

#BeThe1To help save a life



Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Initiative

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The five action steps for communicating with someone who may be suicidal are supported by evidence in the field of suicide prevention.

1. ASK

2. BE THERE

3. KEEP THEM SAFE

4. HELP THEM CONNECT

5. FOLLOW UP

1. ASK

Asking WILL NOT encourage suicide.

There are no magic words to say.

Use words that feel honest and accurate.

Trust your observations.

“You seem sad. Are you thinking about hurting yourself?”

“You seem to be troubled. Are you thinking about suicide?”

“You seem distressed. Are you thinking about ending your life?”

Ask open-ended questions rather than yes/no questions.

“What are you feeling?”

“What upsets you the most?”

“What's been happening in your life?”

“Why do you think you're feeling like this?”

“What would you like to be different about your life?”

then... LISTEN

Listening is as important as asking questions.

- Help them focus on **their** reasons for living – not your reasons
- Take their answers seriously
- Never dismiss or contradict
- Don't be judgmental
- Ask reflective follow-up questions - Repeat back what you've heard and let them know you understood what they said

Here's an example of reflective listening:

You: "You seem very upset. Are you thinking about harming yourself in any way?"

Them: "I'm thinking that dying is the only way to end the pain."

You: "You're really hurting. What are some of the things that are troubling you?"

Them: "Everything."

You: "It sounds like you feel overwhelmed. Tell me just a little about some of what's making you feel so bad."

Them: "I can't do anything right, and no one takes me seriously."

You: "I take you seriously, what can I do to help?"

*If the suffering person seems intent on harming themselves,
ask direct follow-up questions:*

“What are you thinking of doing?”

“How would you end your life?”

“What do you have on hand that you would use?”

**If you encounter someone who has already begun the attempt on their life (e.g. drugs, alcohol),
ask very directly, but gently and not judgmentally, “what have you taken?”**

Seek immediate medical help or call 911

2. BE THERE

Or get someone else to help if you can't.

It is important not to overpromise – even if you want nothing more than to help. Identify the best way to “be there” for them, but don't commit to being there in ways that aren't realistic for you. Bring in others to support your efforts.

Let the person know you need to do something; that you can't walk away knowing they may hurt themselves. Press gently, but persist.

Your ultimate goal is to ensure their safety and get them in touch with a mental health professional – by phone, text, or best-case scenario, in person.

Being there means ensuring, in whatever way possible, that the next steps the person will likely take are not self-destructive.

Remember that this is not about your popularity with them. **It is about the person's life.** If you cannot get the individual to a place that is safe, both physically and emotionally, you should call 911 or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.

Tell the person you are taking this action because you fear for their safety. They may be angry or afraid. Ensure the person you will keep them informed about what will happen next. Don't let them talk you out of it.

Don't hesitate to ask for support from the person's friends or contacts. They can also support you through this process.

3. KEEP THEM SAFE

Do not promise confidentiality.

If you discover that the individual is seriously contemplating ending their life, try to establish what means they are considering.

Remember that you are trying to save their life and they may have negative feelings towards you. Once it is a safer situation, there will be time to work on your relationship.

*Continue with the guidelines for ASKING.
Don't dismiss, argue or contradict the person.*

- Inquire gently about the person's plan: ask what their time-line is, how they plan to harm themselves, what happened if they had similar thoughts in the past.
- If their plan involves drugs or other means of self-harm, tell the person you want to hold any dangerous items for them until they feel safer.
- If firearms are involved, you may need to remove the individual from the firearm's location – suggest going for a walk or getting a cup of coffee elsewhere so you can get someone to remove the firearms.
- Suggest that the two of you might call or text a suicide hotline together – or offer to do it for them, in their presence.

*Most people attempt suicide in private.
If you determine the person has a plan:*

Let the person know that you are worried and do not want them to be alone. Remind them that you care.

Don't be afraid to ask them (gently, as if you are curious) to describe their plan. Try to get as much detail as possible.

Ask them what you can do to keep them from hurting themselves. Most likely, they will say “nothing” – but you are buying time.

Go slowly. **Time is your friend.** The more you keep the person talking, the better the chance they will hear your concern and be more open to support and help.

4. HELP THEM CONNECT

Encourage and support the person to seek help.

- Ask from whom they might feel comfortable accepting help.
- Ask how they feel about getting professional help.
- If they respond negatively to getting professional help, ask why they feel that way.
- Meet them where they are.
- If they are resistant, **don't try to change their mind.**

Involve the person in identifying other people that might be able to provide support.

This may be a professional or people who have supported them in the past (such as family, friends, clergy, teachers, etc.).

Options include making an appointment with their doctor, talking to a mental health professional, contacting a confidential telephone, text, or online counseling service.

Offer your help to make the initial contact or appointment. Encourage them to participate, but you may have to be their voice.

Work with them to develop a safety plan.

Including:

- Ways for them to recognize if they are experiencing thoughts of suicide.
- What to do in those crisis moments.
- A list of individuals to contact when a crisis occurs.

The My3app is a safety planning and crisis intervention app that can help develop and store these supports conveniently on a smartphone.

5. FOLLOW UP

Make sure to check in to see how they are doing.

This will increase their feelings of connectedness and remind them people are there to help. If you said you would follow-up on anything this is the time to share information.

Leave a message, send a text, or give them a call.

There is evidence that even a simple form of reaching out may contribute to a reduction in the number of repeat attempts at self harm. Supportive, ongoing contact is an important part of suicide prevention.

Frequency is more important than content.

A quick check-in on a regular basis may be just as effective as lengthier contact. The central goal is to make the individual feel connected.

Numerous studies demonstrate the effectiveness of specific suicide prevention follow-up; peer groups, on-line support groups and similar resources.

You can be an important ally by encouraging and facilitating on-going participation – even accompanying the person when appropriate.

Take care of yourself.

If you have been instrumental in saving a life or being a support during a crisis, you deserve and will benefit from self-care. Have compassion for yourself. Identify your own supports.

Most of the hotlines, prevention sites, peer groups, and in-person counseling sites are also available to help caregivers process what can be a traumatic experience – regardless of the outcome.