

Supporting Parents of Suicidal Youth: Safety at home



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

Remember that responsibility is ultimately with your child.

Encourage your child to have autonomy over their health and safety. Parents can't always be at home. A suicidal child will find a way – even if you safety proof the home, they can buy harmful things. This is perhaps the scariest question of all. The fact of the matter is that there are so many different ways to attempt suicide, and some kids can be very resourceful. It's similar to baby-proofing a home. No matter how good a job you do, they will always manage to find that one thing that you missed.

Remove the hazards relevant to your child.

Consider past experience of anything your child has expressed as a method to complete suicide - remove any related item or substance that they mentioned from the home or from view (i.e. if an overdose is in their plan, lock up medication). Your child may feel as though they aren't trusted when watched over, and it may be more helpful to include them in a dialogue, for example, "I am going to lock up sharps, medicines, etc. not because I don't trust you but because I love you and worry about you. Is there anything else that you need me to take away? Can we go through your room together? Is there anything else you need to do to make you feel safe or give me peace of mind?" During non-crisis days, starting a conversation

on their self-harm habits to know what they're impulsive towards, can also help safety proof the house. Everyone is different so different harmful items can be a trigger (i.e. as one youth shared in this project, in the past they would have passing thoughts about using household cleaners, but even in those moments of crisis knew they would never use them, so they were never part of the safety proofing).

Restrict safety proofing and surveillance to when your child is actively in a crisis period.

That's when it's needed the most and when it's a priority. Constantly safety proofing and watching can cause tension and stress for everyone. Communication and trust will decrease immensely, and you may be communicating to your child that you don't trust them to be able to heal.

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If your child has a job, it may be helpful to create a shared bank account

to know how they're spending their money, and it may also be helpful to keep their bank card safe during a crisis period. This could help prevent harmful purchases.

Have frank conversations

and try not to be judgmental. For example, you can say "is this what you truly want to do? I would miss you tremendously, and I'm not certain how I would cope if you did something like that. I would miss you so much. I don't know if I would survive." They need to know a parent's level of concern and why they're concerned. Question and talk about safety, just like you would a plan to escape in a fire. This is another type of fire. Build an effective way to communicate and develop trust.

Give your child a chance to feel some independence

through this process. They'll feel like they have more choices in their life when it seems like chaos, it helps them learn how to take care of themselves (as much as you would want to, you won't always be there to safety proof the house or watch over them), and finally, it can also help them understand that they do have control of their life, and can learn to trust themselves.

This may be the hardest thing to do but

what they may need is someone to sit with them, feel their pain, be part of the process. Often words are lost in the spiral that is suicidal thinking. Often presence is not lost in this spiral. Being present, being open, and being courageous through it can be a safety line. You are showing up by being there, being present. Often we are submerged in fear, and fear is valid in these cases, but fear does not help the situation. Reminding them that they are not alone, that there is hope, there is a way out that's not suicide.

Point out reasons to live, and that choices have consequences

and some can have devastating effects. Hobbies, community, connection even to just one person, and spiritual practice can help.

Try to manage your fear

– "the means to the end" and the possibility of missing something will always terrify parents. Understand that sometimes suicide attempts can be thought through, but many times they are impulsive and not well thought through.

Have your child commit to a safety plan and develop a rating system

that they can share with the parent, (red/yellow/green or number system - 0 being the child does not have any suicidal ideation and 10 meaning they do). Have a plan of what to do in relation to the number that your child gives you. Elements of a safety plan include:

- early warning signs- physical, emotional, cognitive, behavioural
- strategies to distract, ground, soothe
- identifying people and places where they can go to soothe, ground, distract
- identifying people in their lives who can sit and be with them when they feel horrible, sad, miserable, without judgment
- identifying helping professionals who are accessible via the internet, chat, telephone, visits/appointments
- create a safety/comfort box that contains items that let the child know they are loved, cared about, belong (i.e. photographs, cards, letters, mementoes, include favourites such as a favourite tea, activity, or game that they can engage in when feeling less safe.)

Trust your gut, trust your child.

Don't beat yourself up.

Use resources, i.e. call a crisis line, give your child numbers for talk lines, online information, and call 911 if necessary.

If they don't want anything to do with you, try not to feel offended.

They may want to have a friend or significant other over that can distract them, but you'll feel more comfortable about their safety than if they were alone. Chances are their friend will distract them, bring in some laughter and pull them further away from their dangerous feelings. But be mindful to not bring anyone over that could motivate or bring in dangerous behaviour (drug/alcohol use, negative/hurtful words, etc.)

PART B - What can give parents hope

Knowing that your child is at risk and has survived thus far. They have things to deal with but they are doing their best.

Recognizing that your child has access to hurt themselves and chooses not to.

Knowing that your child can start to be empowered about their mental health and develop healthy thought processes.

Knowing that with time and maturity, your child's suicidal ideation is no longer continuously on a parent's mind.

Hearing youth talk about the future, whether it's 5 minutes from now, 5 days from now, 5 years from now. It's important because it signifies that despite their mental health issues, they're still thinking about the future.

Increased accommodation and compassion from employers that allows parents to attend to a child's needs as required. Increased awareness of mental health has helped make employers more sensitive.

Knowing there's usually something that holds a child back from executing plans. It's human nature to want to stay alive. Even in a child's darkest moments, there's a will to live. It may be small, wavering, thin, but it exists. If they're still alive, there's a will. Hold onto that hope. You may not be able to prevent them from hurting themselves. That's a fact. But to hurt oneself and to end one's life are two very different pathways.

Knowing that strong bonds with family and friends can help your child realize how much they're loved, needed and have a meaningful future. Your child can see how much loved ones sacrifice to help them get better and that may give a child the strength to take care of themselves and their mental health.

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

● 613.321.3211 (Ottawa)

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