Centre de prévention du suicide de Montréal

Gatekeepers

Managing resistance to asking the question

Verify the presence of suicidal thoughts and get information about the suicide plan

Why is it so difficult to assess the presence of suicidal thoughts?

It's true that asking THE QUESTION can requires us to step outside our comfort zone. Human beings are, in a way, programmed to avoid social conflict—for example, to preserve harmony within a group.

While Gatekeepers are often recognized for their ability to listen and handle delicate situations, nevertheless, finding yourself face-to-face with someone in distress for the first time can sometimes be stressful and lead us to want to compromise to avoid asking the question directly.

This phenomenon can be explained, in part, by these psychological concepts

- •**Social anxiety** regarding interpersonal relationships (Fear of displeasing others)
- •**Psychological paralysis** (Emotional freeze)
- •**"Fawning" –** Appeasement response to satisfy the needs of the person in distress (Conflict avoidance)



The reflex to avoid asking the question is often not a choice, but a natural mechanism of the brain.

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Becoming aware of our own resistance

Here are some common sources of, sometimes unconscious, resistance that Gatekeepers may experience :

- **Catastrophizing** : “I don’t want to put the idea of suicide in their head.”
- **Cognitive distortion** : “I don’t want them to get angry with me.“
- **Projection** : “I’ve been through similar situations myself and never thought about suicide .”
- **Avoidance** : “If the person is thinking about suicide, they’ll surely tell me .”
- **Minimizing**: The distress and indirect messages the person expresses hares (e.g., "I can't tak eit anymore, I want to end it all!") are perceived as not alarming enough.



- **Savior complex** : “I have the solutions.”
- **Lack of confidence** : “I need to take my time before asking the question to build a solid bond of trust.”
- **Rationalizing** : “The person hasn’t called a suicide prevention service, so why should I ask them about it?”
- **Judgment** : “The individual just want attention and is being manipulative .”
- **Cognitive error** : “It’s none of my business, and anyway, I’m not even allowed to ask that question.”
- **Discomfort with being direct** : “I’m going to ask if they are having dark thoughts or thinking about hurting themselves.”
- **Anxiety** : “If the individual answers "Yes," what am I going to do then?!”

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Taking care of oneself and one's core needs is therefore an integral part of the sentinel's role and can promote greater cognitive and emotional availability.

Strategies for Building Confidence in Suicide Prevention

Mental preparation is essential for effectively fulfilling the role of Gatekeeper. If the Sentinel finds it difficult to ask THE QUESTION, cognitive restructuring may be necessary.

- Identify the thoughts and emotions you experience when avoiding asking the question as well as the possible source of resistance;
- Visualize how to have this conversation with the person, how to check for suicidal thoughts, and how to gather information related to suicide planning;
- Practice asking the question out loud.



We invite you to explore our online space for Gatekeepers to learn more. There, you'll find audio clips with helpful tips on how to support someone in distress.

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Asking THE QUESTION is not taboo!

Pinpointing the root of the problem is essential to starting a healing process. The support of a Gatekeeper can be a first step on that path.

When a Gatekeeper observes distress, hears indirect messages, or notices a concerning change in behaviour, the door may already be open to talk about it. There's no need to wait for the situation to worsen or for the door to close.

When the opportunity arises, we can simply ask the question, with kindness and without judgment.

Asking the question directly does not put the idea of suicide into the person's head. On the contrary, it can help them put their experiences into words and open up a space for dialogue.

When the door is open, let's dare to ask THE QUESTION.

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