

Responding to suicidal distress

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1. What can I do if my child says that they want to kill themselves _

Hi there, my name's James and I'm a dad and I've got a few questions about youth mental health I was wanting to ask. Hi James, absolutely. My name's Jess Koro and I'm a child and family psychologist. Wonderful. So what do I do if my teenager says they want to die or they tell me they're going to kill themselves? Yeah, so I guess firstly I just want to acknowledge that this would be incredibly scary to hear as a parent. And so in that moment, the best thing that you can do and the most important thing you can do is take a deep breath and work on managing your emotions because it's going to bring up a lot of emotions.

And we want to be in a place where you can respond to your child rather than react. So reacting to the child would be the urges that come up for you. You may want to yell, you may want to cry, you know, tell them how could they do this, how selfish is that? So these really understandable urges that just come up. But often reactions aren't that helpful in the moment or in the long run, so we want to be able to respond. So by taking a deep breath, thinking things through, responding means that we can actually think through what we want to say. So yeah, the most important piece is keeping your emotions in check and it's going to be the hardest piece.

And so when your child said this, we want to take it seriously, we want to talk about it. And I think a lot of people believe that by talking about it we might be planting ideas in your child's head. Maybe, you know, a worry that it's going to mean that they're going to die. That they're more likely to do something, but there's actually no evidence for that. In fact, we know by talking about it is actually going to be helpful. So when we talk about it, we want to be like a duck on water. I don't know if you've heard that metaphor before. So ducks are kind of gracefully floating around the pond, but underneath their feet are frantically paddling.

And so in that situation, just imagine yourself the duck on water. You're calm, you're curious, you're listening. But underneath, you will be panicking, you will be scared. And it's just trying to keep that underneath. You may even need to walk out and say, okay, I really want to talk about this. I need to go and make myself, how about I make us a cup of tea and I'll come back. That can be your panic outwardly time, do what you need to do and then come back. So when, yeah, how do you even talk to yourself? How do you talk to your child about it? Yeah. So the main thing we want to do is kind of just come into that space and be able to hold those big emotions for your child.

I think we so naturally want to protect our children from these emotions that we can do things that push it away. So, you know, you're fine. Look at all these good things you've got going on in your life. Distract you. No, let's go shopping. It's all good. Yeah. So that can sometimes make the young person just not feel like they're heard. You know, by the time they've said something like this to you, then things are pretty bad. And so we just want to be there. We want to listen. We want to be curious. We want to validate them. So validate them means kind of that we're trying to understand the emotion and we get it.

So we might not get why it's happening, but we get that this is really tough. This is really hard. So just saying something like that, I can see that you're really sad. I can see this is really hard. I can see this is really hard. And just being non-judgmental. Another thing that can come up is people want to know why. You know, it's really natural. Like, why do you feel this way? I don't understand. I don't get it. And so by being curious about what's going on, you know, you can just say, gosh, this is tough. What's going on? That can open it up for your young person rather than why. Why? I don't get it.

Why is this going on? Sometimes, I mean, teenagers often don't actually know why. It may be really kind of a big friendship breakup that's happened and something really obvious. Or it could be just a whole lot of little things. I mean, adolescence is really, really hard. So just listening to them helps them to feel heard. Yeah. It helps. Absolutely. And it can feel like you're not doing anything because you want to jump in and you want to protect your child. So you want to try problem-solve and kind of take it all away. But the best thing you can do is just being there. And then also, obviously, you do want to look at help as well.

So your GP is the best place. So they have access to all different services and they can refer to whoever is going to be best. If you are worried in that moment, though, there are services. So within Canterbury, there is the CAF emergency team, which is child, adolescent, and family emergency team. And so they do Monday to Friday. And there's also another number for a crisis team outside of those hours. But they are there 24-7 if you've got questions, you're not sure what to do, you're worried about your child. They are a really, really useful resource. Okay. So if my child was to say, I'm going to kill myself, and then storm out of the house and leave, I could pick up the phone and ring that number?

