

# Robbie's Hope ADULT HANDBOOK



A GUIDE BY TEENS  
ON HOW TO  
TALK TO TEENS



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*Disponible en español en [robies-hope.com](http://robies-hope.com)*

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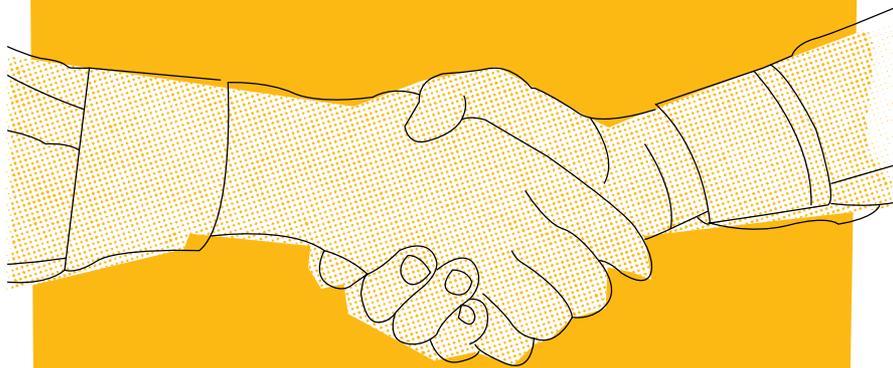
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## introduction



## PARENTS AND TRUSTED ADULTS

Our son, Robbie, died by suicide on October 11, 2018. That day will always be etched in our hearts and minds — the moment our lives were changed forever.

Robbie was 15 years old, a sophomore in high school. He was a great student, excelling in all of his classes, especially math. Robbie was at home in the pool or on the courts playing the two sports he loved deeply, swimming and tennis. Surrounded by his friends at meets and at matches, he was full of joy. Robbie will always be remembered for his grace, kindness to others, wit, and joyful presence. He was always looking out for others and putting them before himself.

Despite his gift of bringing love and joy to others, Robbie was suffering in the darkness, battling privately with incredible pain, unbeknownst to us, his family, teachers, coaches, and closest friends.

We never knew that Robbie was struggling; we never asked. We assumed that because he was outwardly happy and successful that it reflected his inner feelings and emotions as well. **Our single biggest regret in life is that we never had that conversation.**

The Teen Activists of Robbie's Hope have poured their energy into writing this handbook. It reflects how they would like an adult to interact with them on this topic and in other difficult conversations. It provides a guide and some tools to start the conversation. Do not worry about your conversations being perfect, scripted, or smooth — we promise they won't be. Simply take the first step and then keep trying over and over again.

We would also like to stress that this is not just for parents. Many teens would rather have these conversations with other trusted adults: coaches, teachers, youth group leaders, mentors. Taking this first step may make the difference in a teen's life.

With love and in HOPE,  
*Jason & Kari Eckert*

## ABOUT THE GUIDE

There are many professional resources for how to talk to teens about these critical issues. With this guide, however, we aspire to add new insight to the narrative.

This guide was created by teens to help parents and other trusted adults — teachers, coaches, youth group leaders, and mentors — initiate and navigate ongoing conversations with the teens in their lives. It is a reflection of how they, the teens, would want a trusted adult to engage in these conversations with them.

