

TEEN SUICIDE AND SUICIDE SAFETY PLANS

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No matter how many years of experience in practice, when a teenage client turns around and says they “kind of attempted suicide the other day”, it’s hard not to feel panicked. After my 15-year-old client casually announced her recent suicide attempt in this manner, she then mentioned feeling relieved I didn’t “freak out” like most adults do at the very mention of suicide. Little did she know, internally I was definitely ‘freaking out’.

I realised in that moment that if I’d reacted with the distress I was feeling, not only would I have been unable to assist effectively, but my client would have been reluctant to bring up the topic of her suicidal behaviour with me again. Teenagers hold many assumptions of how their parents or teachers will react to such distressing information (often correctly), which results in them avoiding these conversations all together. The thing is, we can’t help if we don’t know what they’re going through. So it’s important we identify helpful ways of reacting, that encourages them to open up

and share so we can go on to help them cope and not act on their suicidal ideations.

So, if ‘freaking out’ isn’t an option – what are more helpful ways to respond when your teenage client presents with risk for suicide?

First and foremost, **assess the level of risk**, as your suicide safety plan will be determined by the severity of risk. If you’re unsure how to assess suicide risk, you can find plenty of screening tools online. When assessing risk, it’s important to distinguish between thinking about suicide or death versus intention to act upon such thoughts and whether they have already come up with a plan. If medium to high risk, you’ll have to:

- Inform their parent/guardian and explain what they need to know to try prevent a suicide from occurring (e.g. removing all harmful objects, not leaving the individual alone and seeking professional help).
- Consider hospitalisation.

The difficulty with knowing what to do in these situations is that it

always depends on the individual case. What’s in one person’s best interests can be the opposite for another. So it’s essential you work together with the client to identify what’s in *their* best interest, regarding their safety plan. This often entails having to inform a family member, especially if your client is still a teenager.

The general approach I take, when it comes to dealing with low to medium suicide risk is as follows:

1. **Psycho-educate** – Explain what mental health is and how illnesses such as depression affect the way someone thinks, feels and behaves. It’s important they understand the following:
 - a. Their intense suicidal thoughts, feelings and urges are *not* permanent, yet taking their own life *is*.
 - b. Many of their thoughts (e.g. people would be better off without me) are not true, they are symptoms of depression. Suicide beckons when people no longer feel they can

PROVIDED BELOW IS A SUICIDE SAFETY PLAN THAT CAN BE GIVEN TO YOUR PATIENTS.

“If you’re feeling like giving up, just remember all the reasons why you’ve held on for so long. It may not seem like it now, but you CAN get through this and you’re NOT alone.”

The urge to act on suicidal thoughts goes down eventually! If you’re unsure what to do when the urge is strong – just follow these simple steps.

1. KNOW YOUR WARNING SIGNS

- a. Identify what situations, thoughts or feelings trigger you to feel suicidal.
- b. If you notice these warning signs, follow your suicide safety plan.

2. CONTACT SOMEONE

- a. Write down the numbers of those you identify as potential contacts. Have multiple contacts, in case someone doesn’t answer their phone.
- b. There’s an app called My3 you can use, which is for this exact purpose.
- c. SADAG (The South African Depression and Anxiety Group) – 0800 567 567 or 0800 456 789. These calls are free, so it’s okay if you don’t have airtime, you can call and speak to a counselor anytime (they’re available 24 hours a day, every day). You can also WhatsApp a counselor 076 882 2775.

3. TAKE A LOOK AT YOUR LIST OF REASONS FOR LIVING

- a. Write a list of your reasons for living, which you can look at when you need to. It doesn’t need to be a long list and can include even the smallest of reasons – e.g. my plants. This is a list just for you, so you don’t have to share it with anyone.

4. TAKE A LOOK AT YOUR LIST OF THINGS TO DO TO FEEL SAFE, COMFORTED AND CALM

- a. It’s SO important that you have a list of options of helpful things you can do, when the urge to act on your suicidal thoughts is strong. Instead of having to come up with ideas in the moment, you can refer to the list.
- b. Calm Harm app is GREAT and has LOTS of helpful ideas for activities people can do when feeling distressed and unable to cope.
- c. Remind yourself (as many times as you need to) that these intense thoughts, feelings and urges are not permanent, yet suicide is.
- d. Remember you’re incredibly strong – you’ve managed to not act on these thoughts before and you can most definitely continue to do so... but remember, you don’t have to manage all on your own – help IS available!
- e. Remember – a lot of the thoughts running through your mind are NOT true. So it’s important to not just believe the thoughts in your head that are telling you you’re worthless etc.
- f. Make sure anything that you could use to harm yourself is **UNAVAILABLE**.
- g. Try letting your feelings out in any way that feels right, but that isn’t harmful to you (crying, drawing, writing, listening to music, exercising, screaming into a pillow etc.).
- h. Do something that distracts you – drawing, listening to music, watching something, practicing a relaxation technique etc.
- i. Google DBT Distress Tolerance skills and try some of them out. It can help to have already identified which skills work for you, so in the moment, you can implement them straight away.
- j. Practice self-compassion – Listen to a loving-kindness/self-compassion meditation on YouTube or via a meditation app (smiling mind/insight timer app). Give yourself a hug (it may seem silly, but it can be really comforting!!). Remind yourself, it’s okay that you’re not okay – this means you need to show yourself some extra love and kindness, just as you would to others who are not okay!
- k. Don’t be alone – it can really help to not act on urges if someone else is around. Being alone can increase the risk of acting on these thoughts.