

Talking with students, if students raise the issue of suicide

You may not be able to choose where to discuss difficult or sensitive topics including suicide, especially if a student initiates it, or the subject comes up in a classroom situation. If students ask about suicide, it's best to be open and honest, and direct.

The Mental Health Foundation's guide to talking about suicide with young people includes some suggested ways to respond to some tricky questions. It can be found here:

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/connecting-through-kōrero>.

This also provides advice on what to avoid when talking (kōrero) with young people about suicide.

Use your judgement to decide whether it's okay to address the discussion right then, or if it would be better to suggest another time. If possible, try to have the conversation when you feel more prepared and have time to be relaxed, ready to listen and respond appropriately.

How to respond to tricky questions about suicide

If you're worried about answering tricky questions, remember it's best to be open and honest. You don't need to know all the answers, and it's okay to say you're unsure. Here are some suggested ways to respond to some tricky questions.

What is suicide?

- 'Suicide is when somebody kills themselves on purpose.'
- 'Suicide is when someone makes their body stop working.'

Why do people kill themselves?

- 'There isn't an easy answer to that question. There can be all sorts of reasons. People who kill themselves have lost hope that their lives will get better.' You can help by talking to them about getting help
- 'People who want to die by suicide feel a lot of emotional pain. They feel that dying is the only way to end their pain. The pain can also stop them connecting with support and other things that can help them stop hurting.' You can help by talking with them and getting help

How do people kill themselves?

- 'Different people try to end their lives in different ways. The important thing is to try and help so that people no longer want to make that decision.'
- 'The way people die isn't as important as supporting people to see a different way out of their pain and getting help for them'

Whose fault is it?

- 'It's nobody's fault. However, there are things we can all do to take care of each other, and make sure anyone else we know who is feeling sad, knows that there is help available.'
- 'It's not your fault. You didn't cause this.'
- 'Suicide is never caused by just one thing. It's multi-layered, the result of many factors coming together.'

Things to avoid when talking about suicide

Avoid conversations that makes suicide seem like a reasonable choice

Sometimes, after someone has killed themselves, people might comment that the person is 'at peace', 'no longer in pain' or it being 'their time'. Other times people see suicide as a logical response to tough situations. For example, 'The kids at school were mean as to him; what choice did he have?'

Why to avoid: When students hear these things, they may feel that suicide will bring peace from pain and is a natural response to challenging times. It's very important to make sure nothing you say could suggest to students that suicide is an appropriate way to deal with difficult situations.

Avoid speculating about why someone tried to take their life

It's common to try to understand the 'reason' someone died by suicide and to look for a single cause, such as bullying or a relationship ending. Suicide is complex, and there is often no single reason. Usually, it's a result of a combination of different feelings, actions and circumstances. It is never anyone's fault.

Why to avoid: Trying to find one single 'reason' for someone's suicide does more harm than good. Family/whānau and friends of people who die by suicide can find speculation painful, because it can feel like they are being blamed. Understanding, support and guidance are what's needed, not judgement.

Avoid talking about methods of suicide

As much as possible, avoid talking about how or where the person died. If students are already talking about the method, be honest, but avoid any unnecessary details. Instead, focus on helping them support each other, and enabling access to support.

Why to avoid: When people are already thinking about suicide, hearing about a method can get them thinking 'this would be a good way for me to kill myself. I know it works.'

Avoid talking about suicide as a selfish act, or how it has harmed those left behind

Although anger and shame are understandable reactions to a suicide, it's important to remember that emphasising these feelings increases the stigma or sense of disgrace, about suicide. This can, in turn, make it difficult for a young person to feel like they can access help or talk to someone about having suicidal thoughts and their feelings. It can also be difficult for family/whānau who have lost someone to suicide to share their feelings and access further support as needed

Why to avoid: Stigma around suicide often causes people to hide suicidal feelings and avoid seeking support. Also, family/whānau who have been bereaved may be less likely to talk about their feelings and get the support they need. This is important, because those who have recently been bereaved are at a higher risk of suicide themselves.

Avoid presenting suicide as criminal, sinful or saying someone has committed or threatened suicide

Some religions and cultures consider suicide to be sinful or criminal. You might personally share these views, but it is important not to communicate these personal beliefs to students when you are talking about suicide as it can prevent people from seeking help. No one threatens suicide, if someone expresses suicidal thoughts they need help.

Why to avoid: Presenting suicide as sinful or criminal can make people less likely to reach out for help when they're going through difficulties, because they think they will be judged.

Dealing with flippant comments about suicide

Just like anyone, students can use careless language about suicide that might be hurtful to someone who is going through a difficult time. 'KYS' and 'KMS' are common expressions that stand for 'kill yourself' or 'kill myself'. When a student uses these phrases, they may not be thinking about what they're saying. Or they may be using dark humour as a way to cope with tough things happening in their life. It's important to follow up in either situation. Respond directly to students to help the student communicate sensitively, safely and effectively:

- 'It's not okay to make jokes about suicide. I know you didn't mean to be hurtful, words can really hurt though. What else could you have said in that situation?'
- 'I've heard you make quite a few jokes about killing yourself lately, and I'm worried. Can we talk?'
- 'Instead of saying 'KYS', what else could you have said?'
- 'It seems like you're going through a tough time. How can I help?'

Whānau and friends are often concerned about some of the risks involved with having conversations about suicide. To help increase your confidence, here are some things to know.

Dealing with safe online peer to peer communication about suicide

The #chatsafe guidelines <https://www.orygen.org.au/Education-Training/Resources-Training/Resources/Free/Guidelines/chatsafe-A-young-person-s-guide-for-communicatin> provides tools and tips for young people to help them communicate safely online about suicide. They provide guidance for young people about sharing their thoughts, feelings and experiences online, including suicidal behaviours and how to get help.