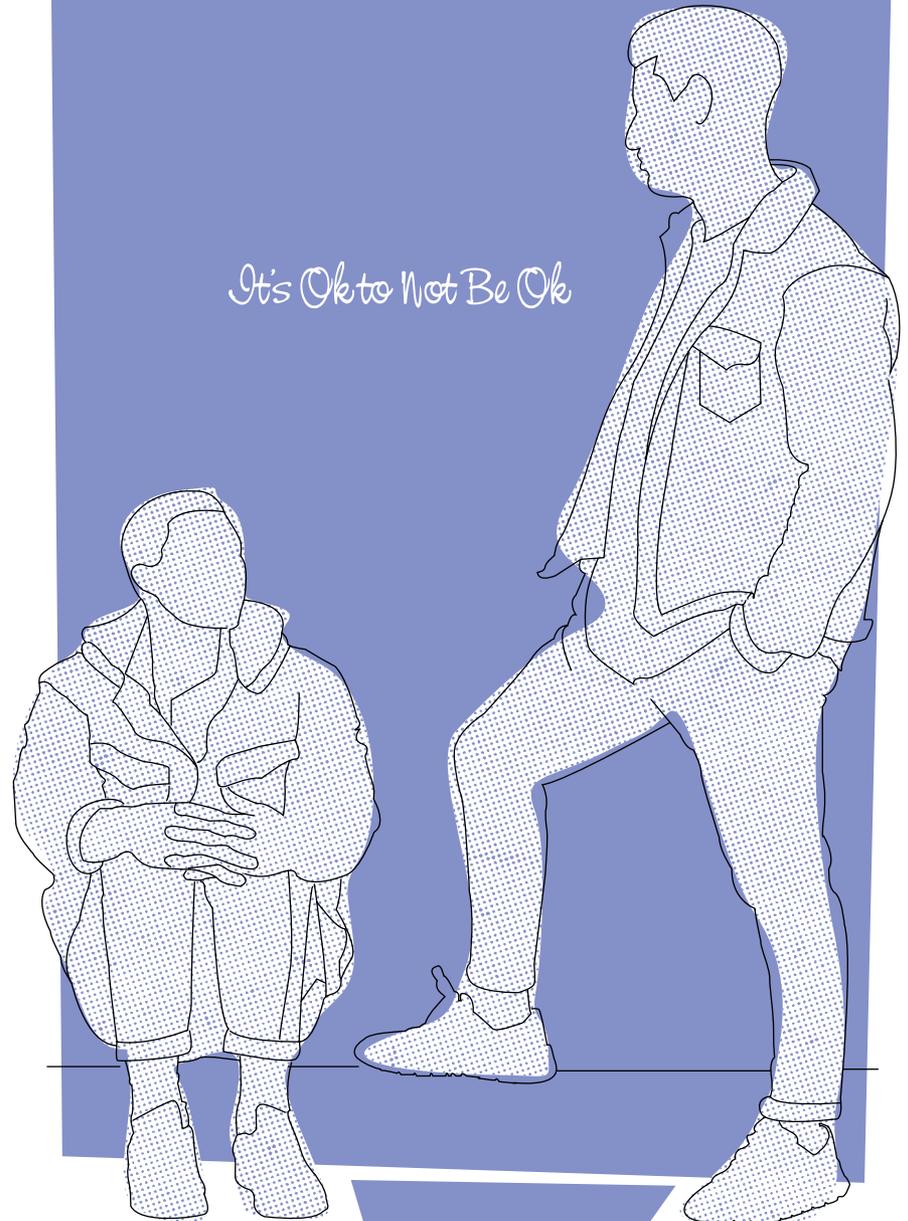
When you enter into a conversation, be open-minded. There is a high probability that you will hear things from the teen that you were not expecting. Be flexible, listen, and adjust your approach. Finally, be patient. While you may have these conversations dozens of times, the 25th time may be the one that makes the difference.

Please keep in mind this is a guide, not hard and fast rules. Teens say there is no one-size-fits-all answer. So, use your intuition about their individual preferences and adjust your approach to and throughout the conversation as needed based on their reactions. In other words, follow your gut. If this were as simple as following a five-step process, this guide would be a lot shorter.

Lastly, know that grappling with feelings of depression and anxiety is normal for most teenagers. Having these feelings does not necessarily equate to chronic depression or anxiety. Regardless of whether emotions come and go, are seriously affecting their mental wellbeing, or potentially indicate a heightened risk of physical self-harm, it is critical to have these conversations sooner than later, to let them know they have your love and support, and that It's Ok to Not Be Ok.

This handbook is part of our ongoing efforts at Robbie's Hope to fulfill our mission of cutting teen suicide rates in half by 2028 by motivating and inspiring you to engage in the kind of proactive, constructive, and ongoing talks that can truly save lives.

Thanks for reading.



# WHEN TO HAVE THE CONVERSATION

Before we move on to helpful tips, it is first necessary to understand when it's important, or critical, to have the conversation.

If you are concerned that there is an imminent safety risk for the teen, please call 911 or the National Suicide Prevention Line at **800-273-8255**

## WHEN IT'S IMPORTANT TO HAVE THE CONVERSATION

- Regularly, when there are no signs at all. Creating open dialogue will make the teen comfortable coming to you in the future.
- Following media coverage or mention of depression or suicide.
- If a friend or family member has expressed signs of depression and anxiety.
- If the teen has expressed feeling overwhelmed at school and/or having a “full plate of activities.”