Yeah, absolutely. They can talk you through what you could do. They can contact your child if they do answer the phone. And they can also arrange, if needed, for you to come in and talk with them for you and your child as well. Okay. So what do I do if I say no or I put limits in place around my child and they say that they're going to kill themselves? Yeah, this is a really common question that comes up. And it feels like a really difficult place to be in as a parent. And again, you know, your emotions are going to be firing, alarm bells are going to be, yeah, kind of going away. And it's really similar to what we've just talked about.

So even though in that moment you might have a thought, they're only saying this because I've said no to them, because I've said no to, you know, whatever it might be, we still want to take it just as seriously. So exactly like what we talked about before, we want to be curious, non-judgmental, validate and just listen. Because that gives you an opportunity to find out, well, is this just a response because you've said no? And so by keeping your emotions in check, being really calm and asking what's going on, that really gives you an opportunity to, it should become a bit more clear at that time what's going on.

Or actually, yeah, maybe in response to you saying no, that's brought up some emotions, but there is other stuff going on and this might be how they're feeling. So we need to take it seriously. We need to listen, just like what we talked about before. Be curious and, you know, again, may need to go call some of those numbers we talked about or talk to your GP. And at the same time, you also, you know, you can hold those limits. So it might be you said no, you still have to come home at midnight even though it's your best friend's party. That's the family rules. So by being curious in those conversations, you might understand a bit more why it's so important for your teen to be out later.

They might be having friendship difficulties and everyone's staying out later and therefore that's going to put them on the outer even more. And so you might be able to do some problem solving after that of is there a middle ground. Or it might not be and actually there is a family rule and there's kind of not much movement in it. So it's holding the both. It's doing that, taking it seriously, listening and, you know, holding the rules and limits as well. Thank you. Yeah.

2. What can I do if my child's friends are thinking about suicide_

So what do I do if my child tells me that her friend is sending messages that say that the friend wants to kill herself? Yeah, I'm hearing this kind of more and more. And it is a really difficult space to be in. And if your child's actually told you this is going on, I mean, that's half the battle there. They've felt comfortable enough to be open with you about what's going on. And I am going to be a broken record because it is managing your emotions in that moment. And I think the most important thing from that is that you're letting your child know that it's not their responsibility. I think it's really easy for your child to be like, I'm the only one that knows, I'm the only one that they trust, I have to be up all night messaging them.

And you can also ring, again, the crisis numbers too if you're feeling really worried. Yeah. So I take that responsibility from my child and then I can give that responsibility on to someone else. Yeah, yeah, so that they can, that relationship can be friendship rather than holding that responsibility. Yeah. Yeah.

What if another child tells my child to kill themselves? Yeah, that's a really big one and awful for a parent to have to hear anything like that. It's actually illegal in New Zealand to encourage anyone to kill themselves, even if that person doesn't act on that. So in that moment it would be, again, trying to manage your own emotions because you're going to want to march down and give that person a piece of your mind. It's not okay. So managing those emotions because if you respond in a way where your emotions have come out and you're so angry, your child's going to be less likely to want to tell you something like that in the future. So taking a deep breath, listening again. You can encourage them to block that person, not respond. But given it is illegal, you actually can go to the police about something like this. And Netsafe has some really good resources on how to do this and what to do. For example, it talks you through taking screenshots of the messages so that you have got them there as well. So again, I can take this responsibility. And... Take it to the police? Yeah. And it's that I'm taking it seriously. I'm really worried about you. And I'm doing this in a kind of a calm manner as well. And if I sort of lose track of all of this in the moment, I can ring the CAF emergency number about this as well? Yeah, they can talk you through it. Yeah.

