

Talking About Suicide: Scenarios and Responses

The following five scenarios offer suggestions on how to respond to students who may be thinking of suicide. Use these scenarios as starting points for discussions and continued thought about how to respond with empathy to students in distress.

Scenario 1: Student overwhelmed by final exams

A student is facing final exams and says to you, "It's no use. I'll never be able to pull this off." As the student speaks, they hardly seem to stop to draw breath, and you notice that they are fidgeting and having a hard time sitting still. The student tells you they have a very critical voice in their head that is always criticizing and saying they are worthless. This student also mentions that their focus and concentration are quite poor. They feel like they are failing and just can't get back on track. They don't see the point in continuing and say "it's not going to matter much longer anyway."

Key points

- Highlight support and empathy while recognizing the capacity of the student
- Ask about suicide
- Facilitate a referral or follow-up

Possible staff/faculty response

I can see that you're upset about the exams. I can hear the fear in your voice and understand your worries about what will happen. When you say, "It's not going to matter much longer anyway," I wonder if you mean you are thinking about suicide? I want to support you to be safe and to have a good outcome from this challenging time. I wonder if you'd be willing to talk to a counsellor? It's confidential and I think it's a wise thing to do. I'd like to walk over there with you.

If the student refuses, you could say, *Another option is for us to call the crisis line together right now so you can talk with them and find out about some resources.*

If the student says no, you could say, *I care about you and am worried about you, so for me to feel comfortable, I need to have someone contact you to see how you're doing and help support you.*



BCcampus. *Let's Talk About Suicide: Raising Awareness and Supporting Students.*



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Adapted from University of Victoria. *Assisting Students in Distress and University of Victoria.* https://www.uvic.ca/faculty-staff/_assets/docs/assisting-students-in-distress.pdf and Dawn Schell. *Let's Talk: A Workshop on Suicide Prevention.* University of Victoria. Scenarios 1 and 4 are adapted from Armstrong, G., Daoust, M., Gil, Y., Seinen, A., & Shedletzky, F. *Capacity to Connect: Supporting Students from Distress to Suicide.* Vancouver Island University. Scenarios 2, 3, and 5 by Jewell Gillies.

Scenario 2: An Indigenous student overwhelmed by a suicide in their family

A mature Indigenous student comes into your office upset. They disclose to you that a close relative has just died by suicide, and they are overwhelmed with mixed 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 the student.
- Clarify what the student means when they say, “I don’t know if I can cope with all this...” Ask the student if they are thinking about killing themselves.
- Connect the student with staff from Indigenous services (or student services if your campus does not have Indigenous services. Student services can connect the student with local Indigenous supports).
- Provide a referral to campus and community supports.

Possible staff/faculty response

I’m so sorry to hear about your loss; dealing with grief of someone passing can be difficult, particularly so when they died by suicide. I can see this has been very troubling for you. Thank you for confiding this to me.

When you say “It would be easier to just end it,” do you mean you’re thinking of suicide? We have 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? You are going through a tremendously difficult time and should be proud of yourself for seeking support.

Are there any cultural supports here that I can assist you in connecting with? Have you spoken with the staff in Indigenous Services? I can introduce you to the staff at Indigenous Services if you don’t already know them. I think they’ll be really receptive to supporting you and might have community or cultural supports that you can use.

Scenario 3: Transgender student who is facing discrimination and isolation

A student who has disclosed to you in the past that they are transgender approaches you in tears. When you ask what is happening, they tell you that they were home with their family over the holiday break and they came out to their family. Their family's response was not supportive, and the student tells you their parents made hurtful and derogatory comments during the discussion. The student makes statements like "This is so difficult. I can't keep going like this" and "I don't know why I even try anymore; my own parents don't love me or accept me for who I am" and "I'm tired of having to validate myself and who I am." They share other more general feelings of loneliness and hopelessness.

Key points

- Highlight support and empathy while recognizing the capacity of the student.
- Thank them for confiding this difficult incident to you and explain you can refer them to resources in the institution or community as appropriate.
- Validate their experience and recognize (if appropriate) that while you do not personally know what this experience is like for them that you can see this is extremely difficult for the student.
- Ask the student if they have connected with their student union or the LGBTQ2S+ community on campus or in the surrounding community for additional support.
- Ask about suicide or self-harm.
- Highlight the student's strengths and resilience that they have demonstrated so far and that their identity is valued. Tell them they are seen, heard, and celebrated at your institution.