## WHEN IT'S CRITICAL TO HAVE THE CONVERSATION

- If you notice drastic changes in mood, behavior, personality, sleeping habits, eating more or less food, becoming isolated, or spending lots of time in their room.
- If someone the teen knows dies by suicide.
- Around the anniversary of a death by suicide, or important holidays.
- The teen seems sad or withdrawn from social situations, friends, or family, or is distant from other people.
- The teen seems to have lost interest in activities that were previously exciting.
- Signs of sadness, shame, anger, depression, anxiety.
- Out-of-control behaviors, unusual behaviors.
- An atypical neglect of care for self or others.
- Sudden overwhelming fear for no reason; intense worries or fears that get in the way of daily activities.
- Seeing, hearing, or believing things that are not real.
- Repeatedly and excessively using drugs, vaping, or alcohol.
- Extreme difficulty in concentrating or staying still.
- A close friend of the teen tells you that he or she is having feelings and thoughts of depression, anxiety, and/or suicide.
- An immediate and abrupt shutdown of the conversation when it is initiated.
- Trying to harm oneself or planning to do so.

## CHOOSING THE RIGHT PLACE AND TIME

It's also important to determine the best environment, location, and time to start the conversation.

### ENVIRONMENT AND LOCATION

Teens say there is no one-size-fits-all answer. Here are some things to think about as you determine the best place to talk.

1. Use your intuition to determine where the teen might be most comfortable.
2. Ask directly what the teen prefers.
3. If you can't ask, think back to places you've had conversations in the past — where did the teen feel comfortable expressing their feelings to you? Where did the teen feel uncomfortable or shut down?
4. Consider locations and environments that might make the teen feel trapped (bedroom vs. living room). Consider places that provide an “escape route” if the teen feels uncomfortable and wants to exit the conversation. *For example, some teens say a car ride is not an appropriate environment because they feel trapped. Others say a car ride could be a good place because eye contact is not necessary, which makes the conversation feel less formal or uncomfortable.*

