

Scenarios and Responses

This handout has 10 scenarios of students who are in distress and considering suicide. It includes suggestions on how to respond to each student and key points to consider. Use these scenarios as a starting point for discussions and continued thought on how we can best respond and support students in distress.

SCENARIO 1:

Acquaintance grieving over death of their sibling

You're waiting at the bus stop near campus when you notice another student who you've taken a few classes with. You don't know them very well, but you enjoyed working on a group project with them once. You remember hearing that this student was fundraising to help pay for expenses related to their sibling's cancer treatments last year. You go up to them and ask how they are. They start to say "fine" but then their face crumples and tears fill their eyes. They tell you that their sibling passed away. They say that their family is devastated, and nothing will ever be the same again. Then they tell you that they feel bad for their parents but think they might join their sibling. Just then the bus arrives.

Key points

- Don't let the moment pass because you are interrupted.
- Express sympathy and support without relying on clichés and while recognizing you can't cure their grief.
- Ask what they mean about joining their sibling. Ask if they're thinking of suicide.

- Facilitate an appropriate referral; escort them to the counselling office or connect them to a crisis line.

Possible response

I'm so sorry that this happened. I can only imagine how difficult it has been for you and your family. Thank you for sharing with me. When you say you want to join your sibling, do you mean by suicide? I'm really concerned about you and want

(Continued)

SCENARIO 1: CONTINUED

Acquaintance grieving over death of their sibling

to support you in getting the help you need. They have counselling services here on campus that can help you cope with grief. How about we skip this bus and you and I walk over there together right now?

If they don't want to go with you, you could say:

Then let's just go to a more private place and call a crisis hotline together. You sound very hopeless about your situation, but there are resources that can help you, and the crisis line workers can connect you with them. I care about you, and I can't leave you feeling this way. I need to know you have someone to talk to that can provide the right support.

Responses to avoid

- Oh ... I'm so sorry to hear that. Well, I better be going, I have a lot to do today.
- Aw, don't be sad. Your sibling is in a better place.
- I know exactly how you feel. I lost my hamster, Snuffles, in Grade 4.
- Well, according to my religion, this is what happens after you die...

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SCENARIO 2:

Friend struggling and drinking heavily after a breakup

You're on your way to a campus party when you notice a friend standing around, staring at the counselling office. You know this friend has been drinking more heavily and frequently recently because you've been to the bar with him a couple times. You invite him to the party, but he refuses, saying his ex-girlfriend will be there. You know they recently broke up. You ask him how he's doing with that, and he shrugs and looks away. He says he just has to "man up." As he goes to turn away you hear him mutter, "She'll be sorry when I'm gone."

Key points

- Validate his feelings without judgment.
- Negate harmful stereotypes like that of strong men not showing emotion.
- Ask what he means about being gone. Ask about suicide and whether he has a plan.
- Offer support and confidentiality.
- Facilitate an appropriate referral; go with him to the counselling office or connect him with a crisis line.
- Empower him by asking him which resource he feels would be most helpful.

Possible response

Wait, dude! I can tell you're really upset about this breakup and there's no shame in that. What do you mean when you say, "when you're gone?" Are you thinking about suicide? Have you been planning it? You're a good friend and I can't lose you. Guys need emotional support too. Let's go into the counselling office; they have people who can help and they'll keep it totally confidential. There are also phone numbers we can call. What do you think would be most helpful? I'm your friend and I want to support you through this.

Responses to avoid

- Well, I better get going so I can get to the party on time.
- Yeah, your ex is terrible! She's so awful; you deserve so much better than a mean girl like that! I don't know how you put up with her for so long!
- Let's go to the bar! We can get wasted and forget all about her.
- Yeah, you do need to man up. Just get over it already.

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SCENARIO 3:

Online student struggling and overwhelmed

You are taking an online course that requires weekly postings and are placed in small groups of four for the semester. You get to know the students in your group through online posts and replies. After a few weeks, you notice that one of your classmates hasn't posted for a while and when they finally do, they admit they have been struggling, are having a hard time keeping up, and are overwhelmed; they feel it is pointless to go on. You are unsure if they are referring to the class or whether they are talking about suicide.

