

How to
support someone who feels suicidal



how to



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This booklet explains how to support someone who feels suicidal, giving practical suggestions for what you can do and where you can go for support.

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What are suicidal feelings?

Suicidal feelings can range from being preoccupied by abstract thoughts about ending your life or feeling that people would be better off without you, to thinking about methods of suicide or making clear plans to take your own life. (See our online resource on *Suicidal feelings* for more information.)

The type of suicidal feelings people have varies person to person, in particular in terms of:

- **how intense they are** – suicidal feelings are more overwhelming for some people than others. They can build up gradually or be intense from the start. They can be more or less severe at different times and may change quickly.
- **how long they last** – suicidal feelings sometimes pass quickly, but may still be very intense. They may come and go, or last for a long time.

Can you tell if someone feels suicidal?

Many people find it very hard to talk about suicidal feelings – this can be because they are worried about how others will react or because they cannot find the words. They might hide how they are feeling and convince friends or family that they are coping.

The NHS Choices website ([nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk)) has a list of warning signs that you could notice, but there might not be any signs or you might not be able to tell. Correctly interpreting how someone else is feeling can be difficult so it's very important not to blame yourself if you aren't able to spot the signs that someone is feeling suicidal.

👉👉 *I wish other people would understand that I don't want these feelings, I didn't ask for these feelings and I want them to go away, but it isn't that simple.* 👉👉

Who is at risk of suicide?

Anyone can have suicidal feelings, whatever their background or situation in life. Suicidal feelings have a wide range of possible causes. (See our online resource on *Suicidal feelings* for more about causes.) They can be a symptom of an existing mental health problem or episode of mental distress, or sometimes a side effect of psychiatric or other medication. When someone is feeling suicidal it is important to be aware of any medications they are taking which might be causing or aggravating these feelings.

To find out more about side effects of specific medications talk to your GP or contact NHS direct on 111 (for England) or 0845 46 47 (for Wales).

 *I try and explain to my friends that it's like there is a huge, thick, black cloud following you around. It doesn't matter what you're doing, how good your life appears or how 'ok' you seem.* 

Some people can say why they feel suicidal, but in other instances there may not be a clear reason, or they may be unable to talk about what they are feeling or experiencing.

If someone feels suicidal, their feelings may become more intense if they:

- drink alcohol
- use recreational drugs
- have sleep problems.

(See our online resources on *Recreational drugs and alcohol* and *How to cope with sleep problems* for more information.)

 *My own thoughts are driven by the desire to want this pain and suffering that I feel inside to cease. I feel my husband and children are better off without me. I feel worthless and undeserving of their love and affection. I don't see the person they do.* 

Groups known to be at risk

Studies show that some groups experience higher rates of suicide than others. Statistics show that men, for example, and people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or queer (LGBTQ) are more likely to take their own lives.

People can also be more vulnerable to suicide if:

- **they have attempted suicide before** – if someone has previously tried to end their life, there is a greater than average chance they may try to do so again in future
- **they have self-harmed in the past** – self-harm isn't the same as feeling suicidal, but statistics show that someone who has self-harmed will also be more at risk of suicide
- **they have lost someone to suicide** – people who have been bereaved by suicide are also more at risk of taking their own lives.

How can I help someone with suicidal feelings?

It can be very distressing if you are worried about someone who feels suicidal. They may have talked about wanting to end their life, or you may be concerned that they are thinking about it.

You might feel unsure of what to do, but there are lots of things that might help. You could:

- encourage them to talk about their feelings
- encourage them to seek treatment and support
- offer emotional support
- offer practical support
- help them think of ideas for self-help
- help them to make a support plan.

●● *The main aspect of supporting someone through this is compassion, listening and most importantly not over-reacting or becoming upset. Remaining calm and talking the situation through is extremely important.* ●●

It may also be helpful to remove things that someone could use to harm themselves, particularly if they have mentioned specific things they might use.

(For more information on encouraging someone to seek treatment for suicidal feelings, see the section on supporting someone else to seek help in our online resource *Seeking help for a mental health problem.*)

If someone has attempted suicide, **call 999** and stay with them until the ambulance arrives.

If you're worried that someone is at immediate risk of taking their own life, it's best to stay with them and take one of these steps:

- ring their GP or out of hours service for an **emergency appointment**
- contact their **Community Mental Health Team (CMHT)** if they have one (for information about when a person might be taken to hospital against their wishes, see our online resource on *Sectioning*)
- encourage them to ring **Samaritans** on freephone 116 123 (24 hours a day)
- go to the nearest **Accident and Emergency (A&E)** department
- **call 999** or NHS Direct on 111 (England) or 0845 46 47 (Wales).

(See our online resource on *Suicidal feelings* if you are experiencing suicidal feelings yourself.)