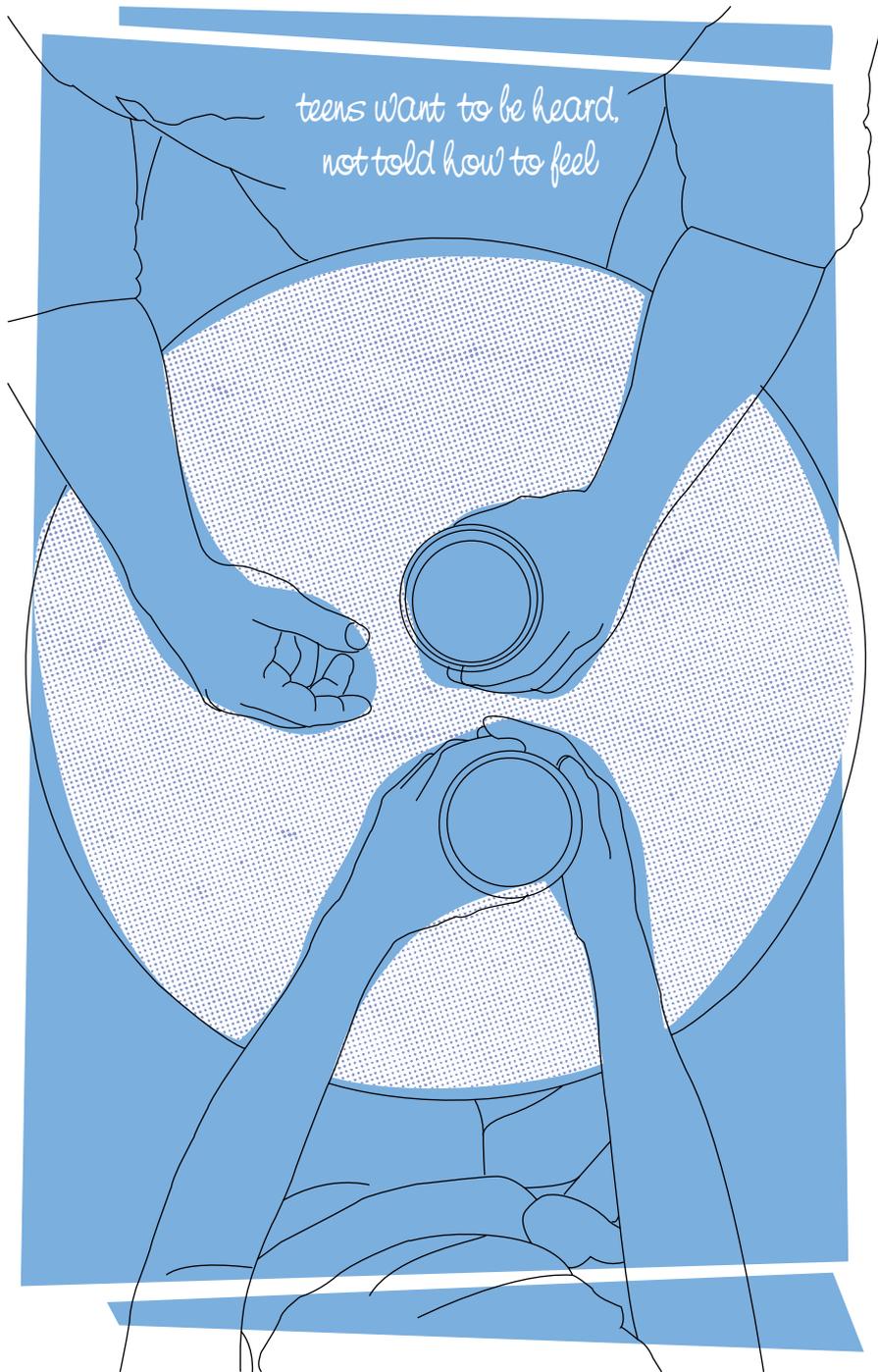
### FINDING THE BEST TIME

Teens say it's best to choose a time when there's no rush, no time commitments or other places to be, and no people around that might make them feel uncomfortable.

### DO NOT HAVE THE CONVERSATION

- In public places with commotion and distractions.
- When the teen is around friends.
- When the teen is at school and may feel self-conscious.
- Around anyone the teen doesn't trust or feel comfortable with.
- When there are other time commitments — they don't want to feel rushed.





## INITIATING THE CONVERSATION

Once you've identified the right environment, location, and time, these tips can help ensure the teen feels comfortable expressing their emotions.

- *Make it a conversation between two people.* Be prepared to ask lots of questions and listen, without interjecting your own advice. **The teen wants to be heard, not told how to feel.**
- *Be prepared to ask questions that can't be answered with a simple "yes" or "no."* For example, "What did you do in school today?" vs. "Did you have a good day at school?"
- *Ease into the conversation.* Start with an easy question, then move into more difficult ones. Some teens tend to deny feelings if initially asked, "Are you feeling depressed?" because they don't want to disappoint you or be viewed negatively.
- *After asking a question, stop and listen.* Allow for silence. During the silence, the teen is trying to figure out what to say.
- *Silently count to 10 seconds after every question.* This allows the teen time to respond. Silence is when the "heavy lifting" of the conversation happens.
- *Be vulnerable to sharing personal experiences.* It's OK to give specific examples that show you understand what they're going through, but don't take over the conversation. Keep your comments short and return the focus back to the teen quickly. **This conversation is about the teen, NOT you!**
- *Use a soothing tone of voice.* Sounding loud or harsh may cause the teen to shut down.
- *Be aware of your facial expressions and body language.* The teen can sense disappointment and judgment based on your physical actions.
- *Be ready for the teen to avoid the conversation.* If they are not ready to talk, don't force it. But don't give up, either. Communicate your desire to find a better time and location to talk.
- *Express your love and support.* Reassure the teen that nothing they say will cause you disappointment or judgment. You can communicate this through both words and body language.
- *Acknowledge that It's Ok to Not Be Ok.*

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## THINGS TO AVOID DURING THE CONVERSATION

- *DO NOT Jump to conclusions or judgment.* If the teen feels they're being judged or that you're trying to "fix" them, they may shut down.
- *DO NOT force the teen to talk.* Create an option for them to talk. For example, ask a question like, "Do you have time to talk?" If the teen says "no," ask "When is the best time to talk?"
- *AVOID comparing your experience as a teenager.* How you experienced your teenage years is not helpful in this context and can frustrate the teen. The world our teens live in today and the pressures they experience are in many respects unrelatable to adults.
- *NEVER make jokes about anxiety, depression, or suicide.*
- *DO NOT suggest in any way that suicide is a way out for the weak.*

## IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

1. **A common misconception is that initiating a first conversation can plant suicidal thoughts.** But teens, backed by the research of professional psychologists, say this simply isn't true.\* So, whether you have legitimate concerns, none at all, or assume "my child is just being a teenager," it's critical to be proactive. **The strength it takes to create open lines of communication now is far less difficult than the emotional grief of losing a child to suicide.**
2. Teens often express that they want to talk or ask for help but don't for fear of being alienated or judged. It's important to express your unconditional love and support. Teens say that some of the hardest topics to talk about include: insecurities including body image, friend/relationship issues, fears about the future, pressures around school and sports, being a disappointment to you, and something that you did that hurt them. Fear, guilt, anxiety, shame, and not wanting to feel like a burden drive teens to avoid these conversations with parents and other trusted adults. Emotions and devaluation of self-worth continue to build until a breaking point is reached.
3. If a teen's close friend, coach, or teacher is the one to express concern about the teen's feelings of depression or thoughts of suicide, consider the consequences of telling the teen the name of the person who told you. The close friend or trusted adult could be someone the teen might turn to

