



This information sheet is intended to serve as a guide for adults to use when talking with a 14-18 year-old teenager about 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 teenager is struggling with how to talk about this difficult topic. It is important to consider your teenager's level of development and ability to understand events when deciding how to talk with them about this issue.

Why should I talk to my teenager about a suicide attempt in the family?

It is important to talk to your teenager about the suicide attempt to help them understand what has happened. Without support of family/friends, they may try to make sense of this confusing situation themselves. 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 tell their friends out of shame, uneasiness, or fear of being misunderstood or rejected.

How should I talk to my teenager?

- Keep your teenager's daily routine as consistent and predictable as possible, but be flexible.
- Pick a place that is private where your teenager will feel free to talk. Be aware of what they may overhear from other conversations.
- Keep it simple. Use words your teenager will understand. Ask them questions.
- Be aware of your own feelings and how you are coming across. For example, your teenager could mistake an angry tone of voice to mean that you are angry with them, or with the family member who attempted suicide.
- If your family member is in the hospital, talk to your teenager as soon as possible. Keep checking in with your teenager. This will send the message that you are open to answering questions over time. Be honest.
- Get other support people involved (friends or clergy). This will benefit you and your teenager.
- 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.

What do I say to my teenager?

- Start with their understanding of the situation. *"I want to talk to you about what happened to dad. What do you remember from last night?"*
- Describe what has happened using understandable language. *"Mom was feeling very sad and hurt herself."*
- Inform your teenager about emotional struggles. *"Grandpa has been feeling very sad lately."*
- Address guilt, blame, shame, and responsibility. *"I want you to know that this is not your fault."*
- Assure your teenager that their family member is getting treatment/care. *"Dad is in the hospital getting help."*
- Let them know that their daily routine will stay the same. *"Even though it is different that mom is not here, you will still go to school tomorrow."*
- Encourage them to express their feelings. Help them to know that their reactions are normal and expected. Ask if they have questions. Sometimes it is easier to draw or write about feelings than to say them. *"I wonder what you were thinking about the things I've told you. Sometimes kids feel like it is their fault, or they did something wrong, or that it will happen to them or other adults in their life. Do you feel any of these? Do you have any questions about grandpa and what happened?"*
- Help create a connection between the teenager and their family member. *"Would you like to go with me to visit dad?"* Tell them when they can expect to see their family member again. *"Would you like to send a letter or a card to dad while he's in the hospital? He will be there for a few days."*
- Allow them not to talk if they desire, and to choose who they talk to. Discuss how your teenager can share this information with family and friends. *"If you don't want to talk about it now, that's ok. We can talk about it later or you can talk to grandma, too. Would you like to talk about this with your friend Jane? What would you like her to know?"*
- Let them know you are getting support, too. *"This is something that makes me sad and I need to get some help, too (from clergy, friends, and/or my doctor)."*
- Reassure them that you are in charge and in control, and that they can come to you with concerns and questions.

If you notice that your teenager is unusually withdrawn, tearful, or depressed, seek professional help or call 1-800-273-TALK (8255). For additional resources and information on how to talk with 4-8 year-olds and 9-13 year-olds about suicide visit: http://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn19/VISN_19_Education.asp or <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/Veterans/>.