tired, crying, giving her work to him, referencing “it will all be over soon” and “little secrets.” Rick did the right thing by calling the hotline and should not assume any responsibility of Maria’s actions, including if she dies by suicide. The decision is Maria’s; Rick did what he could to get her the help she needed. As you heard, we can draw parallels here to physical injury. During a heart attack, we do expect people to call 9-1-1, and perhaps to try CPR if they are trained, but no one expects a friend or bystander to perform heart surgery. Do what you can, but know that a mental health crisis requires professional intervention.

- ↘ If you were in Rick’s position and trying to get help for a friend, where might you go in your community to get the help?

Answer: This depends on the resources that are available in your community. Discussion should also include the new three-digit emergency number: call or text 988 or chat at [988lifeline.org](https://988lifeline.org) to link to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline network.<sup>1</sup> NOTE: As the discussion facilitator, you may need to do some research to identify community services available to help prevent teen/young adult suicide.

- ↘ How would you find out more information about teen/young adult suicide?

Answer: The Internet has a wealth of information that can be accessed by using any of the search engines. Look for Web sites that are government-sponsored or operated by a professional organization. Beware of information that may not be reliable. The Jason Foundation gives valid information on helping at-risk youth and young adults.

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<sup>1</sup> The old National Suicide Prevention Lifeline number remains in service at 1-800-273-8255.

## POST-DISCUSSION SUMMARY:

The warning signs for suicidal ideation are many and complex.<sup>2</sup>

- Talking or writing about suicide, even jokingly.
- Withdrawing from family or friends.
- Drastic personality change.
- Agitated or panicky behavior.
- Open distress or restlessness.
- Irritability and displays of anger.
- Significant changes in behavior, such as eating, sleeping or grooming habits.
- Noticeably rebellious behavior like truancy, vandalism, or sexual promiscuity.
- Dramatic changes in school performance.
- Giving away possessions.
- Remember that not all signs appear negative on the surface. It is possible that a person that has decided to end their life will suddenly appear relieved or calm.

Asking someone about suicidal thoughts or behaviors will not put the idea into their head. Rather, it is a sign of caring and may help make a difference in their life. It can be uncomfortable and difficult to bring up the topic of suicide, but people often feel relieved after admitting they are suffering. You might doubt whether you should ask if they are suicidal because they might have been joking or you may have misunderstood the signs. However, it is important to ask, and you should always err on the side of communication.

So, how do you do that? You can help by using the A-B-C's of support:<sup>3</sup> If you are worried about a friend, **Ask** them if they are considering harming themselves. "**Be** there": listening to a friend in crisis is one way to help support them; helping them make a plan to stay safe is another. And then "**C**": **Connect** them to resources such as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline or the Crisis Text Line's number (741741), or reach out to a trusted adult. And then, seek support for yourself. Being a friend to someone in crisis is likely to challenge your own resilience.

## Conclusion:

We have been talking through some serious topics in this discussion -- boundaries and risk, threats and crisis, and some of the uncomfortable parts of reality: embarrassment and shame, pressure and desire, and actions that create regret.

We all need to know – and talk – about these topics. Why? Because statistically, you or someone you know could experience similar thoughts or feelings. By knowing that there are resources, and knowing how to help, YOU can make a difference.

*The facilitator can distribute the handout to participants.*

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<sup>2</sup> The Jason Foundation <https://jasonfoundation.com/youth-suicide/warning-signs/> offers further information on helping at-risk youth and young adults.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/suicide-prevention>