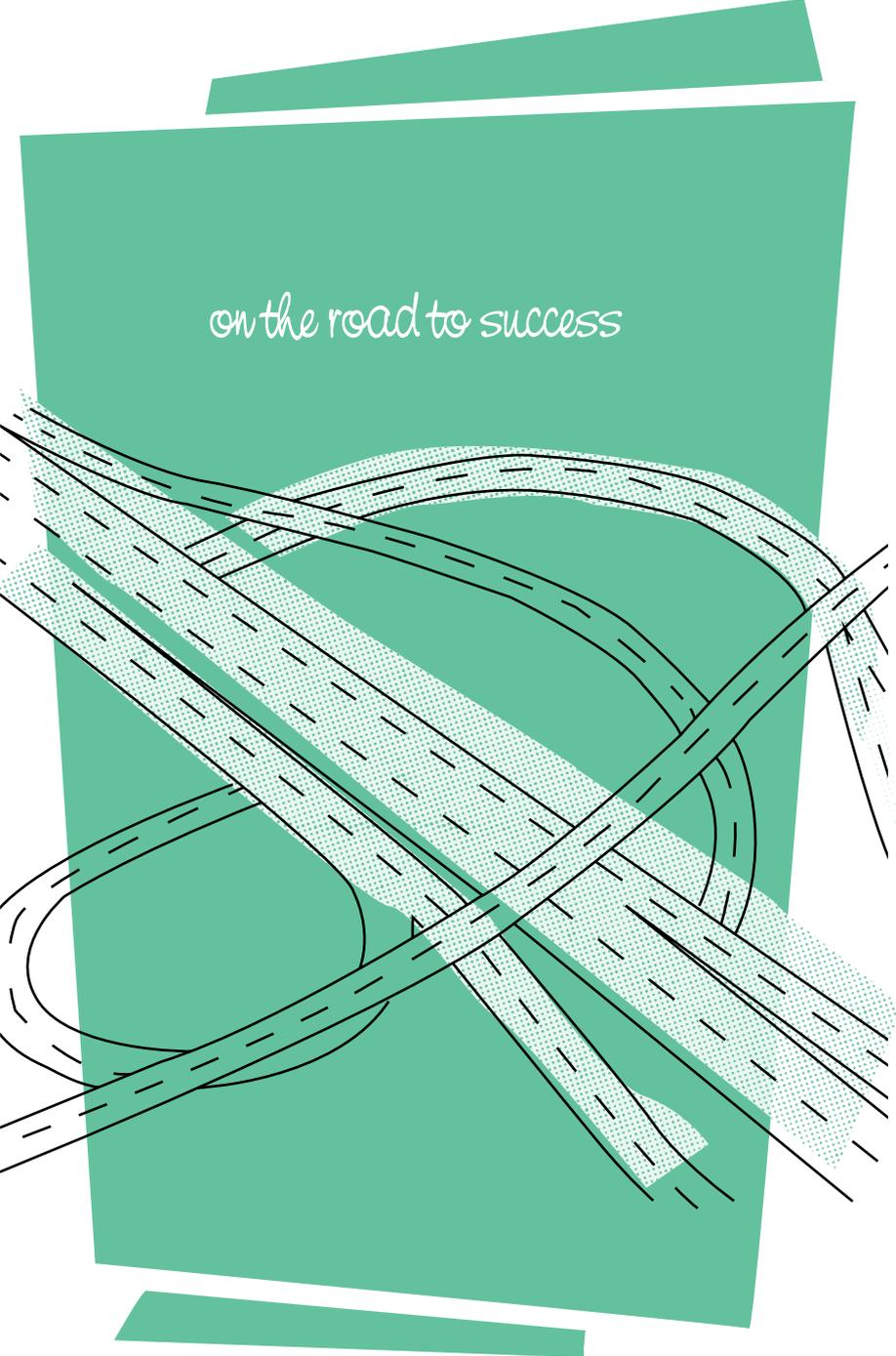
for support in the future—acknowledging they expressed concern could alienate that friendship.

4. Some teens expressed discomfort about being directly questioned about their own feelings of depression, anxiety, or suicide. It can make them feel defensive. Some prefer parents and trusted adults ease into the conversation by asking something like: "Do you know anyone who seems to struggle with depression, anxiety, or suicidal thoughts?"

