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# YOU Can Save A Life

SafeTALK suicide prevention program teaches lifesaving tools.

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Ronelle Grier

**A**re you thinking of suicide?" This is not a question anyone wants to ask, but it could be the one question that can help save a life, according to SafeTALK, a suicide alertness training program I attended last month.

As a journalist, I have written many stories about teen suicide and mental health issues; I've always considered it an important topic worthy of discussion and dissemination. So, when I heard about the SafeTALK training led by Rabbi Yarden Blumstein of Friendship House, I decided to attend, along with my daughter, Lily, on break from Washington University in St. Louis.

Both she and her brother, Ethan, a grad student at University of Michigan, have known people who have taken their lives in recent years, and I know other families whose lives have been touched by this tragedy. If there is a way to help stop our young people from leaving us too soon, I knew I wanted to be part of that solution.

The goal of SafeTALK is to develop a community of "alert helpers" — people of all ages who are trained to recognize the signs of suicide and lead the at-risk person to someone who can provide additional help. Suicide rates are rising, especially among young people

## Suicide Prevention Resources

**National Suicide Prevention  
Lifeline (24/7)**  
1-800-273-8255  
[suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

**Common Ground Resource  
and Crisis Center (24/7)**  
1-800-231-1127  
[commongroundhelps.org](http://commongroundhelps.org)

**Rabbi Yarden Blumstein  
Friendship Circle of Michigan**  
(248) 788-7878  
[yarden@friendshipcircle.org](mailto:yarden@friendshipcircle.org)

and members of the LGBTQ community. Suicide is now the second-leading cause of death for people age 15-24, and the timing is ripe for programs that will create a suicide-safer community.

"Ninety-six percent of people who attempted suicide have tried to tell someone first," said Blumstein, who has devoted himself to raising suicide awareness within the local community and across the country. He explained that many people miss the cues or do not act upon them because they feel unequipped to handle the situation.

SafeTALK emphasizes that one does not have to be a professional therapist to help, just a caring friend, neighbor or relative who is willing to take the time to listen and ask the right questions. It is a simple program that anyone can put into action.

"Wanting to die is different from not wanting to live," Blumstein explained. "We have to meet these people in the middle."

## THE ESSENTIALS

The TALK in SafeTALK is an acronym for the basic components of the program: Tell. Ask. Listen. Keep safe.

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Rabbi Yarden Blumstein of Friendship Circle of Michigan teaches a SafeTALK class.

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**Tell.** While most people provide cues, these messages are usually indirect. Listeners have to pay attention to the words they hear, the actions they see and the feelings they sense. Phrases such as “no one cares,” “it’s hopeless” or “there’s nothing anyone can do” indicate despair and a lack of hope that things can get better. Changes in behavior such as a drop in grades, a loss of interest in socializing, or increased drug and alcohol use are also signs of depression. A traumatic situation such as divorce or another suicide can also be a trigger.

“We have to notice the tell even if it’s indirect,” Blumstein said.

**Ask.** If you have recognized the signs, this is the time to ask the question, “Are you thinking of suicide?” You can repeat the things the person has said to you, such as “When someone talks about feeling hopeless or not wanting help, this can mean they are thinking about suicide. Are you?”

Be direct. Blumstein says that, in most cases, a direct question will get an honest answer.

“People are afraid to cause damage. You will not cause depression by asking,” he said. “If you’re not sure, ask more questions.”

**Listen.** The research shows that most people want to talk about not wanting to live. They just need to know someone is listening. Once a person admits to thinking about suicide, let him know you want to continue the conversation. “Let’s talk about this.” “This is important.” “I am listening.” Depending on what is said, you may want to ask if he has thought about suicide in specific terms, whether he has a plan or a time frame.

**Keep Safe.** The program stresses this is not the time, nor are you the one, to solve the person’s problems. The only job of the “alert helper” is to connect the person as quickly as possible to someone who can help. It could be a therapist or Blumstein, who has handled dozens of interventions since he began the training, or a parent or other family member or a suicide prevention hotline such as Common Ground.

