



Fact sheet 9

Suicide attempts

There are many things that can be done to reduce the likelihood of another suicide attempt.

This fact sheet will help you to understand attempted suicide and what can be done to prevent suicide by people who have previously attempted suicide.

Understanding attempted suicide

People who attempt suicide show significantly higher levels of distress, hopelessness and depression than the general population and are more likely to attempt suicide again, with the increasing possibility of a fatal outcome.

Unlike suicide, which is four times more common in men than women, hospital admissions for suicide attempts are more common in women, although not all suicide attempts result in hospital admission.

Approximately half of all suicide attempts occur in people between the ages of 25 and 44 years of age and a quarter occur in young people between the ages of 15 and 24 years. Young women aged 15 to 19 years have the highest rate of suicide attempts.

All attempts to suicide should be taken seriously:

- Attempted suicide is the third leading cause of injury in Australia (after falls and traffic injuries).
- Suicide attempts cause significant distress to the people involved, their families, friends and communities.
- People who attempt suicide are at high risk of suicide in the future. They may also have a greater chance of early death due to other health problems. Anyone who has attempted suicide needs a thorough medical assessment and considerable support and care during the period following their attempt to prevent further suicide attempts or further ill health.

Why do people attempt suicide?

There are many reasons that people attempt suicide and there is no single, simple explanation:

- Some people find it harder to come to terms with difficult life events and to manage negative emotions, especially when these things all come together. When life seems overwhelming and a person does not have the skills to solve their problems, or does not have support from family, friends and their community, they may feel that it is the last straw and ending their life is the only way out.
- People who feel suicidal often feel as though they just don't belong. Feelings of ambivalence about living or dying are often a central focus for those who attempt suicide.
- Suicide attempts may also be associated with mental health problems or disorders. For example, depression has been shown to have a strong link to suicidal thinking and behaviour. Other mental health problems, such as anxiety, can also be risk factors for suicide. Where anxiety and depression occur together, it further magnifies the risk of suicidal behaviours. Bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, borderline personality disorder and high levels of alcohol and/or drug use all increase the risk of a suicide attempt.

Providing the necessary care and support

It is essential that family, friends, health professionals and community support organisations work together throughout the recovery period to regularly follow and provide care to a person who has attempted suicide by:

- making sure that people who attempt suicide receive immediate and appropriate care, and ongoing support during recovery. People who have attempted suicide and have been treated in a hospital or psychiatric facility have a much higher risk of attempting suicide again in the days, weeks and months following their discharge from the facility;
- providing assertive follow-up support to those who have made a suicide attempt so they have information about the services that are available, and how and when they can access them; and
- assisting people who have attempted suicide to learn better coping strategies and improve their ability to manage difficult circumstances, mental health issues and negative emotions.



Increasing community understanding of suicide attempts

It is essential to increase the community's ability to respond appropriately and provide empathetic and effective help to someone who has attempted suicide. This can be achieved by building better community understanding of suicide and the reasons people attempt to take their own life; and providing information and training for health professionals, community services and members of the community including concerned family and friends about self-injury, attempted suicide and completed suicide, and of the links between them.

What friends and families can do

Family, friends and colleagues often find it difficult to help a person who has attempted to take their own life. It is a distressing time and often causes feelings of shock, anger, rejection, guilt and confusion amongst people connected to someone who has attempted suicide. However, support and care from a strong social network can significantly reduce the risk of further attempts and increase the person's reasons to live. The person is likely to need considerable time and support from a range of people in order to manage the problems that led to the suicide attempt.

There are many things that can help and support someone who has attempted suicide.

Get medical help – This is an important first step. Some health professionals may dismiss it as attention-seeking, so it is crucial to go with the person to the hospital or medical office to provide support and make sure it is taken seriously.

Remove access to any means of suicide – Understanding how a person is likely to attempt to end their life is important because it may then be possible to remove access to the means by which they may make an attempt. It is also advisable to remove alcohol and drugs.

Be aware of your own reactions – It is distressing when someone you care about attempts suicide. Try not to panic, become angry, reject the person or ignore the problem – these reactions only make things worse and may increase the person's feelings of guilt and shame, and may make another suicide attempt more likely.

Encourage the person to seek further help – There are many people and organisations that can help someone who has attempted to take their own life. Suggest options for support, such as their local doctor, and offer to go with the person to appointments.

Assist in getting back on track – A person who has attempted suicide may need to work through how they will manage returning to work or school. This is an important step in assisting the person to recover.

Enlist the help of others – Don't try to care for the person on your own. Providing support to someone who has attempted suicide can be exhausting, so get family and friends to assist you as you help the person through their recovery. Don't forget to take care of yourself by taking time out to relax and do things you enjoy.

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; 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
- *Living Is For Everyone (LIFE) – A Framework for Prevention of Suicide in Australia* (2007). Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing: Canberra.
- *Living Is For Everyone (LIFE) – Research and Evidence in Suicide Prevention* (2007). Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing: Canberra.
- Mental health & well being – information on the Australian Government's role and contributions to mental health reform activities in Australia: www.mentalhealth.gov.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

Brochures and booklets

USA

Brochures from The National Alliance on Mental Illness (part of an 'Emergency Room' toolkit): www.nami.org

- Suicide: taking care of yourself after an attempt – Consumer guide (12 pages)
- Suicide: taking care of yourself and your family after an attempt – Family guide (12 pages)
- Suicide: helping patients & their families – Physician/provider guide (8 pages)

UK

Booklets from Papyrus: www.papyrus-uk.org

- Not just a cry for help. A booklet for those who know someone who has made an attempt to take their own life.
- Thinking of ending it all? Help, if you are thinking of taking your own life, or have already tried to do so.

Canada

Fact sheet from the Centre for Suicide Prevention, Calgary: www.suicideinfo.ca

- A suicide attempt is considered to be a prime risk factor for future suicidality. (SIEC Alert no 45, July 2001, 2 pages). Includes information on helping a friend or family member after a suicide attempt.