Key points

- There is still opportunity to connect with a person even through online class relationships.
- When a person divulges personal details, it is an opportunity to check in on them and offer support.
- Contacting them privately allows the person to be more open about their situation.
- Asking them to clarify what they meant by "it is pointless to go on" is important either way. Whether they are overwhelmed with school or thinking about suicide, reaching out and offering support can help a person who is struggling.
- Offer online supports that may help. Most post-secondary institutions have online resources and phone numbers they can call for referrals.

Possible responses via private message

I read your post today, and I'm sorry to hear you're struggling. It sounds like you could use some support. I know we don't know each other in person, but I'm concerned for you and wanted to reach out to see if you need anyone to talk to or help in seeking out some academic or emotional assistance.

In your post, you stated that it was pointless to go on. Were you referring to the classwork or talking about suicide? I wanted to let you know that you are not alone and school and life can sometimes

feel incredibly overwhelming, but there are resources available out there that can help you. Is there anyone you are close to that you can talk to about your situation? If not, the school has academic and counselling services that can be accessed online if you don't live near campus.

Please don't hesitate to reach out if you need to chat or need help in accessing supports. You don't have to go through this alone.

Note: You may not feel comfortable reaching out to someone online, but ignoring someone's post when they are vulnerable can be isolating for the person. Even a small reply in your group post to say, "Wow, sounds like you've been having a hard time, but I'm glad you're back," can have a profound effect on someone.

Responses to avoid

- Oh, that's too bad. I'm sure you'll pull yourself together.
- The course isn't that hard. I don't have a problem with it.
- I hope your lack of posting doesn't affect my grade; I have to respond to posts to get full marks.
- Maybe it is best for you to quit since you're not really contributing much to our group discussions.

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SCENARIO 4:

Close friend struggling with depression and self-harming

You visit a close friend in their home one weekend. You know this friend has a history of depression and self-harm but has been doing well lately. On entering their apartment you realize that they have not done the dishes, cleaned up after themselves, or done any household duties in what seems like a while. You also notice that your friend seems distracted and looks like they have not slept in days. After settling into a conversation, they disclose to you that their depression has gotten really bad lately, and they are ashamed and afraid. They are getting impatient with themselves, swinging in and out of depression and having it consume all of their life. Your friend tells you that they can't do this anymore and they don't see any point in continuing if it is just going to be like the rest of their life.

Key points

- Listen empathetically and show support.
- Recognize their strength and resilience and remind them that you care about them.
- Ask your friend if they are considering suicide. If appropriate, ask if they have a plan.
- Suggest they talk to a counsellor at the wellness centre/crisis support centre. Offer to go with them.

Possible response

I noticed that it looks like you haven't slept in a while, and I know you usually don't sleep when you're depressed. You said you're feeling depressed again. Do you want to talk about it? I can only imagine how difficult it is to feel stable and then have that ripped right out from under you and feel depressed again. When you say "you

can't do this anymore" and "you don't see any point in continuing," do you mean you're thinking about suicide? Do you have a plan? Would you like me to take you to the wellness centre to see a counsellor? I understand you feel ashamed for asking for help at the wellness centre, but I think it would be good for you. I understand you're scared, but you are not alone, and I'll wait for you.

Responses to avoid

- I thought you got over your depression.
- Don't kill yourself; you have so much to live for.
- Your apartment is gross. Why can't you clean up?
- You're scaring me talking like this.
- It's not going to be like this for the rest of your life. Just try a little harder.

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SCENARIO 5:

An Indigenous student overwhelmed by a suicide in their family

An Indigenous student you are friends with is visibly upset. They disclose that a close relative has just died by suicide, and they are overwhelmed with feelings of grief and helplessness. They want to be home with their family and community, but they also have upcoming projects due in many of their courses. They express feelings of hopelessness and say, "I don't think I can cope with this. I think it would be easier to just end it."

Key points

- Highlight support and empathy while recognizing the capacity of your friend.
- Clarify what they mean when they say, "I don't know if I can cope with all this..." Ask if they are thinking about killing themselves.
- Connect your friend with staff from Indigenous services (or student services if your campus does not have Indigenous services; student services can then connect a student with local Indigenous supports).
- Provide a referral to campus and community supports.

Possible response

I'm so sorry to hear about this; dealing with the grief from someone dying can be difficult, especially when they died by suicide. Thank you for telling me.

When you say, "It would be easier to just end it," do you mean you're thinking of suicide? There are counselling services on campus that are confidential and free for all students. Can I walk you down to their office so you can meet them?