#### FEELING EMPOWERED

Blumstein, who has trained staff members at local Jewish summer camps and schools, has been asked to intervene with kids as young as 9. He says most people who participate in SafeTALK are surprised to find they have an opportunity to use the training within a relatively short time.

“I now feel more comfortable asking the uncomfortable questions,” said Jodi Backalar, a Farmington Hills resident who attends Washington University.

Blumstein said many local organizations are looking into SafeTALK training for the coming year.

“It’s helpful training; everyone should do it,” said Catie Quinn, program manager and camp director for Friendship Circle of Michigan. “It’s good to feel empowered, especially in situations that are so challenging.”

As for me, I have not had the chance to use the tools I learned in SafeTALK, but if anyone out there wants to talk, feel free to reach out. I am listening. 🍌

To learn about future training sessions, contact Rabbi Yarden Blumstein at (248) 788-7878 or yarden@friendship-circle.org.

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## Foundation To Help Expand Teen Mental Health Program

The Andrew Kukes Foundation for Social Anxiety (AKFSA) and Friendship Circle in West Bloomfield are partnering to expand Friendship Circle’s U\_Matter program, focused on teen mental health. AKFSA will co-sponsor the program, providing a \$250,000 grant in a five-year commitment.

The U\_Matter program strives to help teens and young adults who find themselves in isolation with a variety of programming focused on the idea that everyone truly matters. The program is facilitated by the U\_Matter Teen Leadership Board, a group of teens from area high schools who assist their peers by working to reduce the stigma that surrounds mental health to provide support and friendship.



Andrew Kukes

“When I began as director of our Daniel B. Sobel Friendship House, which focused on isolation and life crises, my attention was drawn to the great need for teens to have positive messages about mental health issues. Out of those conversations, U\_Matter emerged,” said Rabbi Yarden Blumstein, director of Friendship Circle’s teen division of the Morrie and Sybil Fenkell Volunteer Club.

U\_Matter was launched in 2015 with one teen adviser and 15 teen leaders. In 2016, U\_Matter trained more than 300 individuals in suicide prevention and hosted four successful events.

In 2017 and 2018, public high schools and private middle and high schools are examining relationships with U\_Matter. Walled Lake Consolidated School District, among the largest districts in Oakland County, already has confirmed participation at all three of the district’s high schools for a U\_Matter Week. West Bloomfield High School and

three other districts in the tri-county area also are considering hosting U\_Matter Weeks.

“With the support of the Andrew Kukes Foundation, we are focused on introducing 10 new high schools to hosting U\_Matter Weeks to reach more of our young people with the message that they are not alone and mental health deserves the same attention and care as our physical health,” said Rabbi Levi Shemtov, executive director of Friendship Circle.

“We started the Andrew Kukes Foundation six years ago, not only in tribute to our son Andy, but to help families and friends understand they need to be aware and involved in the mental health of those they care about, rather than just hoping things will work themselves out,” said Jeff Kukes, co-founder of AKFSA. “To honor Andy’s memory, it is important to us to support young people engaging their peers because the younger they receive support, the better the outcome.”

Andy Kukes took his own life after searching for years for the proper diagnosis and treatment of his social anxiety. Mental health professionals agree that the transitions from middle school to high school and high school to college are especially difficult for teens coping with mental health issues, and early intervention is critical in helping them overcome those challenges.

More about U\_Matter is available at [friendshipcircle.org/umatter](http://friendshipcircle.org/umatter). To participate or host a U\_Matter Week, email [Umatter@friendshipcircle.org](mailto:Umatter@friendshipcircle.org) or contact Yarden Blumstein at [Yarden@friendshipcircle.org](mailto:Yarden@friendshipcircle.org) or call (248) 788-7878 ext. 208. 🍌