

CARING AND HELPING: WHAT WE CAN DO

Few of us can ignore a plea for help. Once we recognize that a student may have suicidal tendencies, there are some important steps¹ which can be used as effective intervention in a potentially dangerous situation:

- STEP 1: LISTEN. A person in mental crisis needs someone who will listen to what s/he is saying. Every effort should be made to understand the problems behind the statements.
- STEP 2: EVALUATE the seriousness of the youngster's thoughts and feelings. If the child has made clear suicide plans, the problem is more acute than when his/her thinking is less definite.
- STEP 3: EVALUATE THE INTENSITY OR SEVERITY of the emotional disturbance. It is possible that the youngster may be extremely upset but not suicidal. Often, if a person has been depressed, and then becomes agitated and moves about restlessly, it can be cause for alarm.
- STEP 4: TAKE SERIOUSLY every complaint and feeling that the student expresses. Do not dismiss or undervalue what the child is saying. In some instances, the child may minimize his/her difficulty, but beneath an apparent calm may be profoundly distressed feelings.
- STEP 5: DO NOT BE AFRAID TO ASK DIRECTLY IF THE CHILD HAS ENTERTAINED THOUGHTS OF SUICIDE. The student may not openly mention suicide during the crisis period. Experience shows that harm is rarely done by inquiring directly about suicide at an appropriate time. As a matter of fact, the student frequently is glad to have the opportunity to open up and discuss it.
- STEP 6: DO NOT BE MISLED by the youngster's comments that s/he is past the emotional crisis. Often the youth will feel initial relief after talking about suicide, but the same thinking may recur later. Follow-up is crucial.
- STEP 7: BE AFFIRMATIVE, BUT SUPPORTIVE. Strong, stable guideposts are essential in the life of a distressed child. Provide emotional strength by giving the impression that you know what you are doing, and that everything possible will be done to assist the young person.
- STEP 8: EVALUATE AVAILABLE RESOURCES. The student may have inner resources, including various mechanisms for rationalization and intellectualization, which can be strengthened and supported, and other resources such as ministers, relatives, and friends who can be contacted. If these are absent, the problem may be more serious.
- STEP 9: ACT SPECIFICALLY. Do something tangible; that is, give the youngster something definite to hang onto, such as arranging to see him/her later or subsequently contacting another helping person. Nothing is more frustrating to a young person than to feel as though s/he has gained nothing from the discussion.

STEP 10: OBTAIN APPROPRIATE ASSISTANCE AND CONSULTATION. Do not try to handle the problem alone. Seek the advice of physicians, school specialists, mental health professionals, or other knowledgeable persons.

¹This listing of ten steps was prepared by Dr. Calvin Frederick, National Institute of Mental Health and appears in Trends in Mental Health: Self-Destructive Behavior Among Younger Age Groups, Dept. of Health, Education & Welfare, Publication No. (ADM) 76-365.