### Sample Questions to Initiate a Conversation

- *What did you do today? Tell me about your day. What made you happy or feel stressed today?*
- *I have noticed that you might be overwhelmed. What makes you feel overwhelmed?*
- *What might be stressing you out?*
- *I have noticed that you are \_\_\_\_ (i.e. disconnecting from your friends). Tell me what you are thinking or feeling.*
- *Tell me about things that make you "down" or zap your energy.*
- *How are you handling all of your responsibilities? I know you have a full plate, so I'm curious how it is impacting you.*
- *What do you need to get off your chest?*
- *Did you hear the news about \_\_\_\_ (friend, media coverage, etc.)? What do you think about it? How did you feel when you heard the news?*
- *Whom do you know that might be depressed, feel anxiety, or has thoughts of suicide? How can you relate to them?*
- *The past several days, I have noticed that you seem distracted or worried. I'm concerned about you. What is going on? ...Tell me more.*
- *What has your school taught you about mental health and suicide?*
- *What do you think about your future?*
- *What does it feel like to you to feel hopeless or depressed?*

\*Dazzi, T., Gribble, R., Wessely, S., & Fear, N. (2014). Does asking about suicide and related behaviours induce suicidal ideation? What is the evidence? *Psychological Medicine*, 44(16), 3361-3363. doi:10.1017/S0033291714001299



on the road to success

## NAVIGATING THE CONVERSATION

Once you've gotten the conversation started, here are some helpful tips for making it as productive and comfortable as possible. Remember that what you talk about is sensitive, so be delicate with your questions — **your ultimate goal is to communicate your acceptance, love, and support.**

- *Stay in questioning mode.* Continue asking lots of open-ended questions. For example, ask “How can I support you?” vs. “Is there anything I can do for you?”
- *Continue to LISTEN!* Your silence and lack of interruption shows the teen you support them and aren't judging them. However, some teens expressed that too much silence can feel awkward. Remember the “count-to-ten” rule and use your intuition to react appropriately.
- *Continue to use positive body language.* An expression of disappointment can cause the teen to shut down.
- *Be focused on the conversation.* Silence and put away all phones so there are no distractions.
- *Be prepared to take a break.* It's OK to stop, pause, or pick up the conversation later, as it can become exhausting for both of you.
- *Respect differences between gender and age.* Being a teenager is different today than it was when you grew up, and it's certainly different for boys and girls. Be sure to acknowledge these factors so you don't frustrate the teen by making unfair comparisons.
- *Give the teen other outlets and resources.* Sometimes it's helpful to suggest outside resources, including suicide hotlines, mental health groups, or other people the teen can trust and talk to. See the back of this handbook and the Robbie's Hope website for more information.

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## THINGS TO AVOID DURING THE CONVERSATION

- *AVOID giving advice.* Offering advice can come across as a lack of empathy and understanding, that you're jumping to conclusions, or that you assume you know the answer. It causes your teen to shut down. It is best to stay in a questioning mode.
- *DO NOT immediately suggest professional help.* Jumping straight to "you need to talk to a therapist" can shut down the conversation immediately. Although this might be a good next step, it's not helpful here.
- *DO NOT take control of the conversation.* You should always try to let the teen guide where the conversation goes. Never communicate or make assumptions about why the teen might feel depressed or suicidal.
- *NEVER judge the teen.* Never engage in any language that suggests judgment, like "I told you so" or "I knew it" or express anything that would suggest they should "just get over it."
- *DO NOT express anger, frustration, or personal guilt* – whether toward the teen or a spouse/significant other, another adult, or a friend of the teen.
- *AVOID using negative body language.* Be careful not to show signs of disappointment, like rolling your eyes or sighing.
- *NEVER suggest your teen shouldn't have these thoughts or feelings.*
- *AVOID following a script or using motivational quotes.*
- *AVOID referring to social media as the problem.*
- *DO NOT compare your teen to other siblings or friends.*
- *NEVER make jokes about their feelings.*
- *NEVER use threats or bribery.*

