

## **How to Talk to a Teenager about a Suicide Attempt in Your Family**

This information is intended to help inform and guide adults when talking with a six to twelve year old child after a suicide attempt in the family. It is not intended to replace the advice of a mental health professional. In fact, it may be best to use this along with professional support if you or your child is struggling with how to talk about this difficult topic. It is important to consider your child's level of development and ability to understand events when deciding how to talk with her. Sticking to the key issues and answering her questions may be all she needs. ("Dad was feeling bad enough that he didn't want to live, so he had to go to the hospital for help.")

### ***Talking to your teenager after a suicide attempt in your family***

It is important to talk to your teenager about the suicide attempt to help him understand what has happened. Without support of family/friends, he may try to make sense of this confusing situation himself. Sometimes teenagers blame themselves for something they may or may not have done. Teenagers may not want to talk directly about their worries or feelings. Instead, they may show them in other ways. They may isolate, or not talk to their friends out of shame, uneasiness or fear of being misunderstood or rejected. It's helpful to share a hopeful outlook, and when appropriate involve your teen in activities that may help make a positive difference.

### ***To consider if you should speak with your teenager***

- If your teenager was exposed to the crisis and traumatized, he will need some basic understanding of what happened.
- Even if he was not exposed to the suicide attempt, you should share the basics of the attempt with him, including any obvious injuries, and let his questions guide you from there. Help him make sense of what happened in the context of mental illness (and/or substance abuse), and include the support of a mental health professional in this conversation if you are not familiar with mental illness.
- If marriage or family problems contributed to a suicide attempt, avoid details that would put the teenager in the middle, between parents or other family members.
- If the family member is in the hospital, talk to your teenager as soon as possible.
- The goal is to answer his questions in a calm, non-judgmental way, so he won't be afraid to ask more questions.

### ***How should you talk to your teenager?***

- Pick a place that is private, where your teenager will feel free to express himself. Try to provide multiple opportunities to talk, even when a teen seems unresponsive or reluctant.
- Provide a safe space for your teen to express even uncomfortable feelings, including anger. Ask him questions that will help him open up to you.
- Be aware of your own feelings and how you are coming across. Your teenager may be more likely to listen if you appear calm and approachable.
- Keep checking in with your teenager. This will send the message that you are open to answering questions over time. Be honest.
- Offer extra support, affection and attention during this time (family meals, time together).
- Be prepared to discuss concerns about whether your teenager is at risk for similar behaviors.

### ***Other ways to support your teenager***

- For the younger teens, help them keep healthy structure in their daily routines, such as homework time, dinnertime, and bedtime routines.
- For older teenagers, who are more independent and more likely to structure the majority of their own time, you can talk to and encourage them in practicing self-care. "Dad is in the hospital now, but we both would like to see you

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*keep on doing such a good job with your school work. You said it helps you to sleep if you work out after school. Would you like to invite Paul to go with you to the gym this week?"*

- While providing stability, also remain flexible to a teenager's needs during a disruptive time.
- Get other support people involved (family, friends or clergy). This will benefit you and in turn benefit your teen.
- Although it's normal for many teenagers to avoid parent's affection, don't be surprised if he needs more physical comfort during a stressful time.
- Teenagers can regress when stressed, and may act like they did during younger stages of development.
- As the parent/relative who has been hospitalized becomes more stable, visiting them in the hospital and attending a family therapy session with a mental health professional could be quite helpful and reassuring.
- Show appreciation for your teenager taking on additional tasks while you attend to the relative's needs.
- Teenagers may benefit from discussing boundaries about disclosing information with friends, classmates and on social media outlets.

### **What do I say to my teenager?**

- Start with her level of awareness and understanding of the situation. *"Last night your brother was having a difficult time. What do you remember?"*
- Use her level of understanding and questions about the event as a guide when describing what happened. *"As you've noticed, Mom has been feeling depressed lately and drinking alcohol to cope. She felt so down last night that she had some suicidal thoughts and feelings."*
- Inform your teenager about emotional struggles and healthy problem-solving and coping strategies. *"Grandpa has been very depressed. Sometimes when people feel that way, they can also feel hopeless about the future and they are not able to think of healthy ways to deal with problems. Have you experienced those feelings? How do you cope?"*
- Address guilt, blame, shame, and responsibility. *"I want you to know that this is not your fault, or anyone's fault."*
- Assure your teenager that her family member is getting treatment/care. *"Dad is getting treatment at the hospital to help him deal with depression, and to connect him with other people who understand his situation and support him as he gets well."*
- Let her know that her daily routine will stay the same. *"Even though it is different that Mom is not here, you will still go to school tomorrow."*
- Encourage her to express her feelings, and her to know that her reactions are expected and normal. Invite her to ask any questions, and share her thoughts about the situation. *"How are you feeling with everything that's going on? Sometimes it can feel like there was something we could or should have done when something like this happens. Have you felt this way? What do you do when that happens?"*
- Help create a connection between the teenager and her family member. Tell her when she can expect to see her family member again. *"Would you like to go with me to visit your sister? She is going to stay in the hospital for a few days. Would you like to email her or send her a card?"*
- Allow her not to talk if she desires, and to choose who she talks to. Discuss how your teenager can share information with family and friends. *"If you don't want to talk about it now, I understand. Maybe you'll feel ready to talk about things in a few days. Your friend Jane has supported you before; do you think it might help to talk with her?"*
- Let her know you are getting support, and encourage her to find ways to build and rely on her own support system. *"I've been talking with Grandma about this, and have also decided to talk to a Psychologist. You can come with me if you like. There are also support groups in town you can join. You could also talk about this with your guidance counselor or your teacher."*
- Help your teen prepare for a family member's return if they have spent time in the hospital following a suicide attempt. *"Your sister will be ready to leave the hospital on Thursday. Is there anything you'd like to talk about or ask me before she comes home?"*

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