ND THRIVES
Rural & Tribal Youth Suicide Prevention

Staff Guide: When a student is hurting

It can be unsettling to learn that a student is hurting themselves. You may worry about saying the wrong thing. You do not need perfect words or all the answers. Your calm response can help a student feel heard and take the next step toward support.

Start with care

Find a quiet place to talk while following school safety procedures. Give the student your attention. You might say:

- "I'm glad you told me. I care about you, and I want to help."
- If you have noticed a change, try: "You haven't seemed like yourself lately. How have things been going?" Listen without blame or shock. Avoid calling it attention-seeking, threatening punishment, or asking the student to show injuries.

Be honest about getting help

Do not promise to keep it secret. Try: "I need to bring in someone who can help keep you safe. I'll explain what happens next." Share concerns only with people who need the information to support the student.

Take safety seriously

- Self-harm means hurting yourself on purpose. It does not always mean a student wants to die, but thoughts of suicide can happen too. Ask directly: "Are you thinking about suicide?" Do not decide the student is safe just because they say no. Contact the school's designated support person promptly.
- For a serious injury, suspected overdose, or immediate danger, call 911 and activate the school's emergency response. If immediate danger or suicide risk is suspected, stay with the student until qualified help takes over.

Help them reach the next person

- Follow the school's supervision procedures and arrange a direct connection with the counselor, nurse, or response team. Avoid sending the student off alone to find help. Try: "Let's connect with the counselor together." If your first contact is unavailable, use the school's backup contact.
- Trained staff should assess safety, arrange care, and coordinate contact with caregivers. Tell them if the student is afraid that contacting home could put them at risk.

Keep the connection going

- Use the school's approved private process to record what you noticed, what the student said, and who took over support. Confirm who will follow up. A quiet "I'm glad to see you today" can help the student know they still belong. Respect their privacy around classmates.
- Keep broader student messages focused on coping, trusted adults, and getting help. Avoid graphic details or asking students to share personal self-harm experiences in a group. If this has been hard on you, seek support through appropriate staff channels while protecting the student's privacy.

School support contact and phone _____

Backup contact and phone _____

Staff resources Oxford school staff guide Cornell school protocol guide

Use this handout alongside your school's procedures. The Oxford guide uses UK service information; follow local referral and emergency pathways.