●● *It has helped me to have someone who loves me who accepts that I am feeling what I am feeling, and yet choose to remain with me quietly and encourage, but not force me, to have a sip of water or a bite of something, or go for a walk with them, etc.* ●●

How can I help them talk about suicidal feelings?

If someone feels suicidal, talking to someone who can listen and be supportive may be their first step towards getting help. They could talk to someone in their life. They could also talk to a professional such as a doctor or therapist, or a trained listener at a helpline. (See our booklet on *Making sense of talking treatments* and the section on telephone support in our online *Crisis services* resource for further information.)

If you feel able to listen, you could ask them about how they are feeling. It could help if you:

- **Ask open questions.** These are questions that invite someone to say more than 'yes' or 'no', such as 'How have you been feeling?' or 'What happened next?' There are more ideas for open questions on the Samaritans website (samaritans.org).
- **Give them time.** You might feel anxious to hear their answers, but it helps if you let them take the time they need.
- **Take them seriously.** People who talk about suicide do sometimes act on their feelings – it's a common myth that they don't. It's best to assume that they are telling the truth about feeling suicidal.
- **Try not to judge.** You might feel shocked, upset or frightened, but it's important not to blame the person for how they are feeling. They may have taken a big step by telling you.
- **Don't skirt around the topic.** There is still a taboo around talking about suicide which can make it even harder for people experiencing these feelings to open up and feel understood. Direct questions about suicide like 'Are you having suicidal thoughts?' or 'Have you felt like you want to end your life?' can help someone talk about how they are feeling.

●● *Not undermining their feelings and letting them know that you believe them and want to be there for them is really necessary.* ●●

Why is it safe to ask if someone feels suicidal?

Asking someone if they feel suicidal or are planning to end their life may not feel like the right thing to do but in fact professionals do recommend asking direct questions about suicide. Some people worry that this might indirectly encourage the person who is feeling suicidal to act on their feelings, but in reality research has shown that speaking openly about suicide decreases the likelihood of the person acting on their feelings.

Asking **simple, direct questions** can encourage them to be honest about how they are feeling. Many people feel relieved and less isolated when they are asked.

👉👉 *You can find yourself tiptoeing around the subject because you're scared of saying the wrong thing and you wish you could make everything better. I knew from my own experiences that being told: don't say that, or you don't mean that, doesn't help. It can help just to say that you're here and you're sorry things are hard right now. You don't have to have all the answers.* 👉👉

How can I offer emotional support?

You don't need any special training to show someone you care about them. Here are some things you can do to offer emotional support:

- **Listen.** Simply giving someone space to talk, and listening to how they're feeling, can be really helpful in itself. If they're finding it difficult, let them know that you're there when they are ready.
- **Stay calm.** Even though it might be upsetting to hear that someone you care about is distressed, try to stay calm. This will help your friend or family member to feel calmer too.
- **Try not to make assumptions.** Your perspective might be useful to your friend or family member, but try not to assume that you already know what may have caused their feelings, or what will help.

(For more information on how you could offer support, see the section on supporting someone else to seek help in our online resource *Seeking help for a mental health problem*.)

Having these conversations can be hard so it's important to take care of yourself too. (See page 12 for suggestions on how you can do this.)

What's a support plan?

A support plan is a list that sets out how someone would like to be supported and what they can do to help themselves in a particular situation. It can encourage them to tell you what might help. It's also a useful way of keeping important information and contacts together in one place.

Understanding support plans

Making a support plan is a way of working out what might be helpful and recording those ideas in one place, which some people find useful. It's not a legal agreement and it doesn't mean you have to help.

As well as asking someone what they might find helpful, it's also important to think about what help you feel able to give. If someone wants help you don't feel you can offer, it's okay not to agree and to find other options.

You could encourage them to explore other ways of finding support. Our pages on *Seeking help for a mental health problem* and the helping yourself section of our online resource on *Suicidal feelings* have some suggestions.

You could encourage the person you are concerned about to make a support plan like the one below. The support plan is for them to fill in, although you might help them do this.

It can be helpful to:

- talk together about what to include
- ask them what has or hasn't helped before
- write or print more than one copy
- keep it somewhere easy to find
- save important numbers in your phones

●● *The thing I find most helpful is just knowing someone is there. Sometimes just listening to someone drivel on about mundane things. Sometimes talking about how I feel – just simply saying to someone I feel suicidal.* ●●

Support plan

This is for someone who feels suicidal to fill in, so the questions are written from their perspective.

What can I do to take care of myself?

This could include things like 'write down how I feel', 'cuddle a pet' or 'do some exercise like walking or swimming'.

How would I like to be supported?

