



WHAT TO DO IF YOUR YOUNG ADULT CHILD IS REFUSING HELP

Seeing your young adult child struggle with emotional issues that may be contributing to their thinking about suicide is extremely painful. Especially when you have acknowledged your child's struggle and offered to help, it can be painful and upsetting when they refuse. In fact, they may even get angry at you and accuse you of interfering in their life and treating them like a baby. Your parental instincts, however, are telling you that they are desperately in need, yet they seem powerless to either acknowledge they need help or unwilling to accept it. How can you approach this situation in a way that increases your chances of success? Here are some tips:

- Take a deep breath and stop the power struggles. Don't start by trying to convince them they are wrong. Listen to what your child is telling you even if you do not agree. Step back for a minute and think about yourself. If someone is trying to open up a channel of communication with you, is it helpful for them to begin by telling you all the reasons you're not thinking clearly? Exactly. It won't work. The way to begin may sound a little like psychological mumbo-jumbo, but it's the first step in trying to understand the page they're on and it's called 'validation'. What that means is you listen to what they're saying and summarize back to them what you heard them say [Something like: "you're telling me you've been through rough times before and you made it through on your own and you think you can manage it this time as well. Did I get that right?"] Validation does not mean agreement- it simply means you have listened closely, heard what your child is saying, and are trying to understand their experience. You might even add how this helps you better understand why they get so frustrated when you try to tell them what to do.
- Recognize that you might not be the best person to help them. Let them know that your parental concern may have gotten in the way of your ability to see their side of things and ask them if there is another adult in their life they would be willing to connect with. The goal here is to get them to talk with someone else with a more objective perspective, who also has their best interests at heart, and can help them see both sides of their story. By not insisting they talk with you, you are relinquishing your parental power and giving your child the control to choose their helping adult. Giving your child back some measure of control frees them from needing to assert themselves by digging in their heels and disagreeing with you. Identify that person and be clear that it needs to be someone neutral, not someone who is going to encourage them to believe you are an interfering parent.
- Now that you're backed off, find out what your child currently needs to feel safe. Are they thinking of harming themselves or taking their life? If they answer 'yes' to the latter question, ask them if they have a plan. Again, this is where all you do is listen. Your natural tendency is going to be to want to tell them they have so much to live for or that their ideas are stupid- don't go there! It will signal that you don't understand how badly they're feeling and have reverted to 'parent knows best' mode. Remember, this is a strategic conversation – your goal is to help them feel supported. If they have a plan, ask them if they have the means to carry it out- for example, do they have access to a firearm, medication, etc. Even if they say 'no' to this question, you may need to mobilize into action immediately and get them to crisis services, which can mean calling 9-1-1 if they continue to refuse, and you are genuinely worried about their safety. This is where tough love may have to come in.
- If you don't get a sense of urgency, remind them that your concern for their welfare comes from your unconditional love for them as their parent. As part of what YOU need, it's going to be important for them to accept your reality of worry about their mental health, just as you are going to try to accept the reality that their perception is different. This is when you can suggest that the objective opinion of a mental health professional might be helpful for everyone involved. Let the idea sink in, then offer to help find that neutral third party.

Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide, Inc. | www.sptsusa.org

110 West Main Street, Freehold, NJ 07728 | info@sptsusa.org | (732) 410-7900

- Finally, recognize the stress this creates for you as a parent, and get some support for yourself! This situation is unlikely to resolve quickly and, just as you are suggesting to your child that an objective outsider can provide them with insight and balance, you could probably benefit from the same. Check with your local mental health services for groups or resources for parents experiencing similar challenges. You can also find groups through the website of the National Alliance on Mental Illness [<https://www.nami.org/Support-Education/Support-Groups/NAMI-Family-Support-Group>]. These resources and support are usually available at no charge. By getting support for yourself you are also modeling for your child that being a mature adult means you recognize when you can't do it alone!