

Engaging in Critical Conversations

Engaging students in conversations about non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) and suicidal ideation (SI) is crucial. When school administrators, counsellors and teachers initiate genuine, caring conversations, it can significantly impact students' openness and relief.

Importantly, these conversations **do not harm** students or make them more likely to think about suicide or self harm. In fact, research has consistently shown that students **benefit from these conversations** and show reduced depressive, self harming, and suicidal thoughts after caring conversations.

Please refer to our original [Suicide Prevention and Self Harm Video Series and Resources](#) for additional important content.



CREATING A SAFE SPACE FOR DIALOGUE

- **Initiating Conversation:** Start with empathy and understanding. Students often feel relieved when someone brings up their concerns in a caring manner.
- **Approach:** Use a genuine and private approach. Authenticity is key as students can easily detect insincerity!
- **Empathy:** This is a genuine demonstration of understanding and concern. The goal is often not to *refute* the negative thoughts, but to *sit with* and *understand* them. For example, instead of “No, you shouldn’t think that way,” something more like “It must be terrible to feel that way, what was happening that led to those thoughts?”



COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES

- Begin with general questions about their health and wellbeing to ease into more sensitive topics.
- Use normalizing statements to make them feel less alone in their experiences.
- Use scaling questions to assess the intensity of their feelings or behaviors.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

- **Personalization:** Use “I” statements like “I’ve been a bit worried about you...” or “Is there anything I can do to help?” to help make the conversation be more of concern than accusatory.
- **Discovery:** Acknowledge that the purpose of NSSI may not be clear and express a willingness to understand their reasons and feelings.

MAINTAINING PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES

Teachers and staff have the opportunity to build relationships with students and to learn how they are feeling, which in turn comes with the responsibility to be aware of and maintain professional boundaries.



BOUNDARY TIPS

1. Consider the student's best interests in conversations.
2. Reflect on whether any part of the interaction may be benefiting you personally, which might suggest a boundary violation.
3. Discuss situations with colleagues to gain perspective, even anonymously if needed, to maintain confidentiality and professional integrity.
4. Clearly communicate acceptable boundaries for texting, such as limiting it to urgent situations and re-directing to professional times and spaces.
5. Encourage students to use established support systems like school counsellors and helplines for ongoing support, ensuring that professional and personal boundaries are respected.

ROLE OF EDUCATORS

- Be a foundation for your students! Listen, support, and be a great guide.
- Connecting to Resources: Understand when to refer the student to mental health professionals including school counsellor and how to facilitate that transition sensitively.

Educators are uniquely positioned to initiate and have thoughtful and caring conversations with students about NSSI and SI. These conversations can help open up avenues for support and interventions that students might need.