So here's a possibility that keeps me up at night. What do I do in that moment if my child comes to me and says they've taken an overdose of medication? Yeah, so a worse nightmare as a parent really, and really terrifying. So again, you're going to be overwhelmed by different emotions. And again, it's really, really working hard to take a deep breath, to try to contain some of that. You're not going to be able to contain everything. We're all human, and that's a really, really scary thing to hear. We did talk about before having open conversations with your teenager when they talk about suicide.

So you have a rough idea. And we, you know, that's just a rough idea. We don't know for sure, but it can give us a bit of a guide. So, yeah, calling the mental health number. Their advice probably still would be to go to the emergency department. But you can at least talk it through with someone before you do that around what to expect. And then obviously. At any point, if you're actually just having immediate concerns, definitely just call 111. Yeah, absolutely. Don't hesitate for that as well. So if it happens and it all, I forget all of this in the moment, call 111 or go straight to the emergency department.

We still want to take it seriously because there's a chance that they've told us less so that we don't worry. And there's also a chance that they've taken what we would consider not a whole lot, but actually they may have also thought that that was going to do really serious damage. So we just want to take it seriously, and we want to make sure that, yeah, seeking medical advice and getting that all checked out, yeah. So even if they've just taken 10 paracetamol or something, still? Yeah, absolutely, yeah, still getting that, because, yeah, I mean, we just don't know, so we just want to be safe than sorry, yeah.

And it also shows your child that you care. They may be freaking out and saying, no, no, no, no, I don't want to, you know, no, no, I won't do it again, but actually, you know, you're worried, so you've got to do this, yeah.

5. What can I do after a visit to the Emergency Department_

So, after hospital, we've gone to the ED, they've gone through what they go through, they let us out, we don't know what we're supposed to do. Yeah, this is a really common experience because emotions are really high during this time, and so it's actually really hard to retain any information that's given to you. And often, you know, you might be in hospital all night and you haven't had sleep, I mean, it's a situation you probably never thought you've had to go through, so it's really hard to retain them. So, if your child has gone into hospital to be seen after an attempt to take their life, or with really strong urges to suicide, there will be a clinician that meets with your child, and they will tell you what to do.

And often, you know, you might be in hospital all night, and you haven't had sleep, I mean, it's a situation you probably never thought you've had to go through. And often, you know, you might be in hospital all night, and you haven't had sleep, I mean, it's a situation you probably never thought you've had to go through. And often, you know, you might be in hospital all night, and you haven't had sleep, I mean, it's a situation you probably never thought you've had to go through. And often, you know, you might be in hospital all night, and you haven't had sleep, I mean, it's a situation you probably never thought you've had to go through.

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continuing you know doing going to the gym going for walks things like that they talk about in aeroplanes you know when they do their safety briefing they say make sure you put on your own oxygen mask before helping others and I think that's a really important one to remember in something like this because you need to be able to you know look after yourself so that you're in the best space possible to look after your child is there anywhere we can go to get support around this yeah definitely so again your GP would be the best protocol but that because they just have access to all the community agencies who can link you in with different supports in the community and sometimes they also have people within the practice that you can meet up with and talk to as well

6. What can I do to keep my child safe_

Sometimes I just feel like I don't know how to keep my child safe. And that is really tricky. And so if your child has attempted to take their own life or they've talked about it, one of the first things that you want to do is actually just have a check through your house. And this can bring up a whole heap of emotions. You want to walk through your house, including your garage and garden shed. And if you are really worried about your child, you want to make sure that you've removed and secured everything that they could use to harm themselves. So these are things like ropes, sharp knives, any medication in the house.

And we also, with medication, we really want to be quite thorough on that. So think about prescription medication you have in your bedside next to you, the medical drawer that you have, somewhere in your house with all the leftover little bits of medication, Panadol and things that are just sort of lying around. We really want to do quite a thorough sweep. So medication and obviously things like firearms. So even just hearing this can bring up quite a strong emotion response in parents. And I also have parents say to me, well, my child has a job, they have an FPOS card, they can go buy medication if they wanted to.