This could include a list of names and numbers of friends, family or professionals you can contact when you need support and details of how you would like to be supported, like 'ask me how I'm feeling' or 'come to appointments with me'. It's also a good idea to list the details of helplines or peer support groups, which might include online support like Elefriends (elefriends.org.uk).

Who can be contacted in an emergency?

It's best to agree on what to do in an emergency, with names and numbers for crisis services. This could include things like 'call 999 for an ambulance', 'contact my Community Mental Health Team (CMHT) on...' or 'call 116 123 for Samaritans'.

(See our online resource on *Suicidal feelings*, which includes advice on self-help and making a safety plan, for more ideas on what to include.)

How can I support myself?

Supporting someone who feels suicidal can be emotionally draining. It's important to look after yourself too. It can help to:

Look after your own wellbeing

When you are caring for someone else, you can find that you think a lot about their wellbeing and not about your own. It's important to take care of your own physical health and mental health, including getting enough sleep, eating regularly and doing things you enjoy or find relaxing.

Take time for yourself

Some people feel that they should spend all of their time and energy trying to support their loved one, or feel guilty about wanting time for themselves. It's important to remember that you are a human being with needs of your own. To be able to care for someone else, you need to take time for yourself too.

It can feel easier to take time for yourself if you make a support plan with the person you are concerned about, so you know that they have:

- things they can do to help themselves
- other ways of getting support

Be kind to yourself

It can be hard to accept that someone close to you feels suicidal. You might feel helpless, powerless, angry, sad, shocked, frightened or a whole range of other emotions unique to your own experience – there's no right or wrong way to feel.

Some people worry that they are to blame if someone else feels suicidal, or their loved one doesn't feel better, but it's important not to blame yourself for what is happening.

If you have these sorts of worries, it could help to talk to someone about how you are feeling. (See page 14 for useful contacts.)

Find support for yourself

You could have all sorts of feelings while supporting someone who feels suicidal. It may help to talk about your feelings and worries, or get support from people who have had similar experiences. You could:

- talk to a friend or family member
- call a helpline
- try talking treatment
- join a peer support group

(For more about taking care of yourself, see our online resource on *How to cope as a carer*.) You could also create your own support plan.

Useful contacts

Mind

Mind Infoline: 0300 123 3393
(Monday to Friday 9am to 6pm)
info@mind.org.uk
mind.org.uk
Details of local Minds and other local services, and Mind's Legal Advice Line.
Language Line is available for talking in a language other than English.

CALM (Campaign Against Living Miserably)

0800 58 58 58 (5pm-midnight)
thecalmzone.net
Listening services, information and support for men at risk of suicide.

Carers UK

0808 808 7777 (Monday-Friday 10am-4pm)
advice@carersuk.org
carersuk.org
Information and support for people caring for someone else.

Elefriends

elefriends.org.uk
Mind's supportive online community.

Maytree Suicide Respite Centre

020 7263 7070 (24 hours a day)
maytree@maytree.org.uk
maytree.org.uk
Offers free respite stays for people in suicidal crisis.

Mind Out

mindout.org.uk
Mental health service run by and for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) people.

NHS Choices

nhs.uk
Provides information on warning signs of suicide.

Papyrus HOPELineUK

0800 068 41 41 (weekdays 10am-10pm, weekends 2pm-10pm, bank holidays 2pm-5pm)
07786 209697 (text message service)
pat@papyrus-uk.org
papyrus-uk.org
Confidential support for under-35s at risk of suicide and others who are concerned about them. Calls and texts are free from all providers and do not appear on bills.

Useful contacts

Samaritans

116 123 (24 hours a day)

jo@samaritans.org

Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK

Chris PO Box 90 90

Stirling FK8 2SA

samaritans.org

24-hour emotional support for anyone who needs to talk. Calls are free from all providers and do not appear on bills.

SANEline

0300 304 7000 (6-11pm)

sane.org.uk

Support for anyone affected by mental health problems.

Stay Alive

prevent-suicide.org.uk/find_help.html#apps

App with help and resources for people who feel suicidal or are supporting someone else.

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SOBS)

0300 111 5065 (9am-9pm)

sobs.admin@care4free.net

uk-sobs.org.uk

Emotional and practical support and local groups for anyone bereaved or affected by suicide.

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If you found this booklet useful, you may be interested in the following titles:

- Understanding depression
- Understanding anxiety and panic attacks
- How to improve and maintain your mental wellbeing
- How to manage stress
- The Mind guide to seeking help for a mental health problem

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web: mind.org.uk

Mind

We're Mind, the mental health charity for England and Wales. We believe no one should have to face a mental health problem alone. We're here for you. Today. Now. We're on your doorstep, on the end of a phone or online. Whether you're stressed, depressed or in crisis. We'll listen, give you advice, support and fight your corner. And we'll push for a better deal and respect for everyone experiencing a mental health problem.

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