

Talking without fear

How to ask someone directly about suicidal thoughts – for relatives, friends, teachers and professionals. The most important thing first: asking does not cause suicidal thoughts. It brings relief and opens the door to help.

When to pay attention

- The person talks or writes about death, about meaninglessness or about being a burden to others.
- Withdrawal from friends, family and hobbies.
- Strong mood swings – or sudden calm after a difficult time.
- Giving away important things, farewell letters or messages, “putting things in order”.
- More alcohol or drugs, risky behaviour.
- Stressful events: separation, loss, dismissal, bullying, shame, debt.

Preparing well for the conversation

- Choose a quiet place and enough time. Put the phone away.
- Have ready: 143, 144 and the number of the psychiatric emergency service in your canton.
- You don't have to solve the problem. Your task is: be there, ask, listen, connect to help.

How you can ask

Start with what you have noticed – without blame. Then ask directly. You may use the words “suicide” or “taking your own life”.

“I’ve noticed that you’ve been withdrawing lately. I’m worried about you.”

“Sometimes, when people feel this bad, they think about not wanting to live any more. Is that how it is for you too?”

“Are you thinking about taking your own life?”

“Have you already thought about how you would do it?”

“What has stopped you so far?”

Listening instead of convincing

- Let the person finish speaking, even if it is hard to bear. Pauses are allowed.
- Take what you hear seriously. Avoid phrases like “It’ll be fine” or “Think of your family”.
- No discussion about whether suicide is right or wrong – and no reproaches.
- Don’t promise to keep it secret. Say honestly: “I want to help you, and for that I’ll get support.”

If the answer is yes

- 1 Assess the danger**
Is there a concrete plan, means or a time? The more concrete, the more urgent.
- 2 In acute danger**
Do not leave the person alone. Call 144 or accompany them to the emergency department.
- 3 Remove means**
Medication, weapons or other means – together if possible – lock them away or hand them over.
- 4 Make help binding**
Make an appointment together with the GP or psychiatric service – ideally right away, during the conversation.
- 5 Stay in touch**
Get in touch again over the next few days. A safety plan helps – template at krisenintervention.ch.

And you? Conversations like this affect you. Get support yourself – for example from 143 (also for relatives) or the parents' helpline Elternnotruf 0848 35 45 55 (in German).

Available around the clock

144

Ambulance

Danger to life, medical emergency

117

Police

Danger to you or others, violence, threats

112

European emergency number

Works even without credit or with a foreign SIM card

143

Die Dargebotene Hand

Talk around the clock, anonymously – also for relatives

147

Pro Juventute

For children and young people, around the clock

Sources: campaign “Reden kann retten” – talking can save lives (reden-kann-retten.ch), guidelines of the mental health first aid programmes (ensa.swiss).