

THERAPY OVER TACOS

A Chaplain's Guide to Connecting
with Your Struggling Teen

7 Dinners That Could Change Everything

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Every family eats. Now every family can thrive.

The Wake-Up Call

One in five.

That's how many high school students seriously considered suicide in the past year, according to the CDC's 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey. Not thought about it once in passing. *Seriously considered it.*

Forty percent reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness. Nearly one in three teen girls contemplated attempting suicide—a 60% increase from a decade ago.

These aren't someone else's kids. They're in your neighborhood. Your church. Your school pickup line.

Maybe at your table.

And here's what keeps me up at night after twenty years as a Navy chaplain:
most parents never see it coming.

I've made those calls. I've sat in those living rooms. I've watched shattered families try to piece together what they missed.

I don't want that for you. So I'm going to tell you something that could change everything.

The Three Things That Keep Showing Up

In every crisis conversation I've had—with service members on the edge, with families in the aftermath—three things consistently surface:

“They didn't feel like they belonged.”

“They felt like outsiders—even in their own homes.”

“They had lost any sense that their life mattered.”

Researchers call it “thwarted belongingness.” When that fundamental human need to belong goes unmet, it can fuel the desire for death. A comprehensive review in *Aggression and Violent Behavior* found that adolescents who feel disconnected from family are significantly more vulnerable to suicidal thoughts and behavior.

The flip side is equally powerful.

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention identifies belonging, connection, and a sense of purpose as protective factors against suicide. A study from McGill University examining over 26,000 adolescents found that family dinner frequency was directly associated with lower rates of depression and higher life satisfaction.

Not family vacations. Not expensive activities or the latest iPhone. **Dinner.**

Anne Fishel, an associate professor at Harvard Medical School, puts it plainly: regular family dinners are associated with lower rates of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and higher rates of resilience and self-esteem.

Here's the remarkable part: **80% of teenagers say family dinner is the time of day they're most likely to talk to their parents.** Your teen wants this more than they'll ever admit.

This Isn't About Guilt. This Is About Tonight.

Maybe you're reading this thinking, *We barely eat together. I've already failed at this.*

Stop.

You haven't failed anything. You're reading this, which means you care. And caring is where every turnaround starts.

Research from the Suicide Prevention Resource Center shows that *perceived* connectedness matters more than the quantity of interactions. A few genuine moments of feeling seen and valued can outweigh weeks of surface-level coexistence.

One real dinner this week beats zero.

Frozen pizza eaten together while talking beats a gourmet meal eaten in silence on separate devices.

You don't need to be perfect. You need to be present.

Start tonight.

The “Therapy Over Tacos” Framework

Three things you can do at dinner to build belonging and protect your teen’s mental health:

1. Ask One Question That Actually Opens a Door

“How was your day?” gets you a grunt, or maybe a, “Fine”.

Try one of these instead:

- **“What’s the hardest part of your life right now?”**
- **“What do you wish adults understood about being a teenager?”**
- **“What’s something you wish people knew about you?”**

That last one is powerful. It assumes there’s a gap between how your teen is seen and who they really are. For struggling teens, that gap feels enormous.

One question per dinner. Let it breathe. Don’t fill the silence—that’s where the real answers live.

2. Listen Without Fixing (the ‘tricky part’)

When your teen shares a struggle, every instinct screams *fix it*. You’ll want to solve their problem. You’ll want to ease their pain.

Resist.

The American Academy of Pediatrics emphasizes that adolescents need space to share without correction or interruption. When you immediately problem-solve, teens hear: *You don’t trust me to handle this.*

Try this response: **“That sounds really hard. Tell me more.”**

When kids feel genuinely heard—not lectured, not corrected, just *heard*—they keep talking. And talking is how you find out what’s actually going on before it becomes a crisis. “Tell me more,” invites them into conversation, into connection. It telegraphs that you’re present, that you care, that you might really hear what they are saying.

3. Make the Table a Safe Zone

Research consistently shows that adolescents in emotionally validating family environments are less likely to experience suicidal thoughts and behaviors. It's helpful to remember that validating another's feelings does not mean you have to agree with them. Our feelings are our own - ours to process, ours work out. Validating another's feelings simply acknowledges that you recognize those feelings and have empathy for them. Whether you agree or disagree is immaterial. Their feelings aren't yours to evaluate. Your dinner table needs to be the one place where your teen isn't being evaluated.