And I go, I guess how we think about that is, yes, they can. But oftentimes big emotions and urges to hurt yourself come up in a moment. So it might be at night time, your child's got a message and it's really upset them, big emotions coming on or during the day and a thought pops into their head, I don't want to be here anymore, I can't do this. By the time they, search through the house and then

they walk down to the supermarket to get something, often their immediate urge can be over or reduced at least to a different level. So by removing the stuff and securing the stuff in the house, it just, it reduces the chances of your child acting impulsively.

So it is really, yeah, really important that over that period of time, you do just, you do just have a check throughout the house. And then continue, yeah, this is a really, really scary thing as a parent and a hard thing. And I think one of the most important things you can do is keep those lines of communication open with your child. So that if and when you created an environment in a relationship where when they are struggling, they feel like they can come to you. And again, broken record, but the most important thing you can do, in this moment is manage your own emotions. Because especially if you've, you know, had, had previous experiences and, or this is the first time you've heard this, you're, you can be really, it's really common for you to just have a strong emotional response where you, you know, your kid comes to you and said, yeah, I'm really struggling today.

I don't feel good. So you've gone into protective parent mode and you know, you're like, okay, well, you know, you won't be going out this weekend with friends anymore. I'm going to take your phone off you. You have to have your door open all the time. And just kind of that hovering or, or even sometimes, you know, parents are like, well, as soon as they hear that my child's not doing well, we're going to the hospital. And so this comes from a really well-meaning place of, I want to protect you. I want to keep you safe. Absolutely. But that response, I've had a lot of young people say to me, I don't want to tell mum or dad, because last time I did, we, you know, I just said I was struggling and then we ended up in hospital.

So we want to take like what we talked about at the beginning. We just want to have that, manage our emotions, take a deep breath. Again, you might need to pop out and make a hot drink and come back in a space where you are calm and can listen, can be curious, you know, just, okay, what's going on? It sounds really rough. It sounds really hard. You may, your young, your child might start talking about what's going on. That's great. They also might not want to, and that's also fine. So in that moment, actually not talking is fine. They've come to you for help. You might just be like, how about we, do you want to go for a walk?

You know, how about we go for a walk? Should we do some baking together? Shall we just put on a movie together? And, you know, it can kind of feel like you're not getting to what's going on, but actually in that moment, you're just helping your child with those really big emotions. You're being really open with what, you know, open to hear what's going on, and you're just being with them and just being present. And that is going to mean, hopefully, that next time they feel that way, they'll be more likely to come and let you know they're really struggling again. And at any point, again, if you're just still feeling really uncomfortable, contacting your GP and the crisis mental health numbers again.

Yeah. So if you're sitting with feeling uncomfortable, don't hesitate to call those numbers. And I think another really important part of keeping your child safe is keeping their regular routine. So when your child's really struggling, again, you want to kind of take away all the stresses of the world so that they can feel better. And maybe for a really short amount of time, that might be needed. But if we kind of say, okay, don't worry about school, don't worry about your work, you know, you can just stay at home. Actually, that can make things worse because there's just a whole lot more time to kind of think over things.

And some of those emotions can just get kind of bigger and bigger and really stuck. So encouraging your child to keep up with routines, keeping good sleep, exercise, you know, going out with friends, things like that are really important. And again, remembering at any time contacting those numbers, talking to your GP, yeah. And I think as well, the final thing I'd say is that this is a really kind of delicate dance because it changes day to day. And so just seeking support of professionals if you're not really sure where that's at or what to do. Yeah. It's a really, really hard subject and it is a really difficult one that no parent kind of ever imagines.

That they have to have with their child, these kind of talks. But yeah, the biggest part is managing, managing those big emotions that come up for you so that you can be that duck on water and sit with those emotions with your child and help them. And then once they've, you know, felt like you've really listened to them and understood them, that's when you can start doing some problem solving together. Yeah. Go get support. Yes. If in doubt. Yeah. Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah.