



Fact sheet 21

Suicide warning signs and tipping points



It is important that friends and family understand the warning signs and know what to do to help.

This fact sheet describes warning signs and tipping points for suicide, and how to respond in order to keep the person safe.

The importance of understanding suicide warning signs and tipping points

Suicide is usually the result of a complex range of factors, but it is often just one or two things that can trigger a person's actions such as making a suicide plan or finding a means to take their own life.

Most people who are thinking of taking their own life do not actually want to die but can't see any other way out of their situation. They are likely to be deeply ambivalent or confused about their suicidal thoughts or intentions and their state of mind may change rapidly in a short period of time.

The potential for suicidal behaviour exists at a certain threshold level in many people. The threshold in each person is determined by their family background, physiology, personality traits, emotional state, and family and social support systems. The warning signs and tipping points for suicide can be likened to signposts that give early warning of the potential for suicidal behaviour. Knowing the main warning signs for suicide and responding to them quickly and effectively may save someone's life. However, it must also be noted that in many cases the warning signs are not obvious and even the most skilled professionals may miss them.

What are the warning signs for suicide?

A suicide warning sign is the earliest indication that someone might be at a heightened risk of immediate suicide. A warning sign indicates that a person is having serious thoughts about taking their own life and may even be making plans to take this action.



Suicide warning signs may be a cry for help and they can provide a chance for family, friends, associates and health professionals to intervene and potentially prevent the suicide from happening.

If you notice someone acting strangely or particularly out of character it is important that you talk to them about it. The following behaviours are more common among people who are considering taking their own life:

- threatening to hurt or kill themselves;
- looking for ways to kill themselves, or talking about their suicide plan;
- talking or writing about death, dying or suicide (especially when this is out of character or unusual for the person);
- expressing feelings of hopelessness;
- expressions of rage, anger or revenge;
- engaging in reckless or risky behaviours;
- expressing feelings of being trapped, like there's no way out;
- increased use of alcohol or other drugs;
- withdrawing from friends, family or the community;
- anxiety or agitation;
- abnormal sleep patterns – not sleeping or sleeping all the time;
- dramatic changes in mood, such as sudden feelings of happiness after a long period of sadness or depression;
- giving away possessions or saying goodbye to family and/or friends; and/or
- saying they have no reason for living or have no purpose in life.

Although most people show some of these signs at some time, especially when they are tired, stressed or upset, it is better to act safely rather than not to act at all, particularly if someone is showing several of these signs at the same time. It is important to respond quickly by talking to the person and enlisting the help and support of others.

What is a tipping point?

The point at which a person's risk of taking their own life increases due to the occurrence of some precipitating event, such as a negative life event or an increase in symptoms of a mental disorder. This may be called a tipping point. Tipping points vary for every individual but there are some indicators of times at which people may be under particular stress. These indicators and tipping points can give early warning of the potential for someone to take their own life and are referred to as triggers or precipitating events. They include mental disorders or physical illnesses, alcohol and/or other substance abuse, feelings of interpersonal loss or rejection, or the experience of potentially traumatic life events (unexpected changes in life circumstances). Tipping points can be thought of as the final straw that may lead someone who has been considering suicide to take action. Examples of events and circumstances that may act as a tipping point include:

- an argument with a loved one or significant person
- the breakdown of a relationship
- the suicide of a family member, friend or public role model
- a media report about suicide
- the onset or recurrence of a mental or physical illness
- unexpected changes in life circumstances; or
- experiencing a traumatic life event, such as abuse, bullying or violence.

The diagram below shows different types of precipitating events and circumstances that are linked to the increased likelihood of suicidal behaviour (although they do not necessarily occur sequentially).

