

LET'S TALK

Yesterday I had to ask THE QUESTION. You would think being a social worker, I would be comfortable asking difficult questions but this time was different. I have asked THE QUESTION numerous times, without hesitation or concern how they will react or their perception of me. My only concern was making sure they are safe. But it all changed when I knew I had to ask THE QUESTION to a person who I am very close to, that I care about very much. This person is going through extreme hardships and was giving a few warning signs that worried me enough that I needed to ask THE QUESTION...

Are you thinking of ending your life?

There is such angst in even considering uttering these words... will they think I am weird for asking? Maybe I am overreacting? Am I simply paranoid? They can't really be seriously considering suicide...would they? What if they say yes? What if I make them angry?

Yet, I knew I had to ask THE QUESTION despite all my fears.

You know what? It was okay. After I asked, he sighed a big, heavy sigh, like a weight came off his shoulders and said, "yeah, things have been hard. Nothing is going at all like I planned. I have been really down on myself, but no, it is not so bad that I have thought about killing myself...thank you for checking on me".

Then I did all the things that I knew to do: listened, evaluated the risk, gave support, listened some more, made sure he knew all the resource numbers, and most of all told him how much I cared about him and how important he was to me.

I knew what to say and do, but it was still hard. It made me think about regular people who are worried about a friend, colleague or family member. People like you: parents, teachers, students. What is a regular person to do or say?

An excellent resource is www.bethere.org. It teaches the average person how to break the ice and start the conversation.

The 5 Golden Rules of Being There

1. **Say what you see.** Reach out when you notice something is different. Describe the changes you have noticed and why you are worried. **Stick to the facts, don't judge, don't make assumptions.**
2. **Show you care by building trust.** Support them by being compassionate, helpful, inclusive. Offer practical everyday support like give them a ride, take a few chores off

their plate, make a meal or bring their favorite meal.

3. **Hear them out.** Be a good listener by finding the balance between listening, asking questions and wisely sharing your experiences. Remember, **this conversation is about them, not you.**
4. **Know your role** and set boundaries to protect your relationship and your own mental health. You are not their therapist or doctor so don't fix, don't preach, **just be there.**
5. **Connect to help.** Learn how to access professional and community resources. Check out Kids's Help Phone www.kidshelpphone.ca/resources-around-me or call 1-800-668-6868. Other resources in Alberta are the Mental Help Line 1-877-303-2642 or crisis supports in Alberta www.alberta.ca/individual-family-crisis. Keep following up to ensure they are being supported.

Conversations around mental health are becoming more common and so is overcoming the stigma around mental illness. Initiatives like [Bell Let's Talk Day](#) Campaign, on **(January 26/22)** have been excellent in engaging Canadians in open and candid discussions about mental illness. Just talking about it isn't enough though, we all need the confidence and knowledge to step up and be there for one another. Not only for kids but also parents, colleagues and friends. When we are prepared to support someone, we can truly make a difference.

This article was submitted by Tammy Charko BA, BSW, RSW. Tammy is Northern Gateway Public School's Student Support Facilitator. She is a support and advocate for schools, students, parents and caregivers to promote success in school. Tammy has been a Registered Social Worker for more than 20 years and is a mother to 3 teenagers and 1 young adult.