let the teen guide where the conversation should go

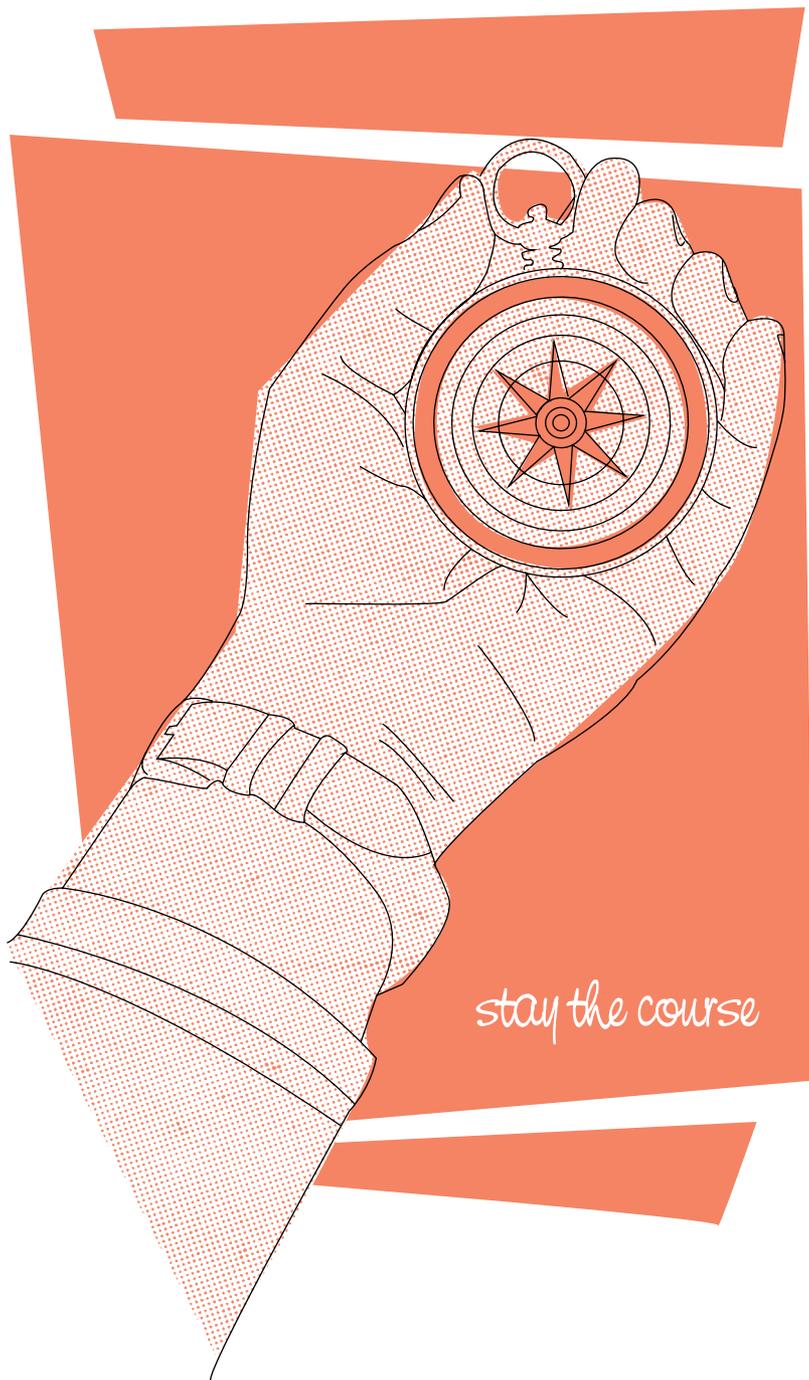
## IMPORTANT CONSIDERATION

As a trusted adult, it's important to keep your conversation with the teen confidential. Teens express that getting other parties involved (unless there is immediate cause for concern) can break their trust in you and cause them not to want to engage in future conversations. It's important to maintain this trust by letting the teen know that you are on their side without risk of exposing their feelings to others.

If you feel that the teen is in crisis, immediately call 911 or the National Suicide Prevention Line at 800-273-8255. You can jointly call the Prevention Line if that provides the teen comfort.

### Sample Questions During the Conversation:

- *Can you tell me more?*
- *I understand that this is hard to talk about. I'm here to listen to you. What are you thinking?*
- *What else? ... listen... then ask, "What else?" again.*
- *What makes you feel hopeless? What makes you feel depressed?*
- *What are your feelings and thoughts about suicide?*
- *What are your feelings and thoughts about hurting yourself?*
- *What are your thoughts about having depression or anxiety?*
- *How can I help you?*
- *How can I support you?*
- *Remember to listen to what they say and reassure them that you are listening by summarizing their response. Replay or paraphrase.*



stay the course

## CLOSING THE CONVERSATION

These types of conversations need to be ongoing and it's important to end each one by fostering open lines of communication. Try to align on clear next steps that feel appropriate and helpful moving forward.

Here are some tips to ensure that the teen feels heard and is comfortable having these conversations in the future.

