



---

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>2</b>
Conversations about mental health	3
Understanding suicidality: the importance of social connection	3
Spotting the signs of distress and risk	4

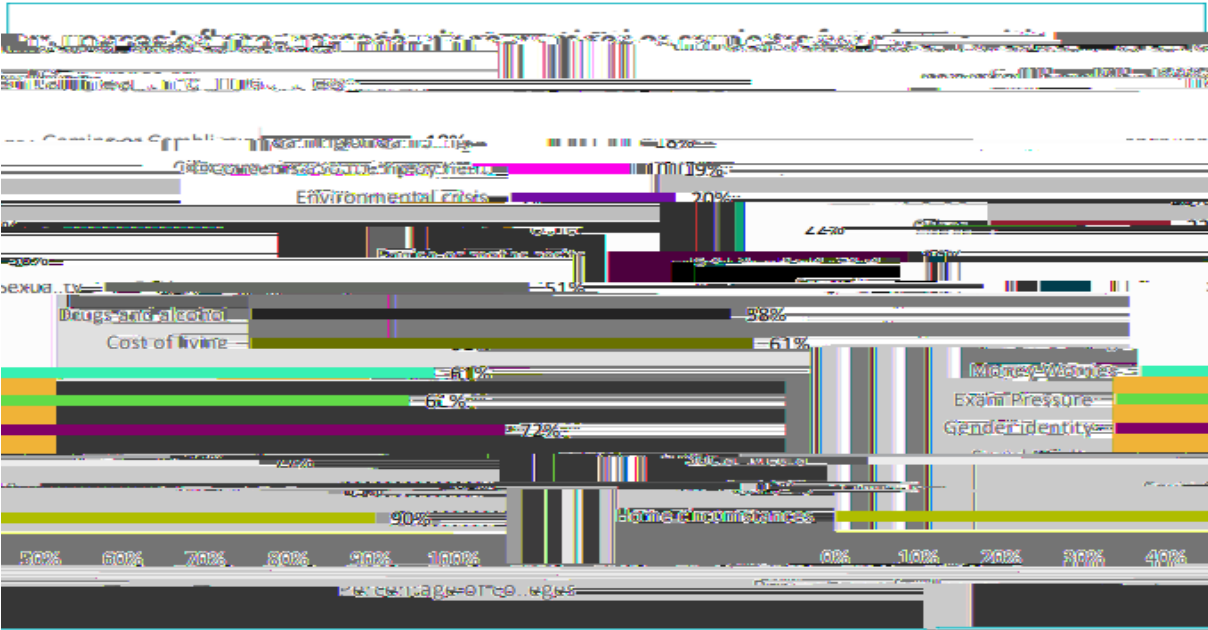


## INTRODUCTION

This resource is designed to guide staff working in educational settings in initiating a supportive conversation with a learner or colleague who may be experiencing thoughts of suicide, and to facilitate their access to appropriate support. The principles outlined in this guide may also support conversations in contexts beyond educational settings. It's important to note that it is not expected or appropriate for you to take on the role of a counsellor or therapist, unless this is your professional role. Please refer to our companion guide, [Supporting Learners with Mental Health Difficulties](#) for guidance on responding to a suspected suicide or sudden death.

Talking about mental health and wellbeing can be challenging, particularly where there are concerns someone might be thinking of suicide. However, it's crucial that we develop the confidence to initiate supportive conversations.

Mental health problems in 17–19-year-olds have risen from 1 in 10 in 2017, to 1 in 4 in 2022,<sup>1</sup> affecting learners in a range of educational settings. The Association of Colleges recently reported an increase in learners accessing support for mental health difficulties, with several factors cited which may influence the rise, as shown in the graph below.



<sup>1</sup> NHS Digital (2022) Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2022 - wave 3 follow up to the 2017 survey. Available at: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2022-follow-up-to-the-2017-survey>

Furthermore, 93% of colleges have reported an increase in learners who had attempted suicide in the last year, with the number of attempted suicides ranging from less than 5 to over 40 per college.<sup>2</sup>

There are also concerns about the mental health of staff, who reportedly have higher rates of anxiety and depression compared to the general population.<sup>3</sup> A recent survey of school staff found that 78% of staff had experienced mental health symptoms due to their work,<sup>4</sup> with 52% of colleges reporting an increase in staff accessing support.<sup>5</sup>

Around 20% of adults report having considered suicide at some point in their life, with 1 in 20 currently experiencing suicidal thoughts.<sup>6</sup> It's important to be mindful of diversity, including identity, cultural and individual vulnerability factors, which may increase the risk of suicidal thoughts.

Increasing awareness and skills around suicide prevention, intervention and postvention are crucial aspects of developing suicide safer communities<sup>7</sup> to help reduce suicide and support the mental health and wellbeing of everyone in the learning community.

## **Conversations about mental health**

Although today, many people are willing to talk more openly about mental health and wellbeing, stigma and apprehension nevertheless persist, particularly when thinking about suicide. You may be concerned that asking someone if they are suicidal may put thoughts of suicide into their head; however, this is a myth.<sup>8</sup> Engaging in a compassionate and supportive conversation with

thwarted social connectedness increases the risk of suicide,<sup>10</sup> and is associated w7(s)7(sou7(soc)-5 (teps

SLEEP







## **Calm and compassionate, PLEASE** <sup>16</sup>

There are no perfect words to say to someone who is distressed. Rather, we can endeavour to develop a way of being which may help to facilitate a supportive conversation around suicide.

Firstly, endeavour to generate a calm and compassionate state, as this is important when having conversations with people who are distressed, particularly those who are suicidal. Although there is evidence that stress is contagious,<sup>17</sup> calmness can be contagious too. Bring your attention to your breathing – mindfully focussing on the breath can help. Be aware of and try to loosen any tension in the body. Notice your thoughts, particularly concerns or judgements and try to set them aside. Be aware of the tone of your voice, a soothing tone can help to calm you, and the person in distress.

Compassion is crucial in all our interactions with people who are experiencing distress and there is evidence that the flow of compassion from one human being to another can also help reduce distress.<sup>18</sup>

## EMPATHY

Empathy involves trying to see things from the other person's perspective to understand how they feel, what is causing them pain or distress or how a situation is impacting them.



**EXAMPLES:**







