

Suicide: let's talk about it.

In the course of your work as a LifeRing meeting convenor, you will likely encounter the full range of human emotions, expressed verbally and non-verbally, in short bursts and over longer periods of time. At some point, you may wonder if someone in a LifeRing circle is contemplating taking his or her own life. What do you do?

It's important to recognize that even trained professionals struggle with this question and to remember that you are not responsible for what any individual, other than you yourself, chooses to do. But you can, in your role as convenor, help guide conversation toward getting an individual to think about, and hopefully access, resources available to them in a period of crisis.

Listen for clues

The American Association of Suicidology (www.suicidology.org) suggests the mnemonic "IS PATH WARM" to help recognize the warning signs of suicide:

- I Isolation (sudden and increased)
- S Substance abuse (increased)

- P Purposelessness (expressed as no reason for living)
- A Anxiety (agitation, sleeplessness, or sleeping all the time)
- T Trapped (feeling like there's no way out)
- H Hopelessness

- W Withdrawal (from friends, family, society)
- A Anger (expressed as uncontrolled anger, rage, or seeking revenge)
- R Recklessness (engaging in risky activities with no consideration of consequences)
- M Moodiness (dramatic swings and/or increased depression)

Many of these descriptors are part what we talk about at any LifeRing meeting! But we don't often hear some of the parenthetical descriptors, such as "having no reason to live." Many times, a person in acute risk for suicidal behavior will accompany these general descriptors with threats of hurting him or herself or talking of wanting to hurt him or herself; looking for ways to kill him or herself by seeking access to firearms, pills, or other means; and talking about death, dying, or suicide in a manner that is unusual. Or you may find an individual is talking about other behaviors that are out of the ordinary, such as getting their affairs in order or giving away personal possessions.

Trust your intuition

If you hear what you believe may be suicidal thinking, chances are others in the meeting are hearing it too. As meeting convenor, your responsibility is to help the group take the person's threat seriously, be direct and open, let the person know you care, and urge the person to get professional help. Not change the subject – put the group's focus on the individual.

Interestingly, individuals who are considering suicide are often relieved that others are willing to acknowledge the depth of their pain and to talk about how they feel. Talking about constructive options and helping the individual make and agree to carry out a safety plan to keep themselves safe and seek professional help can make a difference.

Guide the conversation

As you assess the situation, you have an opportunity to help guide the discussion by asking difficult, but important questions:

- That sounds very difficult. **Are you feeling suicidal?**
- We're really glad you chose to be here. **What were/are you hoping for by coming to this meeting?** Ask a paradoxical question like **What would make you choose to live?** (A beloved pet or an upcoming event might be at the top of the list.)
- **Maybe we can help you make a plan to stay safe?** (Talk about contacting local or national crisis line; local mental health agencies or other resources; remembering the value of staying sober when in crisis; suggest immediate or next day action, depending on circumstance). Have you called your therapist/counselor? Supportive friends? Relatives? Spiritual advisor?
- **With all the things we've talked about, what things sound best?**
- **Will you agree to do that? If you feel like you can't stay safe, would you call the crisis line?** They are a source of therapy resources, in addition to crisis support.
- **If you don't think any of these things will work, and you don't think you will be safe after the meeting, would you go to the emergency room?** There will be trained staff there who can provide you with individualized, professional help.

Bullet points are one thing, but such conversations are rarely seamless and smooth. The important thing is to guide the conversation and move the contributions of everyone in the room in a focused, rational, and thoughtful direction.

Should the discussion take a turn for which you do not feel prepared, or otherwise seems out of control, designate a trusted individual to leave the room and call a local crisis line or emergency responders. Emergency responders and crisis line workers are trained to help guide both you and the individual in identifying appropriate next actions while you are on the call. In virtually any scenario, it is not appropriate for you or another meeting member to drive an individual to the emergency room or to other crisis services.

Take care of yourself

You and other meeting participants may be drained. Consider talking to another trusted meeting participant and encourage others, as well as yourself, to talk with your own counselors and therapists. It is important to take care of yourself and to protect your own sobriety and well-being. Remember that local and national suicide crisis and warm lines are also resources for friends and family members! It is completely appropriate for you, as well as any other LifeRing meeting participant who needs to talk after a suicide prevention conversation, to take full advantage of crisis and warm line resources.

Support for survivors

In the course of convening meetings, you may be in the position of dealing with the aftermath of another's suicide or suicide attempt. Do whatever you need to do to take care of yourself and your sobriety. In addition to seeking out professional help, another powerful resource can be support groups specifically tailored to the needs of suicide survivors. Suicide crisis and warm line personnel are there for you as are community grief support groups led by trained peers. Seek support as you need it!

Suggested Resources

Crisis/Hot Lines:

National Suicide Prevention Line
800-273-TALK
<http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

Kristin Brooks Hope Center
800-SUICIDE
800-442-HOPE
<http://www.hopeline.com>

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA)
800-826-3632
<http://www.dbsalliance.org>

They are not open 24 hours, but during off-work hours, the outgoing voicemail provides useful information about support groups for depression, bipolar disorder and assistance for intervention of suicide.

For veterans, active service members, and their loved ones:
800-273-8255 – then press 1
or text 838255
<http://www.veteranscrisisline.net>

Warm Lines (for individuals not in crisis, but needing support):

<http://www.warmline.org>

In addition to warm lines run as part of your local community crisis services, you can find general information about warm lines, as well as state-by-state listings at this site.

Additional Web-based Resources:

American Association of Suicidology
www.suicidology.org

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
www.afsp.org

Befrienders International with the Samaritans (resources worldwide)
www.befrienders.org

Families for Depression Awareness
www.familyaware.org

Prevent Suicide Now
www.preventsuicidenow.com

Psycom.net
<http://psycom.net>

Suicide Hotline Listings (U.S. and International)
www.suicide.org

Suicide Prevention Action Network USA
www.spanusa.org

University and College Student Resources
www.ulifeline.org