That means:

- Phones away (including yours)
- No interrogations about grades or homework
- No discipline conversations at the table
- No criticism of friends, choices, or appearance

The table is for connection. Everything else can wait.

The 7-Dinner Conversation Guide

One theme per dinner. One question to open the door. Don't rush through these—spend a week, or take a month. The goal isn't to finish. The goal is to connect.

Dinner 1: “What’s Hard Right Now?”

The Question: “What’s the hardest part of your life right now?”

Why It Works: This question assumes your teen has struggles—and that you want to know about them. It gives them permission to be honest without judgment.

How to Respond: Don't minimize. Don't compare to your own teenage years. Just say, “That sounds really difficult. I'm glad you told me.”

What to Avoid: “Well, at least you don't have to worry about...” or “When I was your age...” *And be prepared that the answer might be — you. You might be their biggest challenge right now. *(I know from personal experience it's tremendously difficult to be on the receiving end of this!)*

Dinner 2: “What Do You Wish I Understood?”

The Question: “What do you wish adults—or I specifically—understood about being a teenager right now?”

Why It Works: This positions your teen as the expert on their own life. It also signals that you're open to being wrong and willing to learn.

How to Respond: Listen without defending yourself. If they say something that stings, thank them for their honesty. Process your feelings later. *(I wish someone had given me a guide like this years ago. My wife and I have done a lot of closed-door processing after hearing from some of our own children.)*

What to Avoid: Getting defensive or explaining why you do what you do.

Dinner 3: “What Are You Proud Of?”

The Question: “What's something you're proud of that I might not know about?”

Why It Works: Teens often feel like parents only see their failures or areas for improvement. This question looks for the wins they're not sharing.

How to Respond: Celebrate what they share, even if it seems small to you. “That's really cool. Tell me more about that.”

What to Avoid: Turning it into a lesson or connecting it to something you want them to do.

Dinner 4: “What Would You Change?”

The Question: “If you could change one thing about your life right now, what would it be?”

Why It Works: This opens a window into what they’re struggling with most—and what might be causing them distress you don’t see.

How to Respond: Don’t immediately try to fix or change it. Ask follow-up questions: “How long have you felt that way?” “What would it look like if that changed?”

What to Avoid: Offering solutions before they ask for them.

Dinner 5: “Who Do You Feel Like Yourself Around?”

The Question: “Who are the people you feel most like yourself around?”

Why It Works: This tells you where your teen feels belonging—and where they don’t. It also reveals the relationships that matter most to them.

How to Respond: Show genuine interest in these people. Ask what makes those relationships feel safe. If they respond with, “Nowhere, or no one,” don’t be alarmed (though inside you might be), simply respond with something like, “Wow, that must make you feel incredibly lonely.” Then stop talking, let them fill the silence or simply sit in it. They’ll hear you, even if it doesn’t seem so.

What to Avoid: Criticizing their friends or asking leading questions about people you don’t approve of.

Dinner 6: “What Worries You?”

The Question: “What’s something you’re worried about that you haven’t told anyone?”*

Why It Works: Teens carry more than we realize. This question creates space for them to unload something they’ve been holding alone.

How to Respond: Receive it without panic. “Thank you for trusting me with that. That’s heavy to carry.”

What to Avoid: Overreacting in a way that makes them regret sharing.

*This question purposefully comes later in the process. Hopefully by now your communication has opened up and improved. Hopefully you teen feels safe enough to share at this point.

Dinner 7: “What Do You Want Me to Know?”

The Question: “Is there anything you want me to know that you’ve been waiting for the right time to tell me?”

Why It Works: This is the most open-ended invitation. It puts your teen in control of what gets shared—and signals that you’re ready to hear it.

How to Respond: Whatever they share, receive it with gratitude. “I’m really glad you told me.” If they are not ready to respond to that question yet, that’s okay. Try again at another time and simply remind them they can always come to you — even if you might not respond in the best way. Consistency pays dividends.

What to Avoid: Reacting with disappointment, anger, or shock—even if you feel those things.

