

Talking to someone at risk of suicide

Life can be painful and problems can seem overwhelming at times.

For some people, suicide seems like the only way out of their situation or the feelings they are experiencing. They generally feel very alone and hopeless and can feel like nobody can help them or understand what they are going through.

Talking to someone who is at risk of suicide or self-harm can be incredibly daunting and fraught. You will very likely wonder if you are saying or doing the right thing.

A person who is thinking about taking their life is usually feeling overwhelming mental anguish and emotional pain. Allowing them the space and opportunity to discuss their thoughts and feelings can help a person thinking of suicide to feel supported, and may assist them to put things into perspective.

How to have a conversation about suicide

It is important to ask the person directly if they are feeling suicidal or if they have been thinking about suicide. It is a myth that talking directly about suicide will put the idea in their head.

Instead, discussing suicide openly and honestly about what you've noticed and genuinely asking how they are feeling can give the person the opportunity to take the first steps towards getting the help they need.

Here are some ideas to help you start the conversation:

"I've noticed that you haven't been yourself lately, is everything ok with you?"

"I'm worried about you. I'm wondering if we can talk about what's troubling you?"

"You seem really (down/sad/angry/unhappy) lately. I'm worried that you might be thinking of hurting yourself or suicide. Can we talk about this?"

Expressing your concerns to a loved-one

Let the person at risk know that you are concerned and that you care. Often, knowing another person cares enough to become involved and listen to them can be a great comfort to someone who is suicidal.

Let the person know that you have noticed a change in them. A change in behaviour and feelings or something that they have said that might have alerted you. It's important for the person to realise that you have been paying attention and noticed these changes in them.

It is important to simply describe what you have observed rather than use words that convey judgment such as 'good' and 'bad'. If the person feels judged, they might feel embarrassed or withdraw from the conversation, and that's the last thing you want to achieve.

Be honest and genuine in your concern.



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Keep the following in mind when talking to someone at risk of suicide

- Acknowledge that the person is experiencing a lot of pain at the moment and explain to them that you understand what they are going through.
- Show them respect and be as understanding as possible about their situation. Maintain eye contact and use positive, open body language.
- When discussing suicide, ensure you listen carefully to what they have to say. Use active listening techniques, such as paraphrasing what the person has said and reciting it back to them to ensure you understand them.
- Avoid minimising or dismissing their problems. Ensure they know you're taking them seriously so they can have confidence in you as a support person.
- Avoid using statements such as "You don't know how lucky you are" or "You shouldn't feel like that" as these might sound to the person like you're judging them or minimising their feelings.
- Remind the person that although they may be having thoughts of suicide, they can choose not to act on them.
- Offer realistic hope that it's possible for situations to improve or change for the better. It is likely that their problems weren't created overnight, therefore the situation will probably take time to resolve. But their problems can be solved through other means.

What if they insist they're OK

Continue to be observant for any warning signs of possible suicide risk. Trust your instincts and follow through on any concerns or suspicions you have, and don't be afraid to check in with them again if you notice any warning signs.

Ensure other people in the person's support network know about your concerns and the changes you've noticed and that they are also looking out for any other warning signs.

Make yourself available and reassure the person that you will listen when they are ready to talk.

What if they won't talk to a professional?

If the person doesn't want to talk to a professional and their immediate risk is lower, work with them to identify other supports such as parents, family members, friends, teachers or colleagues.

It is important for the suicidal person to build support around them.

If they don't agree to seek professional help and the immediate risk is high, you will need to contact emergency services on their behalf regardless of their wishes.

Should I keep their suicide plans or my concerns to myself?

Whilst discussing suicide, if the person reveals that they are seriously thinking of suicide and have a plan, it is critical that you seek professional help as soon as possible.

Don't keep or agree to keep secrets that could lead to the person harming themselves.

It is important to be firm about your intentions to involve others if they won't. Tell them that you are taking what they say very seriously and that you can't keep this information to yourself.

Don't try to deal with this situation alone, encourage the person to get professional help and support them to do so.

It is a good idea to involve the suicidal person in this process as much as possible, as it is important for them to take an active role in resolving their suicidal crisis.

In an emergency

If you are with someone who is in immediate danger or you're concerned for their safety in any way, **call 000 and request an ambulance.**

Stay on the line, speak clearly, and be ready to answer the operator's questions.

