

how can I help someone I'm worried about?



It can be distressing if you are worried about someone who is experiencing thoughts or feelings of suicide. They may have talked about wanting to end their life, or you may have noticed signs of distress. Here are a few steps you can take to support someone during their difficult times.

IF THERE IS A MEDICAL EMERGENCY/ SOMEONE HAS ATTEMPTED SUICIDE:

- **Don't leave the person alone**
- **CALL 102 (national ambulance service) or any other ambulance service. Wait with the person till the ambulance arrives**
- **If possible, take the person to your nearest emergency department or hospital**
- **Contact someone trustworthy**

1. RECOGNIZE AND ASK

Learn the warning signs of suicide to know what to look out for when a loved one is struggling. If you recognize signs, ask the person directly if they are thinking of suicide. Focus on asking open and direct questions to encourage conversation.

You could say, "I noticed that you seem to be down lately. I wanted to check-in with you. Are you having thoughts about suicide? I care about you. I know talking about this can be difficult, but I am here to listen."

Some people worry that asking about suicide can put the idea in the person's mind or encourage them to act on their feelings, but this is not true.

In reality, speaking openly about suicide can make the person feel relieved and encourage them to speak openly about their feelings.

If they confirm that they are thinking of suicide, reassure them that they are not alone, and that together you can find a way to get through this.

2. ESTABLISH IMMEDIATE SAFETY

While all thoughts of suicide must

be taken seriously, people who have made a plan for suicide are at a higher risk. So, it's important to find out a few things to establish immediate safety. To do this, you need to ask the person:

Have you thought about how you would kill yourself?

Have you thought about when you would kill yourself?

Have you taken any steps to get the things you would need to carry out your plan?

Also check whether they have tried harming themselves before.

Knowing the answers to these questions can help you understand the severity of the danger the person is in. If the answer to any of these is yes, they are at a higher risk of attempting suicide. In such cases, you can take the following steps:

1. Ensure that they are not alone till they are safe or not at risk of suicide.

2. Remove access to anything they could use to harm themselves (e.g., pills, poisons, sharp objects such as razors, knives, or blades).

3. Think of ways to distract them from their thoughts of suicide. It is preferable that the person chooses an activity that they enjoy or has worked for them in the past to cope with difficult situations.

4. Reach out to trusted family or friends for additional support. You should let them know if you will be reaching out to some of their close contacts to ensure their safety.

5. Encourage them to speak to a trained professional (doctor, counselor, or therapist) or call a crisis helpline.

If the person is able to continue the conversation, you could encourage them to continue talking, provide emotional support and empathetically listen to them as they share about their distress.

3. LISTEN AND UNDERSTAND

It is natural to feel upset or angry to hear that someone you care about is thinking about ending their life. You might have the urge to give them solutions immediately, or you may feel that they are not making the correct decisions for themselves.

But it's very important to stay calm, and not express any judgment towards their experience. Encourage them to take the time they need to open up. Not respecting how the person is feeling can shut down communication.

4. OFFER PRACTICAL SUPPORT

You can work together to find ways through which you will be able to support them. Some of these ways are:

a. Connect to professional help

You could mention mental health professional services listed in the help sheet and encourage them to connect with one of them. You could also book an appointment on their behalf or even accompany them to their first meeting if they find that useful. If they refuse to take professional advice, reassure them that you are there for them, and they can seek professional help when they feel ready. If the person doesn't want to consult a doctor or mental health provider, you could also suggest seeking help from a peer support group or a crisis helpline.

b. Reach out to a support network

It is important to recognize the limit of the support you can offer. You don't have to do this alone; neither does the person you are helping. Together you can identify trusted contacts such as family/friends/ community groups - who can support you in the process.

WHAT TO DO

1. Be patient: Give them the time they need and listen to their reasons for being in such pain, and reasons they want to continue to stay alive.

2. Ask open questions: Ask questions that encourage them to open up about their feelings, such as "How have you been feeling?".

3. Respect the person's agency: Work out the next steps together so that they feel in control of the situation.

4. Focus on their strengths: Explore how they have coped with similar feelings & experiences before.

5. Explore sources of hope: You can motivate them to think about a hopeful future. Help them identify sources of hope - things, people, places, activities etc., that make them feel better.

6. Take them seriously: Don't ignore their distress as attention-seeking behavior or a phase that will pass eventually. People who talk about suicide may act on their feelings.

WHAT NOT TO DO

1. Do not judge: Do not make the person feel guilty or ashamed for how they are feeling.

2. Do not offer advice: Even if you think you know best, you might not fully understand what the person is going through.

3. Do not promise confidentiality: You can let them know that you might have to call in for extra help to ensure their safety, if their life is in danger.

4. Do not pressure the person to talk: Instead, let them know that you're here to talk to if they ever need to. Suggest other persons in their circle whom they can talk to as well.

5. Avoid making judgmental statements such as:

*How can you think of ending your life over such a trivial issue?
You're doing this to seek attention.
It's not so bad, you should count your blessings.
Things could be worse.
You have so much to live for.
Don't be so weak.*

c. Make a safety plan

A "safety plan" is a tool that supports and guides someone when they are experiencing thoughts of suicide. Research has shown that suicide safety planning can prevent suicides. The plan has different parts that identify warning signs, coping strategies, contact details of loved ones or support services, and steps for keeping yourself safe. You can volunteer to make one together with the person.

5. SELF-CARE

Sometimes when we are caring for someone, it is easy to forget our own needs. Supporting and taking care of someone who is grieving can be emotionally and physically stressful. So, it is important to ensure that you are taking care of yourself in order to offer support to someone. Make sure that you are eating regularly, sleeping well and doing things you find relaxing. Remember, that you are not responsible for the person's life or decisions.

Outlive is a suicide prevention programme for young people by Sangath, The Centre for Mental Health Law & Policy, and Quicksand. Learn more at www.outlive.in.

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