

# LEADER REFLECTION

Suicide is currently the second leading cause of death for preteens, teenagers, and young adults in the US—and rates are on the rise.<sup>1</sup>

Many young people who have suicidal thoughts never get help, and half of the time, parents are unaware of their kids' suicidal feelings.<sup>2</sup>

This week's content ventures into the most troubling questions of this series, and may touch a nerve with more students—in particular if your community has experienced a recent suicide, if students have friends who have shared suicidal thoughts, or if they have had their own thoughts of self-harm.

As we share in the tips below for responding to students in crisis, it's better to talk directly about suicide than skirt around it. You won't be giving anyone ideas they haven't already contemplated. The hope is to open up safe spaces and offer safe relationships in which students can share what's really going on.

The good news students need to know is that God designed us to surround ourselves with people who care, and at times to expand our circle to professional helpers. No one needs to face anxiety and depression alone.

It's also important to reinforce this message this week: **Remember that having inner struggles doesn't mean we lack faith. It means we're human.** We can grow in faith *even in the midst of our struggles* when we look up and see the encouragement God and our faith community want to offer us, when we look inward and recognize God at work within us, and when we look outward to the world around us for help and support.

## Practice for healthy leadership

Before you begin your Daily Replay this week, you may want to take a few moments to practice a “stillness prayer” based on Psalm 46:10. Small groups will practice this together this week. Start by sitting comfortably and noticing your breathing as you begin your prayer. Then pray the following phrases in progression, pausing for a minute or so after each one:

Be still and know that I am God.

Be still and know that I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be.

Here are some prompts for this week’s Daily Replay:

1. **Become aware of God’s presence.** *Where has God been at work in my life today?*
2. **Review the day with gratitude.** *Which conversations or encouraging words am I thankful for?*
3. **Pay attention to your emotions.** *Is there anything that is making me feel anxious or sad that I can talk with someone about?*
4. **Forgive, and ask for forgiveness.** *What forgiveness do I need to ask of God so that I can fully experience the gift of peace?*
5. **Look toward tomorrow.** *What would I like to do differently tomorrow?*

## More tips on how to help a student in crisis

- If a reaction seems odd, trust your gut—it probably is! Don’t be afraid to check in with the student afterward to ask how they are doing and if they are okay.
- If a reaction seems extreme such as intense crying or shaking, then a more immediate check-in may be helpful. Take care not to potentially shame a student or call out their distress in front of the group. Instead ask if they would step outside the room so that you or another leader can check in about what is bothering them without putting them on the spot.
- When checking in with a student, don’t probe or push them to disclose anything. Adopt a nonjudgmental and listening stance so that they feel heard and supported. Remind them that they are not alone in their struggle or pain, but resist telling them what to do to “fix” their situation.

- If you have a gut feeling or have concerns about the potential of self-harm, don't be afraid to ask. It will not make it worse or make them think of suicide more than they already do. Asking directly shows that you care, and this can lead to help for those who need it most. Don't hesitate to say, "Some people have thoughts about dying or killing themselves when they feel totally overwhelmed. Do you ever have these kinds of thoughts?" Be direct and 100 percent clear instead of using euphemisms. Remember, the risks of asking are far lower than the risks of not asking.
- If a youth discloses something that falls within the scope of your mandated reporting responsibilities (focused on protecting youth from harm), let them know that you are there for them and will be making some calls to help ensure their safety and well-being. Be compassionate, but firm. Do not make promises that you can't keep, and do not ask them to make your promises.
- If you need to call 911 because of a mental health or potentially harmful crisis, make sure to give emergency personnel as much information as you can and to request a "mental health crisis response team" if available. After you make the call, stay with the student as best you can and remain as supportive and calm as you can until help arrives. You may want to emphasize that the police are not coming because they did anything wrong. They are not in trouble; they are just going to get the evaluation and help they need.
- Use discernment, follow your ministry's procedures when a student is in crisis, and consult with your supervisor to determine the right time to contact parents. In many cases, a parent should be your first call. If you suspect a parent is involved in abuse or neglect, consult with your supervisor about how to proceed.

## A word about boundaries

You care a great deal about your students. But a leader has many responsibilities and people to care for. Likely your own friends and family have needs too. As you connect your students with people they can call upon in a crisis, you may want to put your name on their list. But it's important that you're not the only name on their list. Talk with your supervisor and review your church or ministry's policies to identify a few appropriate people who are capable and willing to be a point of contact for students in a crisis.

Make sure students understand the boundaries your ministry keeps regarding who will meet with them, when, and under what provisions (for example, no one-on-one meetings in private spaces), and be clear with them if you and the adults on your list have obligations under your state's mandatory reporting laws. You may wish to communicate these boundaries and obligations during this session, or send a communication to students and parents as a follow-up.

Visit [fulleryouthinstitute.org/anxiousworld](https://fulleryouthinstitute.org/anxiousworld) for more information and practical advice on young people and anxiety.

## How you can help your students grow this week:

- If you use texts or social media with students to encourage participation, give them a preview of the week's topic. We've provided premade social media images in the folder of resources for Session 3.
- A few days after your group meeting, you might want to send out a reminder about the Daily Replay and how to practice it.
- Communicate with parents ahead of time about the series and about this week's content. We've provided a parent communication piece that corresponds to each session, and we've also produced podcast episodes you can share with parents via email, social media, or text. *This week* you will want to ask parents to consider spending extra time processing this session, and reinforce how to reach out for help.
- Listen to this week's [Faith in an Anxious World Parenting Podcast](#) yourself! Find [Episode 3](#) to hear Kara Powell and Clint Daniels discuss the themes of this session.
- Check in with small group leaders to see if any students could benefit from a follow-up conversation this week.

## Final prep for this week:

- Read carefully through the script and make any needed adjustments based on your context and timeframe.
- Practice using the slide deck and make any needed changes.
- Watch the video and decide how you'll use it.
- Print enough **Look inside** small group discussion guides for each leader to have one (email it out in advance if possible and ask them to review ahead of time).
- If your students struggle to bring their Bibles to your meetings, print the Bible passage sheets for each small group leader found at the end of each **Look up** session.
- Print enough **Look around** student take-home sheets for each student to have one.
- Check out the "You'll need" list at the start of the **Look up** large group teaching guide and at the top of the **Look inside** small group discussion guide (note they are separate lists).

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> See the National Institute of Mental Health suicide fact and resource portal at <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide.shtml>

<sup>2</sup> Jason D. Jones, Rhonda C. Boyd, et al., "Parent-Adolescent Agreement About Adolescents' Suicidal Thoughts," *Pediatrics* 143:2, February 2019, <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/143/2/e20181771>.