- *Express your interest in continued conversations.*
- *Ask what you can do to support the teen.*
- *Validate with your teen that "It's Ok to Not Be Ok."*
- *Be supportive.* Use positive body language and a supportive tone of voice.
- *It's OK to suggest professional therapy.* Delicately bring up the option of talking with a professional therapist, but do not push it. If you feel professional therapy may be helpful, suggest it as a comparison to physical health. If you had a 104° temperature, you would not think twice about going to a doctor — getting treatment for your mental health should not be any different.
- *Demonstrate empathy.* Express that you understand the teen's feelings.
- *Be patient.* The teen may not want to talk about this the first time, second time, or tenth time that you bring up the topic. Keep asking and keep trying; **one day in the future the teen may be struggling and your persistence will make the difference.**
- *Be sincere.* Use eye contact to show you support the teen and want to help.
- *Continue asking open-ended questions.* For example, ask "What can I do to help you feel comfortable talking about this with me again?" vs. "Do you want to talk about this again?"

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## THINGS TO AVOID

- *DO NOT make this the only conversation you have together.* Find the most appropriate way to continue talking.
- *AVOID jumping to conclusions about the right solution.* For example, don't suggest that the teen needs to immediately talk with a therapist or tell your teen that going to therapy is the only option.
- *DO NOT put more pressure on the teen to find a solution.*
- *NEVER end the conversation with anger.*
- *DO NOT get overly emotional.* End the conversation calmly rather than getting upset, angry, depressed, or emotionally distressed. If a teen feels the conversation negatively affected you, it may cause your teen to avoid future conversations.

Be patient. One day in the future the teen may be struggling and your persistence will make the difference.

### Sample Questions When Closing the Conversation

- *What can I do to help you?*
- *What does help look like to you?*
- *What do you think or feel about professional help/therapy?*
- *What can I do to help you feel comfortable talking about this again?*
- *What do you think are the best next steps?*
- *What should we do now?*
- *What can I do to make myself more available to you?*

## NOTES

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## CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

It's easy to put off having conversations with your teenager about mental health and suicide because it can feel unnecessary or overwhelming. But teens say that continuous open dialogue is **the best thing parents and trusted adults can do** to prevent normal teenage emotions from progressing into suicidal territory (or self-harm of any kind).

The following tips can help the teen feel supported and thus more likely to engage in these conversations moving forward.



## IMPORTANT THINGS TO REMEMBER

- *Frequently check in with your teen.* Even if you're not intending to start an in-depth conversation, ongoing questions, even in passing, can help the teen feel your ongoing love, support, and concern. Continually letting the teen know you care helps foster future conversations.
- *Express your ongoing support.* Let the teen know it's important and OK to reach out to you in the future. Also, encourage them to open up to other people they trust, whether it's a friend or another trusted adult who can help them work through their feelings.
- *Validate that the teen's feelings are real.* The most important thing you can do is listen and acknowledge the teen's feelings. **Your role is not to be a problem solver** but an active, engaged listener and a trusted support system to help navigate the teenage years and beyond.
- *Take a class.* If you're a trusted adult who frequently interacts with teens, it can be helpful to attend a mental health training course like QPR or Mental Health First Aid. These classes offer valuable resources for understanding how to support teens in need and provide helpful tools for dealing with a teen in crisis. For more information, go to [QPRinstitute.com](http://QPRinstitute.com), [MentalHealthFirstAid.com](http://MentalHealthFirstAid.com), and [Robbies-Hope.com](http://Robbies-Hope.com).
- *Suggest professional help.* If after talking and listening to the teen, you feel the struggles have reached the point that they're affecting the teen's life, school, extracurricular activities, mental wellbeing, or physical health, it's OK to suggest and look into meeting with a professional therapist. Just like we'd recommend a teen see a doctor for a physical illness, we need to start looking at mental health treatment as a useful resource for addressing feelings of depression, anxiety, and suicide. It is OK to seek professional help.
- *DO NOT suggest there is an immediate solution.* For many teens, working through these normal adolescent emotions is an ongoing process that can't be "fixed" with a quick or easy answer. The best thing to do is to be an ongoing support system rather than suggesting there's a quick solution.

## RESOURCES

### **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline**

800-273-8255

[suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

### **Nacional de Prevención del Suicidio**

888-628-9454

### **Veterans Crisis Line**

800-273-8255

### **Colorado Crisis Services**

844-493-8255 or text "Talk" to 38255

### **Trevor Project**

866-488-7386 or text "Start" to 678678

**For more resources go to [Robbies-Hope.com](http://Robbies-Hope.com)**





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For more information about Robbie's Hope, please visit  
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