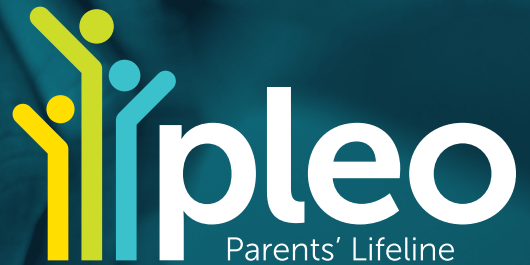


# Supporting Parents of Suicidal Youth: Communication



The information offered here is the product of a parent-led project that brought together parents and youth with lived experience, clinicians, and experts in suicide prevention to offer tips for help and hope based on their front-line experience.

## PART A - What can help parents based on experience

**Keep communication open, seek opportunities to talk**, and be willing to discuss mental health. Even if you're not always available to your child because of other commitments, try to make sure that they have opportunities to talk when you do have time together. Using "I" statements to open difficult conversations with your child can be helpful. It can help prevent blaming or yelling, and is a way for you to express how you feel and what you want/need from your child. If they're comfortable, they can use the same technique to express how they feel and what they want/need from you or others. It might feel a little robotic and awkward at first, but once you get it down, it can be helpful. Both parties will be better able to understand what the other feels/needs/wants.

**Be positive, free of negative emotion or judgements, listen and be empathetic** - this will help develop a bond of trust between you and your child, so you can be better prepared for crisis when it does happen. Avoid saying anything that might hint to your child that you are dissatisfied with them, disappointed, etc. Validate that what they are experiencing is terrible, even if you can't understand what they are going through, and that you are committed 100% to helping them. Just hearing, "I see

how devastating this must be to go through, I understand what you're sharing with me, and I'm so sorry you're going through this," can make your child feel validated without feeling pressured to get better for somebody. It may allow them to feel safe to feel their feelings with you - no pressure, no questions, just feeling their feelings, and feeling like someone cares. Remember that your child's behaviours - acting out, manipulating, etc. - may be because they don't know how to deal with their extreme emotions. Suffering can feel really big as if there is no way out. If emotions are high, give your child space and time to decompress. It's ok to not always have the solutions or answers.

**It's important to take your child's feelings seriously.** What might seem trivial for a parent (breaking up with a boyfriend/girlfriend, not getting invited to a party, someone walking past them in the hallway without saying hi), can be truly devastating for a child. It's important for parents not to trivialize feelings, but to just hear them out and be supportive. Their brains are on overdrive during adolescence especially - between the neural pruning, and the new neural networks forming, and the hormones and the lack of frontal lobe function, the teen years are tough! Try to show compassion and support for their feelings, problem

solve and re-think through the situation (i.e., maybe your friend didn't say hi to you in the hallway because they were focused on where they were going and not mad at you...). Basically, parents have to be their teen's frontal lobe.

**Help your child with self-talk** - it is hugely impactful when it comes to mental health. What people say to themselves directly impacts their moods and, thus, their behaviour (Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) in a nutshell). If parents can help their child change what they say to themselves, they can change their moods and, ultimately, their behaviour.

**Try to understand what it means for them when they say they are suicidal** - which is not the terminology that they will often use. They may say they don't want to live, that they feel their life is not worth living, that they'd rather just not be around, be dead, etc. - regardless - try to engage and connect with your child to ensure that they understand that they are being heard.

### Ask questions. When your child says they want to die:

- Can you tell me what it is you want to end?
- What will dying give you?
- How will dying help you?
- Telling me you want to die is telling me you are having some HUGE feelings, can you tell me what they are? (A feeling can't kill you. A thought can't kill you. What you do with either could...let's talk about the feelings that are leading you to think this way).
- What are some choices of things you/we can do to help you feel like you have some more moments of control when it feels so big?
- What can I help you with so you can choose not to die right now even if you have thoughts of wanting to end your life?
- Yes, you might try to end your life and that would be devastating to me, how can I/we help you choose not to die?

### When a child is able to articulate feelings ask:

- Can you tell me what you're feeling?
- Tell me about the pain you're feeling.

- What is one thing that we can do to help take the pain down just a notch?
- Can you tell me a moment when you don't feel (the feeling) as badly?
- If you could have a magic wand right now and make 3 wishes come true, what would you wish for?
- Sometimes we can feel x AND also feel y - i.e.. I can feel super sad and feel some comfort when I eat an ice cream, or cuddle up with a dog/cat, even when I'm crying.
- Let's find the moments/activities/people where it feels just a little bit less
- Use feeling wheels- available online - to help name and articulate feelings

### Try to remain calm and remember how much you love your child!

There will be times when you may be angry, frustrated, etc. You may feel like your child is displaying self-defeating behaviour, etc. Think about how you would feel if this person was no longer in your life. This is usually a very sobering thought process and in most cases, will help you put any frustrating behaviour in perspective.

**Try to remember what it was like when you were a child.** What was your childhood like? What stressors did you have? Did you like school? How did you interact with your peers? Were you ever afraid? Were you ever bullied? For most of us as parents, we may have a tendency to put the past behind us and forget the difficult parts along the way. We have developed coping skills and that is what we want for our own children.

