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STEP-BY-STEP: EARLY INTERVENTION AND SUICIDE

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Calls to suicide crisis hotlines spiked 65%, and texts grew 116% after the suicides of designer Kate Spade and journalist Anthony Bourdain. A similar spike occurred in 2014 after the suicide of Robin Williams. If more people in crisis are inclined to reach out for help when suicide enters the national conversation, what happens when suicide recedes from the media spotlight?

We need to break through our culture’s stigma surrounding mental health issues and start talking about depression and mental health on a regular basis. We can start at home and follow-up in our schools, workplaces, and healthcare settings. We should think about suicide prevention much like we think about the prevention of heart disease, by intervening early with education, resources and advocacy for mental health issues. We don’t combat heart disease by focusing only on people at the brink of a heart attack. Neither should we ignore suicide until people are on the verge of ending their lives. If a mental health issue has gotten to the crisis phase where you think someone might be suicidal, here is how to handle it:

**WHAT TO SAY**

Before you start the conversation, be prepared with resources for help, ie: The National Suicide Hotline and Veteran Crisis Line: 1-800-273-8255. Our local crisis line: 1-855-838-0404. Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741 from anywhere in the US anytime, about any type of crisis, not just suicide.

Speak up and very clearly ask the person if they are suicidal. This opens the door to converse about their emotional pain. Listen without judgement to the reasons the person has for both living and dying. Validate that they are considering both options and emphasize that living is an option for them. Help them to focus on their reasons for living and creating a network of support. Let them know you care and how much you want them to live.

Ask them directly if they have a suicide plan. Do they have a timeline? Have they attempted suicide before? Do they have access to a method (weapons, medication)? If so, help them remove the means from their vicinity. You may need another friend or law enforcement officer to help you with this. Do not put yourself in danger. If you feel threatened call 911.

**HELP THEM CONNECT AND KEEP THEM SAFE**

Create a safety plan together. Agree on people they can call if they think they may act on their suicidal thoughts. Ask them to refrain from using drugs and alcohol. If possible, arrange a situation so they are not left alone. Provide them with the numbers of the crisis lines.

Get a verbal commitment that they will not act upon their thoughts and that they will call a crisis line or a friend instead. If you cannot get that promise, then take them to the nearest emergency room or call 911.

Suicide is a serious public health issue that needs more attention so that far fewer folks get to the crisis point. You don’t have to be a mental health professional to help someone who is struggling with suicide. We can all help prevent suicide and start the conversation before it gets to that point. Don’t be afraid to speak up!

STEP-BY-STEP is presented by Avenues to Wellness. ATW is a program of the Frank R. Howard Foundation. Be sure to check out ATW’s archive of speaker events on a wide variety of health topics at [www.avenuestowellness.org](http://www.avenuestowellness.org) (under resources). In September ATW will be offering FREE Healthier Living Workshops for those living with a chronic health condition. Call: 456-9676 for more information.