Know the Warning Signs

Family dinners are powerful preventive medicine. But they're not a substitute for professional help when your teen is in crisis.

Watch for these warning signs:

- Talking about wanting to die or being a burden to others
- Withdrawing from friends, family, and activities they used to enjoy
- Dramatic mood swings or changes in sleep patterns
- Giving away prized possessions
- Increased substance use
- Researching methods of suicide
- Saying goodbye to people in unusual ways

If your gut is telling you something's wrong, trust it.

Call or text **988** — the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. Free. Confidential. Available 24/7.

Don't wait. Don't convince yourself you're overreacting. Make the call.

An Important Note

I'm a chaplain, not a therapist.

This guide is designed to help you build connection and communication with your teenager. It draws from research on protective factors and my experience walking alongside our bravest service members and their families in crisis. It takes an immense amount of bravery to admit some of these things to another human being.

This guide is not a substitute for professional mental health care.

If your teen is showing signs of depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, or self-harm, please seek help from a licensed mental health professional. Family dinners can support recovery—but they cannot replace treatment.

My goal is prevention, not intervention. I want to help you build the kind of relationship where your teen feels safe coming to you *before* they're in crisis.

That starts tonight. At your table. With one question.

What You're Really Building

Every time you sit down together, you're sending a message that cuts through everything else your teenager hears:

“You belong here. You matter to us. You have a place in this family.”

That message, repeated over weeks and months, becomes the voice your teen hears when the darkness gets loud. It becomes the reason they reach for their phone to call you instead of reaching for something else.

You can't prevent every struggle. You can't guarantee your child will never face depression or despair.

But you can make sure they know—in their bones—that they are not alone.

That's what dinner does.

Tonight's Mission:

Sit down together.

Phones in a basket.

Ask one real question.

Listen to the answer.

That's it.

You're not fixing your teen. You're showing them they belong.

Start where you are. Start tonight.

Every family eats. Now every family can thrive.

Want to Keep Going?

This guide is just the beginning. If it resonated with you, here are two ways to continue the journey:

Dinner Commander Newsletter

You've already done the first one. You subscribed to Dinner Commander. Every week, I send research-backed strategies, conversation starters, and encouragement to help families reconnect at dinner. It's free, practical, and written from my heart and experience as both a chaplain and a parent.

Alice! — Your Meal Planning Partner

Here's also what I've learned (more than that, I've experienced it first-hand): the biggest barrier to family dinner isn't desire. It's time.

The mental load of figuring out what to cook, checking what's in the fridge, making a grocery list—by the time you're done, you're too exhausted to actually *connect*.

That's why I built Alice!—an app that handles the meal planning, considers your family's preferences, and even integrates with grocery delivery. So you can spend your energy on what actually matters: the conversation.

I gave you the WHY and the HOW of connecting with your teen. Alice! handles the WHAT and the WHERE so you can actually do it.

Learn more at: HeyAlicePlan.com

About the Author

Commander Steve Velthuis is an active-duty Navy Chaplain with over 20 years of experience serving military families through deployments, crises, and the everyday challenges of military life.

He has walked alongside service members in some of their darkest moments—and watched families discover that connection can happen in the most ordinary places, like the dinner table.

Steve created Dinner Commander to share what he's learned: that families don't need more programs or prescriptions. They need a place to belong. And that place can start with a simple meal and a real conversation.

He lives with his wife, children, and dogs, where he practices what he preaches—imperfectly, but persistently.

Connect with Steve:

- Newsletter: DinnerCommander.com
- Alice! App: HeyAlicePlan.com
- Instagram: [@DinnerCommander](https://www.instagram.com/DinnerCommander)

Sources & Further Reading

The research behind this guide:

- CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2023
- Van Orden et al., Psychological Review (2010): Interpersonal Theory of Suicide
- Aggression and Violent Behavior (2021): Family processes and youth suicide risk
- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: Risk and Protective Factors
- Elgar et al., Journal of Adolescent Health (2013): Family dinners and adolescent mental health
- Harvard Graduate School of Education / The Family Dinner Project
- Suicide Prevention Resource Center: Connectedness research
- American Academy of Pediatrics Clinical Report on Suicide Risk in Adolescents (2024)

If this guide helped you, please share it with another parent who might need it.

Every family eats. Now every family can thrive.