**Quickly assess moods**, and ask whether a hug or some company would be good - it can be a conversation starter.

**Even if you can't stand the behaviours** of your child, somehow you have to let them know you want to help them.

**Listen to your gut** when assessing how your child is doing and what action is appropriate.

**Keep talking.** Be fearless and explore, even if you really don't want to hear the answers! If talking doesn't work for your child maybe writing a letter will keep communication open, or sending an email.

**It's a delicate balance** – there's a point at which prying for information or continuously asking if your child is suicidal is too much, and may cause them to withdraw. Waiting for them to express their suicidal feelings will help them feel like they can be comfortable in communicating with you and that they can trust you in hard times. Things like, "Life gets better" or "You have everything you could ever want/You've got everything to live for" are not effective. Respect their privacy as much as possible. Your child will not trust you if you make it a habit to go through their phone/computer/tablet/diary or if you try to get their friends to tell you about them. Sometimes these things may be necessary, but don't do it for no reason. Expect backlash from your child if you do these things.

### **Ask yourself, "what if they weren't my child?"**

What if I didn't know all the tricks and schemes they'd already tried? Would I sit and listen and give them the time of day?" This may help to restore your compassion and perspective.

**It takes lots of patience and sometimes it wears thin.** It's ok to tell them you need to take a break. Seeking outside support for the emotional toll that a parent experiences can make you a more effective communicator and supporter. Use resources for yourself as much as possible so that you have reserves to keep coming back with warmth, love, and encouragement. Hire a babysitter. Tell your child why- that it is for your peace of mind, what you have to do to manage yourself in this terrible situation. Remember you do not have all the answers. Remember you're not alone, lots of families are struggling, if you're willing to be open there's tremendous support in places you may not expect (family, friends, colleagues). Love for your child will help get you through this.

### **Your child may or may not want to talk to mom or dad about their struggles.**

Acknowledge that and let the child know that it's ok if they don't want to talk to you about it but that they need to talk to SOMEBODY.

**Create a safety plan** and check-in system with your child.

### **Developing connection between parents and children is essential.**

Help your child understand that their feelings matter, and that they matter. Respect your child and their ideas. Ask about their

passions. Help them recognize and explore alternatives to dying. We can help by planting the seeds of hope that things can improve. Remember repairing any relationship that is important to us will take time. Time will heal.

**Manage your expectations** for your child. Don't overwhelm them with your plans for their future. They may not be able to do some of the things you wanted (i.e. university) on your timeline and they may not share your values/religious beliefs. Respect their individuality and help them reach their potential.

**Always take your child seriously**, even if they don't have a plan and say all is ok. If they've been talking about suicide it could be an impulse at any moment. Somehow get their trust so they let you know when they feel suicidal. When they tell you they are suicidal be assertive and finite - become action based. Get the car ready, pack a lunch, convince them the best action is to go to the hospital. I know the hospital has its pros and cons, but it is an excellent destination in times of dire need. It shows that we love the person so much that we're willing to make executive decisions in their life. Get them there and find ways to stay there. It's best to deal with this thing on your own, as a family unit because adding additional strangers to the mix could potentially heighten the episode and make it traumatic. Be there to sit with the child. In this role, your role is to be present, speak in a calming, low, soothing, voice. You might be very scared at this point but its best to not project that energy. Act like you know your child is going to be okay. This is just a moment in their lives, there's much more this person will experience because they're not going to die today. You have to believe that. You're simply there to listen, be observant, remain relaxed, answer any questions they ask, and be there emotionally.

### **Try to help them see that because they're feeling such intense emotions/feelings they can't see past the pain to the possibility of things getting better.**

The feelings may be valid but may not always be accurate; they may have good moments within that suffering and there may be solutions available even when they aren't able to see them. It can be helpful to point out the positives. Let them know you want them to stay here because you can still see how things can get better, have hope, see change...

## PART B - What can give parents hope

**Appreciating good lines of communication**, when your child is relatively open with you.

**Remembering that your child's brain is still developing** and they are trying to learn coping mechanisms.

**Remembering that the brain is a part of the body** that can be ill and treated like any other part of the body.

**Noticing that more people are talking about suicide and more people are coming forward, helping to reduce stigma** and make it easier for others, like your child and family, to seek help.

**When things are stable, building good memories.** Encourage anything positive they want to do or talk about. Try to think of every smile or laugh as a penny in the bank account you're building, which will help carry you all through the next downtime.

**Trying to have positive events** for your child to look forward to.

**Knowing we can always improve our relationships through communication.** Everyone needs to feel a sense of purpose and belonging. We can develop these skills to better ourselves and

to support others. We all have the capability to listen and communicate - the sky is the limit.

**Knowing that at some point, your child may be able to recognize** and show their appreciation for being alive, saying things like "thank you for being everything I ever needed, whenever I needed it."

**Finding training and support** to get better at this as a parent. In particular, parents have suggested Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) training as helpful, as it teaches about how to respond in a way that is validating, even when you don't understand what your child is going through.

**Seeing your child develop good communication and coping skills** that empower them to better advocate for themselves.

It's our hope that you find this information practical, helpful, and hopeful. The collective wisdom here is not a substitute for guidance or medical advice specific to your family's needs. It is a piece of the puzzle you are navigating, from those who have been there, and get it, and want you to know that you are not alone.

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● [pleo.on.ca](http://pleo.on.ca)

● 613.321.3211 (Ottawa)

● 1.855.775.7005 (toll free)



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