

Responding to Students who May be Suicidal

Although suicide is a rare event, it is the third leading cause of death among college students. Suicidal states are often associated with major depression, a combination of acute anxiety and depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, drug and alcohol abuse, and bipolar disorder. People who are suicidal often tell people about their thoughts or give clues to others about their feelings.

Some factors associated with suicide risk are:

- suicidal thoughts
- pessimistic view of the future
- intense feelings of helplessness, especially when combined with anxiety
- feelings of alienation and isolation
- viewing death as a means of escape from distress
- previous suicide attempts
- personal or family history of depression and/or suicide
- personal or family history of suicide attempts
- substance abuse
- history of self-mutilation

Don't be afraid to ask directly about suicide. Asking a student about suicidal thoughts will not plant an idea if it isn't there already. Asking the question will eliminate secrets and reduce the stigma of talking about difficult feelings and thoughts – the first steps toward relief and solutions.

A student who is suicidal and who confides in someone is often highly ambivalent about suicide and open to discussion. **Students who are at high risk** usually have a specific plan, have a means that is lethal (e.g., medication, knife, gun), a time frame in which they will kill themselves, and they tend to be or feel isolated.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Call the Office of Public Safety, 607-274-3333 from a cell phone, (or 911 from an on-campus phone), if the student is in immediate danger to him/herself.
- Talk to the student in private.
- Remain calm and take the lead.
- Take a student's disclosure as a serious plea for help ("I hear clearly that you are really considering killing yourself to just end the pain of how badly you are feeling").
- Ask the student directly about feelings and plans ("Are you thinking of killing yourself?" "How have you thought about doing it?").
- Express care and concern, and assure the student that you will help him or her reach a professional ("I believe and trust everything you are saying and that you have not gotten to this point easily. I am highly concerned for

- you and want you to believe and trust me now that seeking help can make a difference even if it doesn't feel this way right now").
- If the incident occurs during business hours, escort the student to the Counseling Center on the lower level of the Hammond Health Center.
 - Call the Office of Public Safety, 607-274-3333 from a cell phone, (or 911 from an on-campus phone) to access emergency services 24/7.
 - If you feel overwhelmed or unprepared to help a student who may be suicidal, call the Counseling Center to consult with a counselor about how to proceed.
 - *All threats must be considered potentially lethal.*

AVOID

- Minimizing the situation ("It is not okay to kill yourself.").
- Arguing with the student about the merits of living ("You have good grades and everyone loves you, how could you think of killing yourself.").
- Allowing friends to assume responsibility for the student without getting input from a professional.
- Assuming the family knows that the student has suicidal thoughts.

For more information, see the Counseling Center Suicide Awareness and Prevention Website:

<http://www.ithaca.edu/sacl/counseling/resources/sures/>