How to Talk About Suicide

Hard conversations are inevitable in life. Knowing how to have them can make a difference in the experience of everyone involved. One of the most challenging things for people to talk about is suicide. Most of the time, these conversations are avoided because someone doesn’t know how to talk about suicide, what questions to ask, or what resources are available to refer someone to if necessary. September is Suicide Prevention Month and an ideal time to learn more about having these conversations.

Setting the tone with your approach and word choice is very important. Introducing a discussion on suicide by saying, “You’re not suicidal, are you?” can shut down any admittance of a need for help before the conversation even starts. Any question leading someone to a specific answer or not introducing a welcoming environment to whatever their answer may be can cause more hurt than help. It is essential to be mindful of all aspects of your approach. Being direct is the best option, leaving no room for misguidance or misinterpretation. For example, asking, “Do you think about suicide?” is an excellent way to start.

After starting this conversation, listening is the next best step. Give the person you are speaking to your undivided attention. Be careful not to interrupt or turn the conversation to yourself. This could be the first time they have openly discussed their suicidal ideation or plan of attempt. It’s imperative you give them the space to do so, not only so they feel heard and cared for, but also so you know what next steps to take. Asking them questions when appropriate about if they have a plan or if they have attempted before can help determine your next course of action.

There are multitudes of resources across the nation. If you feel that someone is in crisis, 988 is the number for the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. The Lifeline is available 24/7 and can connect those in need with services in their area. If someone is not in crisis but still needs help, get them in contact with a counselor who can help connect them with other resources. Always make sure after you have a conversation like this to notify those in daily contact with the person, such as teachers, youth workers, parents, foster parents, etc. That way, a circle of care is established in the best interest of the person experiencing suicidal ideation. If you want to learn more ways to help, The Jason Foundation offers multiple free, online programs to further your education on this topic. You can also find more information at www.jasonfoundation.com.

Suicide is a sensitive subject, but that doesn’t mean it should be avoided. Most often, the topics we avoid are the ones that should be talked about the most. Suicide is deemed the silent epidemic for a reason. Don’t let your silence contribute to it.