Have you spoken with the staff in Indigenous services? I can go with you to talk to them. I think they could be really helpful, and they might have community or cultural supports that you can use.

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SCENARIO 6:

Friend who has been harassed online and is in distress

You notice that a friend is being harassed online, so you reach out and meet them after class. You haven't seen this person for a while and you notice that they have lost a lot of weight, their hair is thin, and they look frail. You don't mention the online comments, but you do tell them that if they needed anything you would be there to support them. A few weeks later, the same friend calls you crying and in distress. They open up to you about what has been going on online. They tell you that they've received a lot of negative comments on their posts. It first started with comments about their body, but lately they've been receiving anonymous direct messages from people telling them to kill themselves. Your friend says that at first the comments did not bother them that much, but it is starting to get to them. They say, "I can't keep going on like this. Maybe those people online are right: I should just end it."

Key points

- Show empathy and understanding.
- Ask the person if they're considering suicide and if they have a plan.
- Reassure them that it's not their fault they're being bullied, and they didn't cause it.
- Suggest that they see a professional for support and ask them if they'd like you to go with them.

Possible response

I'm so glad you've told me about this; I can only imagine how scary this is for you. I'm worried that this is happening to you and want to help. When you said "you should just end it," what did you mean? Are you thinking about suicide? How often do you think about this? Do you have a plan? I care a lot about you, and you shouldn't have to deal with this alone. Would you like me to take you to the wellness centre so you can talk to a counsellor and get support? Can we go to the wellness centre together so I know you're safe? Let's just take this one step at a time.

Responses to avoid

- Why are you letting people online get to you? Everyone gets harassed online.
- You're so skinny now. You look so great!
- People say the dumbest stuff online. Don't listen to it.
- It's not going to be like this for the rest of your life. Just try a little harder.

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SCENARIO 7:

International student who is under a lot of stress and is self-harming

An international student you know from a few classes seems upset. They tell you that they had been sharing a basement suite with three other students, but the roommates have recently all moved out. They can't afford the rent and are about to become homeless. They tell you that the landlord has been entering the suite without permission and just threatened to seize all of their possessions in lieu of the rent that is now due. Your classmate explains that their family cannot afford to send more money for better housing and that they don't want to embarrass them by asking for help. They say they feel helpless and trapped. They also mention that they have been harming themselves and show you fresh cuts along the inside of their forearm. The cuts are slim and do not appear very deep, but they are not bandaged. Your classmate also expresses feelings of hopelessness and despair during the interaction.

Key points

- Highlight support and empathy while recognizing the capacity of your classmate.
- Address any medical needs, referring them to resources as appropriate.
- Ask the person if they are thinking about killing themselves.
- Connect them with staff from the international student office (or student services if you do not have a separate international student office).
- Help connect them with campus and community supports that can help with community contacts and rental properties.

Possible response

I'm so sorry to hear that your living arrangements have been causing you so much stress these past few months. You should be proud of how you have handled all of this; managing this level of stress and staying on top of your studies is really hard.

Thank you for telling me about the self-harm. I will keep this confidential as we figure out what you need. Do you want me to call our campus first aid office? They can come down and clean and bandage your wounds for you; this support is also confidential and free.

I understand how overwhelming all this may be for you right now. You mentioned that you're feeling hopeless. Are you having any thoughts about killing yourself? There are counselling services on campus that are confidential and free for all students. Can I walk you down to their office so you can meet them and see if it would be a good fit to talk with one of their team?

Have you spoken to anyone at international student services yet? I can walk down there with you now if you would like. Maybe they will have some ideas to help you find accommodations, and you can also talk to our residence on campus to see about emergency housing until you find a safer place to rent.

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SCENARIO 8:

Former classmate whose partying is out of control

You attend a party in your old neighbourhood after returning from a semester at college. You arrive at the party, and you see that everyone's attention is focused on one individual. You recognize this person from your high school class. This person is loudly bragging about their escapades from the previous night and boasting to everyone about how they "don't give a f**k." You remember them differently; they were not nearly as boisterous. Later in the night you overhear your former classmate tell others that they "don't care if they die." You also hear them talk about driving to another party when this party is over. Once the guests disperse, you decide to sit next to your old classmate. They don't recognize you and ask if you have brought more drinks. You remind them of who you are. They remember and attempt to pull themselves together. You talk briefly. They mention that they have gone through a bad breakup. They say they don't really care; they just want to party.