Possible staff/faculty response

Thank you for sharing this with me, I can appreciate this is such a difficult time for you and this has a significant impact on your well-being. While I don't personally know what it's like to identify with the LGBTQ2S+ community and not have the support or acceptance of your family, I can appreciate that this is a fundamentally important aspect of your well-being. Do you have any ideas on how I might be able to support you through this?

Have you connected with our pride centre or student union office on campus? I am happy to walk you over there now if you would like.

I have heard you make some statements about feeling hopeless and losing a sense of purpose in your life generally. Are you having any thoughts of suicide? We have 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?

If the student says no, you could say, Another option is for us to call the crisis line together right now so you can talk with them and find out about some resources.

I want you to know that I support you; you're a valued and important member of our campus community. I'd like to support you in any way that I can to know that you are seen, valued, and celebrated here on campus.

Scenario 4: Student who is showing major changes in behaviour

You noticed a student in class who has been wearing the same clothes on a few occasions and looks somewhat dishevelled. They appear tense at times and other times they've seemed sleepy in class. Last class you walked by them and wondered if you smelled alcohol. They have been handing in their assignments but doing mediocre, and their grades have been dropping. The most recent assignment wasn't handed in. You feel concerned that the student may be suicidal.

Key points

- Highlight support and empathy while recognizing the capacity of the student.
- If appropriate, ask the student if they are thinking about killing themselves.
- Facilitate a referral or follow-up.

Possible staff/faculty response

Thank you for meeting with me. I've been feeling concerned about how you're doing. I can see that you're motivated to be here as your attendance has been good. At the beginning you seemed enthusiastic about the material and discussions. But lately you seem tense and tired. Your grades have been going down and your last assignment hasn't been handed in yet. Last class I wondered if I smelled alcohol. I wonder how you are doing and I'm concerned you are going through a challenging time that is interfering with your ability to do as well as you can at school.

I'm glad that we're talking, although I feel that it's beyond my scope/role to talk to you in detail about what's happening. I've found that in times of challenge it's helpful to get support for myself. Seeking help is courageous, not weak, and shows you are committed to working through the hard times. Do you have someone you can talk to? Have you considered accessing counselling services to talk or find out about resources? It's confidential.

There are other supports on campus, and I wonder if you're aware of them and if anything would be useful to you. The campus website lists all of the student resources in one place; I'm happy to show it to you. The crisis line is also good to know about as they can provide support and ideas of community resources.

Scenario 5: International student who is under a lot of stress and is self-harming

An international student comes into your office visibly upset. The student tells you that they had been sharing a basement suite with three other students, but the roommates have recently all moved out. This student cannot afford the rent and is about to become homeless. They tell you that the landlord has been entering the suite without permission and just threatened that he would seize all of their possessions in lieu of the rent that is now due. The student 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. The student also discloses that they have engaged in self-harm and shows you fresh cuts along the inside of their forearm. The cuts are slim and do not appear very deep, but they are not bandaged. The student expresses feelings of hopelessness and despair during the interaction.

Key points

- Highlight support and empathy while recognizing the capacity of the student.
- Address any medical needs, referring the student to resources as appropriate.
- Ask the student if they are thinking about killing themselves. Refer to emergency services as appropriate.
- Connect the student with staff from the international student office (or student services if you do not have a separate international office).
- Provide a referral to campus and community supports.
- Provide student support in advocacy to community contacts in regard to rental properties.

Possible staff/faculty response

I'm so sorry to hear your living arrangements have been causing you so much stress these past few months. You should be proud of how you have conducted yourself during all of this, trying to manage this level of stress and stay on top of your studies is commendable.

Thank you for disclosing your self-harm actions to me, please know I will keep this confidential as we determine what level of care might be appropriate for you. 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 can appreciate how overwhelming this may all be for you right now. You mentioned that you're feeling hopeless. Are you having any thoughts about killing yourself? We have 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?

Are there any cultural supports that I can help connect you to? Have you spoken to staff in international student services yet? I can walk down there with you now if you would like. As for the rental housing concerns, the international student office might have some resources to help you find accommodations, and we can also talk to our residence on campus to see about emergency housing until you secure a safer place to rent.