

## Suicide: let's talk about it.

Are you concerned about a friend or family member who may be speaking in a helpless manner about their life? Do you notice their dark humor in making offhand comments about not wanting to be here? Maybe a friend has stopped taking his medication and seems to be sliding back into depression. Does the degree of this person's sense of despair and hopelessness signal an alarm in you? Perhaps this family member or friend has attempted suicide in the past.

What's the best thing to say and 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 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](http://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

When people are in acute risk for suicidal behavior, they may accompany general descriptors with threats or desires to hurt themselves. They may look for ways to kill themselves by seeking access to firearms, pills or other means. You may notice they are 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, take the person's threat seriously. Be direct and open. Let the person know you care, and urge the person to get professional help.

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?**”
- “I’m relieved you’re sharing this with me.” 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.
- “**Let’s make a plan to help you stay safe.**”  
Talk about contacting a 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 toward 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, you may want to consider calling 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.

## Take care of yourself

Sometime later, after you have done what you can for this individual, you may be feeling drained. Consider support for yourself. Talk with your own counselor or therapist. 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 to talk to a crisis or warm line resource after a suicide prevention conversation. They are there to help and offer support after encounters such as this.

## Support for survivors

Perhaps you know someone who has suffered the extreme loss of losing a loved one to suicide and is dealing with the aftermath of intense feelings. There are support groups specifically tailored to the needs of suicide survivors. A local group may have a name similar to “Survivors After Suicide.” Perhaps you could provide contact information for this person. Suicide crisis and warm line personnel may be helpful in providing such contacts for community grief support groups.

Remember to seek support as you need it, as well. Do whatever you need to do to take care of yourself and your sobriety.

## 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:

<http://www.warmline.org>  
In addition to warmlines run as part of your local community crisis services, you can find general information about warmlines, as well as state-by-state listings at this site.

A warm line is a service which offers free, confidential support for non-crisis related issues. It is a safe way to make contact with a warm voice. Trained volunteers at a Warm Line offer encouragement to those experiencing feelings of loneliness, anxiety and emotional distress. They listen, refer and empower.

Speaking of Suicide  
A site for suicidal individuals and their loved ones, survivors and mental health professionals  
<http://www.speakingofsuicide.com/2013/04/12/if-you-suspect>

Helping a Suicidal Friend or Relative  
Befrienders International with the Samaritans (resources worldwide)  
<http://www.befrienders.org/helping-a-friend>

### Additional Web-based Resources:

American Association of Suicidology  
[www.suicidology.org](http://www.suicidology.org)

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention  
[www.afsp.org](http://www.afsp.org)

Families for Depression Awareness  
*Suicide: Let's talk about it.*  
[www.lifering.org](http://www.lifering.org) – books/media  
11/11/2014

<http://www.familyaware.org>

Prevent Suicide Now  
[www.preventsuicidenow.com](http://www.preventsuicidenow.com)

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

Suicide Hotline Listings (U.S. and International)  
[www.suicide.org](http://www.suicide.org)

Suicide Prevention Action Network USA  
[www.spanusa.org](http://www.spanusa.org)

University and College Student Resources for Mental Health  
[www.ulifeline.org](http://www.ulifeline.org)