Key points

- Show support and empathy while recognizing their capacity.
- If appropriate, ask them if they are thinking about suicide.
- Refer to a mental health support or suicide line and let them know they can talk to someone right away.
- Consider the person's safety and offer to call them a cab or ride-share so they're not putting themselves or others at risk.

Possible response

I feel concerned about how you're doing. I want you to know that I'm not here to judge you. Just hear me out. I noticed that your behaviour has changed from when we were in high school. I never would have imagined you this way. This sudden change is troubling to me. I also overheard you say that you don't care if you die, and I'm concerned. Are you thinking of suicide?

I want you to know I care, and I'm here. I also want you to try to get some help. Here is a number for a 24-hour phone and chat counselling support service. You can call them or text them. Here's another number if you need immediate help. This crisis line may help you with any thoughts you have about self-harm or suicide. I also don't think that you should drive right now. How about I call you a cab or a ride-share service?

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SCENARIO 9:

Transgender student facing systemic discrimination and racism

Blake, a transgender student, discloses to you that he had been bullied in his program for being a non-white transgender (trans) man. His instructor was belittling him repeatedly and had given him a failing grade in the practicum. When Blake reported the situation to the director of the department, the director suspended Blake indefinitely from the program, stating, “Maybe this program isn’t right for you; perhaps you should try a program that supports people like you.” Blake feels disrespected, humiliated, and ashamed of his gender identity and ethnicity. He explains that he keeps running into incidents like this. While you’re talking to Blake, you observe that he’s having trouble thinking clearly, and is at times tearful and shaking, frequently staring past you without saying anything. He expresses feelings of low self-worth, loneliness, despair, hopelessness, and anger, stating, “I don’t have any friends anymore because I’m such a loser. I wish I could be comfortable being female, so I don’t have to be this... I hate being trans! Why couldn’t I be born in the right body so people would accept me, maybe even love me? I didn’t choose this! I just want to be normal... I’m done with life. I can’t do this anymore.”

Key points

- Stay calm, listen empathetically, and support the person while recognizing his capacity.
- Validate his experience and acknowledge that you do not personally know this experience, if appropriate.
- Appreciate the strength and resilience he has demonstrated and remind him that he is valued and cared for.
- Ask directly if he is thinking about suicide. If appropriate and if you feel safe and comfortable to do so, ask clarifying questions, such as, Are you having thoughts of hurting yourself? What plans do you have? Does it involve other people?
- Offer your support and campus, community, and/or online resources, such as counselling services, crisis lines, and advocacy groups such as a pride centre that can support the student.
- If you think he is in danger, consult a school counsellor or someone at the student union, and campus, community, and/or online resources. Do not be the hero; always ask if you are unsure.
- Make time for self-care and recognize that it is not your responsibility to solve another person’s problem on your own. Ask for help.

Possible response

Thank you for sharing your story with me. I’m so sorry this happened to you again. I can appreciate how these incidents are impacting your well-being and your ability to move forward in life. It must be so difficult to feel like things are constantly stacked against you. You have shown strength and resilience. You are valued, and there are many people and services that can support you through this. I care about you, and I’m here to support you and help you succeed. How can I help?

SCENARIO 9 (CONTINUED)

Transgender student facing systemic discrimination and racism

Are you having thoughts of hurting yourself? What plans do you have? Does it involve other people? If you do decide to go through with any plans, can you please call me first so we can talk about it? I hear you're having a lot of big emotions from these horrible experiences, and I'm concerned.

Would you like to talk to a counsellor on campus? Counselling is confidential and free for students. If it's okay with you, can we walk to counselling services together? I can also give you their location and contact information if you prefer that instead. Another option is I could help you connect with the queer community centre. They have free short-term counselling as well as sliding-scale, low-cost, and long-term counselling services. I can also give you the online crisis resources so you can access them if and when you're ready.

When you feel ready, we can also speak to the student union on campus to discuss mediation with the school about this. We can walk to the student union together if you like, or I can give you their location and contact information. I can also be there to support you throughout this process. You are not alone.

Responses to avoid

- I understand what you are going through. I have a non-binary colleague.
- Are you sure you are transgender? Maybe you're just a lesbian?
- You think too much. Your instructor is a professional; she can't be transphobic or racist.
- Have you considered a chest binder or a double mastectomy? If you can make your chest look flatter, you can pass for a man. People will believe you then.

