



Fact sheet 23

I know someone who is feeling suicidal

For immediate crisis intervention when life may be in danger, ring the police on 000 or go to your local hospital emergency department.

This fact sheet helps you to identify warning signs to look for in someone who is feeling suicidal so you can decide what to do and know what help is available.

Are you concerned that someone close to you is thinking about suicide?

It is distressing to realise that someone close to you may be thinking about taking their own life and it is often difficult to know what to say and do, and how to make sure the person is safe.

Most people who feel suicidal do recover from these intense feelings. Family, friends and health professionals can make a big difference in helping people stay safe and to find positive reasons for living.

What you might look for

Many factors are involved in someone feeling suicidal. People at risk of taking their own life often feel very isolated and alone. They may feel that nobody can help them or understand their pain. When they can't see any other way of dealing with their difficulties, suicide can seem to be the only way out.

Sometimes people who have been distressed and openly suicidal for some time become outwardly calm. Be aware that while this could be a sign of recovery it may be because the person has decided to complete their suicide plan.

If someone is not their usual self or if they are showing signs that cause you concern, you should not ignore it. You need to talk to them about how they are feeling.

Mental health problems, previous suicide attempts, and stressful or traumatic life events can increase a person's vulnerability to suicide.

The following are characteristics and occurrences that may indicate a person could be thinking about suicide.

Events – what's happening in the person's life?

Have they experienced recent life events such as:

- Diagnosis of a physical or mental illness;
- Recent loss of a loved one, a job, income or livelihood, a pet;
- Relationship breakdown, separation from children;
- Major disappointment such as failed exams, missed job promotions;
- Major change in circumstances such as retirement, redundancy, children leaving home;
- Suicide of a family member or friend, or a public role model; and/or
- Financial and/or legal problems.

Feelings – how does the person feel?

Difficult life events and changing circumstances affect each person in different ways. Most people who experience them do not consider suicide, but some do. Be aware of:

- How the person feels about what is happening to them and around them;
- What this means to them;
- Whether they are feeling stress or pain; and
- Whether the pain (physical, emotional or psychological) seems bearable.

Behaviours – what is the person doing?

People at risk of suicide usually give clues by their behaviour. These may include:

- Previous suicide attempts
- Being moody, sad and withdrawn
- Increasing their use of alcohol or other drugs
- Talking of feeling hopeless, helpless or worthless
- Taking less care of themselves and their appearance
- Losing interest in things they previously enjoyed
- Finding it hard to concentrate
- Being more irritable or agitated
- Talking or joking about suicide
- Expressing thoughts about death through drawings, stories or songs
- Saying goodbye to others and/or giving away possessions
- Leaving organised group activities such as social or hobby groups or study; and/or
- Engaging in risky or self-destructive behaviour.

What to do

Act immediately to respond to the person by following these steps:

- 1. Do something now.** Take warning signs seriously and ask the person if they are considering suicide and if they have any plans. Reaching out could save a life. Seek urgent help if it is needed by calling 000 or take the person to an emergency department of a hospital.
- 2. Acknowledge your reaction.** You might panic or want to ignore the situation. If you are struggling, enlist the help of a trusted friend.
- 3. Be there for them.** Spend time with the person, encourage them to talk about how they are feeling, identify who they can call on for support and encourage the person to agree to get further support.
- 4. Ask if they are thinking of suicide.** Talking about suicide will not put the idea into their head but will encourage them to talk about their feelings. Don't agree to keep it a secret since the person's safety is your main concern.
- 5. Check out their safety.** Ask how much thought the person has put into taking their own life. If you are really worried, don't leave the person alone. Remove any means of suicide available, including weapons, medications, alcohol and other drugs, even access to a car.
- 6. Decide what to do.** Discuss together what action to take. You may need to enlist the help of others (partners, parents, close friends or someone else) to persuade the person to get professional help. Only by sharing this information can you make sure the person gets the help and support they need.
- 7. Take action.** Encourage the person to get support from local health professionals such as:
 - GPs
 - counsellors, psychologists, social workers
 - Aboriginal Health Workers
 - school counsellors, youth workers, sports coaches
 - religious leaders
 - mental health services
 - community health centres
 - telephone and web-based counselling services
- 8. Ask for a promise.** Ask the person to promise they will reach out and tell someone if suicidal thoughts return. This will make it more likely they will seek help.
- 9. Look after yourself.** It is difficult and emotionally draining to support someone who is suicidal, don't do it on your own. Find someone to talk to, maybe friends, family, or a health professional.
- 10. Stay involved.** Thoughts of suicide do not disappear easily. The continuing involvement of family and friends is very important to the person's recovery.

People at risk of taking
their own life often feel
very isolated and alone.



Useful State and Territory contact numbers

ACT – Crisis Assessment and Treatment Team

Ph: 1800 629 354

New South Wales – Salvo Care Line

Ph: 1300 363 622

Northern Territory – Top End Mental Health Services

Ph: 08 8999 4988

Crisis Line

Ph: 08 8981 9227

Queensland – Salvo Care Line

Ph: 1300 363 622

South Australia – Emergency Mental Health Service

Ph: 13 14 65

Tasmania – Samaritans Lifelink – country

Ph: 1300 364 566

Samaritans Lifelink – metro

Ph: 03 6331 3355

Victoria – SuicideLine (VIC)

Ph: 1300 651 251

Western Australia – Samaritans Suicide Emergency Service – country

Ph: 1800 198 313

Samaritans Suicide Emergency Service – metro

Ph: 08 9381 5555

More information

- Kids Help Line – 24 hour telephone and online counselling service specifically for young people aged between 5 and 25: Ph: 1800 551 800; www.kidshelponline.com.au
- Lifeline – 24 hour crisis counselling available across Australia: Ph: 13 11 14; Toolkit for helping someone at risk of suicide available at www.lifeline.org.au
- Lifeline's Service Finder – a comprehensive online national database of low cost or free health and community services offered throughout Australia www.lifeline.org.au/find_help/service_finder
- Mensline Australia – 24 hour professional counselling service or men: Ph: 1300 78 99 78; www.menslineaus.org.au
- Ministerial Council for Suicide Prevention – Information and Support Pack for those concerned about someone who is distressed or suicidal: www.mcsp.org.au/resources
- Multicultural Mental Health Australia – information and resources about mental health in languages other than English for Australia's multicultural community: www.mmha.org.au
- Salvo Care Line (Salvation Army) – offers a crisis counselling service available throughout Australia: visit www.salvos.org.au for the number in your state.
- SANE Helpline – offers a wide range of information on mental illness and suicide prevention: Ph: 1800 18 SANE (7236); www.sane.org
- Suicide Call Back Service - a free national telephone support service for people at risk of suicide, their carers and those bereaved by suicide: Ph: 1300 659 467