

**AWISA Fall 2006:
Recognizing and Assisting
Students Who May Be Suicidal**

Possible Warning Signs:

- Feelings of hopelessness or extreme anxiety
- Persistent sad or irritable mood
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Changes in appetite/eating
- Difficulty concentrating or maintaining motivation, possible absenteeism
- Poor energy or agitation
- Deterioration of hygiene
- Loss of interest in activities; inability to experience pleasure
- Guilt, shame, or low self-esteem
- Alcohol or other substance abuse
- Social withdrawal
- Having previously lost someone close to suicide
- Presence of a psychiatric disorder
- Unusual "good-byes" or giving away belongings
- Dramatic changes in mood (including from depressed to elated)
- Access to firearms
- Verbal cues
 - Indirect statements suggesting a wish to be dead (e.g., "maybe my family would be better off without me.")
 - Direct statements suggesting a wish to be dead (e.g., "I might as well end it all.")
 - Statements indicating hopelessness (e.g., "I don't see how I'll get through this.")
- Presence of a plan to harm self (e.g., plan for what method to use, plan for when to try)
- Access to means that are a part of the plan
- History of one or more suicide attempts
- Loss (break-up, grief, etc.) or other major stressor
- Perceived Failure
- Isolation or loneliness – may be a particular problem for International Students
- Feeling discriminated against (especially if also feeling isolated)
- For International Students, poorer than expected performance in academics can lead to significant distress. Also, parents' disappointment about grades may also contribute to such distress.

What to do when a student may be suicidal:

1. Take the potential threat seriously.
2. Stay calm, many people who feel suicidal want assistance and it's highly unlikely that a student would act on any urges in your presence. Therefore, as long as they're sitting with you, you have time to take a deep breath and think through your next steps.
3. Try to make sure there are no other students within earshot.
4. Maintain a warm and concerned tone. Be direct, but non-confrontational.
5. If you think a student might be depressed or suicidal, **ask directly**. One way might be to say "You seem so down, have you been having any suicidal feelings lately? What do you think about doing?" Studies have shown that asking about suicidal thinking does not put the thought in someone's head.
6. If the answer is yes, maybe, I'm not sure, or unresponsive then please **contact a mental health professional** or medic who will conduct an assessment. Your student counseling center, an ER, 911 resources, or a suicide hotline should all be equipped to provide you assistance in these situations.
7. If the answer to your direct question is no but the student is experiencing a handful or more warning signs above, please refer them to a mental health professional.
8. **Do not leave a suicidal student alone**. Walk them over to the counseling center or stay with them until you've made contact with someone qualified to assess suicidality. (If a student flees, do not block their way, but then contact emergency personnel.)
9. Remember, you do not have to fix the student's problems, you just need to focus on engaging with them around how distressed they are and connect them to appropriate resources.
10. It can feel stressful to work with a seriously distressed student, so make sure you do good self-care and get plenty of support.

Responses to avoid:

- Minimizing the situation or feelings (e.g., "It's not that bad," or "Things will be fine tomorrow.")
- Being afraid to ask the person about how badly they're feeling, or to ask if they're thinking of ending their life.
- Trying to debate/convince the person that suicide is wrong.
- Trying to handle the situation by yourself.