Triggers and precipitating events

Risk factors

- mental health problems
- gender – male
- family discord, violence or abuse
- family history of suicide
- alcohol or other substance abuse
- social or geographical isolation
- financial stress
- bereavement
- prior suicide attempt

Warning signs

- hopelessness
- feeling trapped – like there's no way out
- increasing alcohol or drug use
- withdrawing from friends, family or society
- no reason for living, no sense of purpose in life
- uncharacteristic or impaired judgement or behaviour

Tipping point

- relationship ending
- loss of status or respect
- debilitating physical illness or accident
- death or suicide of relative or friend
- suicide of someone famous or member of peer group
- argument at home
- being abused or bullied
- media report on suicide or suicide methods

Imminent risk

- expressed intent to die
- has plan in mind
- has access to lethal means
- impulsive, aggressive or anti-social behaviour

Responding to the warning signs and tipping points for suicide

- **Be aware** – if someone you know is showing some or all of the warning signs for suicide and/or has experienced a potential tipping point, you should act immediately to ensure their safety. Remove access to any means of suicide and do not leave the person alone. If in doubt about a person's risk of suicide, talk to them and seek help from others.
- **Assess the risk** – talk to the person who you think may be feeling suicidal and assess the situation. Does the person have a plan to take their own life? Do they have the means to carry it out? If so, the person is at a high risk of suicide and you should seek immediate help by calling 000 (police, ambulance), a health professional, or you may need to take the person to hospital. If they or you are in immediate danger, call 000 immediately. If the person is at a lower risk of suicide, talk to them about their suicidal thoughts and develop a plan together to help keep them safe (see Living Is For Everyone Fact sheet 23: I know someone who is feeling suicidal, for tips on how to help someone in need).
- **Talk to other people who know the person** you're concerned about – if you think someone may be having thoughts of suicide, talk to other people who know the person to see if they have noticed anything out of the ordinary.
- **Don't panic** – if someone you know is showing warning signs of suicide or has reached their threshold, try not to over-react. Simply talk to the person, assess the situation and respond as quickly and efficiently as possible.
- **Give the person hope** – while showing them that you understand they are feeling desperate or are in a difficult position right now, also give the person hope that help is available, that they have not always felt this bad, and that with the right help it is possible they could deal with their problems and feel better in the future.

- **Know where to go for support** – find out what support services are available in your community. Keep a list of contact details and when services are available. Provide practical help to get the suicidal person to an appropriate service. Have a backup plan if that service turns out to be not available or has a long waiting list.

Build community capacity to respond to warning signs for suicide

On a community level, strategic approaches to responding to warning signs of suicide can provide help early to the person at risk and reduce the number of people who reach crisis point.

- **Educate key community gatekeepers** – There are many people in the community, such as general practitioners, mental health workers, other health professionals, community services personnel, telephone crisis line workers, ministers of religion, local service providers, who may come in contact with people who are showing the warning signs of suicide or who have experience in dealing with these situations. It is important that local community leaders are aware of the warning signs for suicide and know how to respond appropriately.
- **Build a local suicide prevention network** – It can be helpful for people who are most likely to come in contact with people who are feeling suicidal to have a list of contact numbers for local support services. This should include local emergency services, community mental health services, hospitals, and other community-based resources, who they can contact quickly when necessary. Regularly bring representatives of these services together and implement a local suicide prevention strategy and response plan, so that everyone who needs it will get to the appropriate service more quickly and each service knows they are not being left to assist large numbers of people on their own.



More information

- American Association of Suicidology (AAS) – a broad range of information about suicide and suicide prevention including fact sheets on warning signs for suicide: www.suicidology.org
- Lifeline – 24 hour crisis counselling available across Australia: Ph: 13 11 14; www.lifeline.org.au
- The Ministerial Council for Suicide Prevention (WA) – suicide prevention information for professionals, researchers and community members: www.mcsp.org.au
- Reach Out – a website aimed at helping young people to deal with problems and maintain their mental health and wellbeing: www.reachout.com.au
- Read the Signs – provides information about suicide, depression and other issues: www.readthesigns.com.au
- SANE Helpline – offers a wide range of information on mental illness and suicide prevention Australia: Ph: 1800 18 SANE (7236); www.sane.org