SCENARIO 9 (CONTINUED)

Transgender student facing systemic discrimination and racism

Queer resources

- When speaking to a transgender or non-binary student, use the name of the student.
 - Say: “What is your name?”
 - Do not say: “What is your preferred name?”
 - If it is necessary to determine the student’s name in the registry, say: “What is your legal name?”
- Use the appropriate pronoun of a transgender or non-binary student.
 - Say: “What are your pronouns?”
 - Do not say: “What are your preferred pronouns?”

Online resources

- Genderbread Person: <https://www.genderbread.org/resource/genderbread-person-v4-0>
- University of California, San Francisco, LGBT Resource Centre: <https://lgbt.ucsf.edu/glossary-terms>
- University of California, Davis, LGBTQIA Resource Centre Glossary: <https://lgbtqia.ucdavis.edu/educated/glossary>
- Alberta Health Services, Terms to Avoid: https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/info/pf/div/if-pf-div-terms-and-phrases-to-avoid.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0mPGRYfphRuccSRrWaR26zbdylvEv1J_7ST6qUyZJSGslbVhMvaOS0QDo
- Trans Care B.C, Two-Spirit: http://www.phsa.ca/transcarebc/gender-basics-education/terms-concepts/two-spirit?fbclid=IwAR0EF-NLkJ--zFclvOSmc8L0_YBjullL4vFfcrqTDBdP_T5F2tl6FwBlik
- Re:searching for LGBTQ2S+ Health, Two-Spirit Community: https://lgbtqhealth.ca/community/two-spirit.php?fbclid=IwAR0RtPAKmxolQM9CginqLu1qRTJpFJxjR5VGa5vcgA2nT1q-69TJLpft_o
- Embracing My Two-Spirit Journey with Prestin Thotin-Awasis (Spotify): https://open.spotify.com/episode/7fFhq4G7Qjho35W8dqlbg5?si=9lq00ZSUQwqCqjvXhajAOw&dl_branch=1&fbclid=IwAR21BoNPbBmrlnjCuDftveJ8CLowMkqXTJFx1QHGRDQMd3V36Kcc_8WZzk&nd=1

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Friend who feels responsible for another student's suicide

Your non-binary friend, Jamie, discloses to you that a transgender student they had been helping at school recently killed himself. You notice they look tired and have lost weight, their hair is unkempt, and they smell a little musty. Jamie discloses to you that they felt remorse, guilt, and regret because they had spoken to this student the day before he died, and they did not think to ask if he was okay or was thinking about suicide. Jamie explains that the student had been bullied and discriminated against by his instructor because of his ethnicity and gender identity and expression, and he was suspended indefinitely from the program when he advocated for himself. Jamie had been working with this student by attending meetings with him and providing support. Jamie states, "I did everything I could ... and then I heard that he had killed himself. It's all my fault! I should've done more. Why do bad people always win? What's the point of all this hard work if nothing ever changes? Why is this world so unfair? Why won't anyone do anything about this?"

Key points

- Stay calm, listen empathetically, and support your friend while recognizing their capacity.
- Validate their experience and acknowledge that you do not personally know this experience, if appropriate and applicable.
- Appreciate the strength and resilience they have demonstrated and remind them that their effort is valued and meaningful.
- When your friend is more stable, offer food, a beverage, and/or an activity, such as a walk to promote comfort.
- Offer your support and community and/or online resources, such as counselling services, crisis lines, and advocacy groups that can support them (e.g., crisis centre or other advocacy services in the community and/or online).

Possible response

Thank you for sharing your story with me. I'm sorry this happened to you. It's not your fault; you did everything you could to help your friend. We cannot control what people do. It must be

so frustrating to know that there are still people out there who are racist and transphobic. I can appreciate how this incident is impacting your mental health. What you do matters. I'm here to support you. How can I help? Would you like to speak to a counsellor? I can help you find a suitable one and go with you if you like. I can also give you the online crisis resources so you can access them if and when you are ready. Is that okay with you? Are you feeling hungry or thirsty at all?

Responses to avoid

- I understand what you're going through. People never do what I tell them to do.
- Let's focus on the positive. He didn't commit suicide in front of you.
- It's not your fault. Trans people often kill themselves.

Queer resources

See Queer Resources above.

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