

Responding When Someone is Distressed or Suicidal

WARNING SIGNS – You can't always tell when a loved one or friend is considering suicide. Sometimes people talk openly about suicide and other times there may be only subtle signs, or no signs at all.

Common signs might be:

- Talking about suicide, including making remarks such as "I wish I were dead" or "I wish I hadn't been born"
- Withdrawing from social contact
- Dramatic mood swings, such as being emotionally high one day and deeply discouraged the next
- Being preoccupied with death, dying or violence
- Feeling trapped or hopeless about a situation
- Abusing alcohol or drugs
- Changing normal routine, including eating or sleeping patterns
- Doing risky or self-destructive things, such as abusing drugs or driving recklessly
- Giving away belongings or getting affairs in order
- Saying goodbye to people as if they won't be seen again

APPROACH the person you are concerned about by stating what you have observed, for example:

- You stay to yourself a lot more than you did last quarter. We miss seeing you, and I'm really concerned about you.
- It's not like you to sleep through your classes. You used to love your major but now you seem not to be caring about classes or anything. What's going on?

- When you talk about your life you sound like things feel hopeless. I'm concerned you may be really depressed. Can we talk about how your other friends and I can help you?

ASK directly whether the person is thinking about suicide. Your bringing up the subject does not cause someone to think about suicide if they haven't thought it before. Some ways to phrase your questions could be:

- Are you thinking about suicide?
- Are you thinking about dying? Or hurting yourself?
- Have you thought about how you would do it?
- Do you have the means to do it?
- Do you know when you would do it?

GET HELP. If your loved one or friend tells you about his or her suicidal thoughts:

- Listen with compassion and without judgment.
- Repeat your concern and offer your friend help in getting to a counselor or other health professional. Talk with them about services Western offers (see resources on other side).
- Encourage the person to avoid alcohol and drug use as this can increase depression and risk.
- Remove potentially dangerous items from the person's surroundings (pills, weapons, etc.).
- Never promise that you will keep someone's suicidal thoughts a secret. If you believe a person is at risk of suicide, talk with a counselor at WWU's Counseling Center, your RA or RD, or other trusted professional.



Free and Confidential Counseling
www.wvu.edu/counseling
(360) 650-3164

