

How to
support someone
who feels suicidal



how to



support someone
who feels suicidal

How to support someone who feels suicidal

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.

Contents

What are suicidal feelings?	4
What causes suicidal feelings?	5
What can I do to help?	6
What should I do in an emergency?	11
How can I support myself?	12
Support plan	13
Useful contacts	16

What are suicidal feelings?

Suicidal feelings can be frightening and painful for the person who is experiencing them, as well as for their partner, family, friends and colleagues. They may include:

- believing death is your only option
- feeling helpless and worthless
- feeling that things won't get better
- feeling overwhelmed and unable to cope
- having low self-esteem
- feelings of anger that you direct towards yourself
- feeling isolated or not understood by others
- feeling undecided about whether you want to live or die.

👉👉 *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. 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. 👉👉*

Suicide is complex. Whether someone knows why they feel suicidal or not, it can be difficult to tell others how bad they feel. As much as someone might want to die, they may also want to find another way forward. They may want others to understand how they feel, yet feel unable to talk.

👉👉 *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. 👉👉*

What causes suicidal feelings?

There are different reasons why someone might experience suicidal feelings. There may be an obvious cause, such as a particular event or problem. It may also be because of a combination of different factors. There may also be no obvious reason.

Suicidal feelings may appear suddenly or develop gradually over time. Some factors that may contribute to someone feeling suicidal include:

- experiencing mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety or psychosis
- long-term physical illness
- difficult life experiences, such as losing a job, the end of a relationship, bereavement or trauma
- relationship problems with a partner, friends or family
- experiencing prejudice, discrimination and social exclusion from others for whatever reason, including because of someone's sexuality, racial, cultural or religious background
- physical or sexual abuse
- a history of self-harm – although for most people, self-harm is not about trying to take their life, people who self-harm are more likely to take their lives than people who don't, either intentionally or accidentally (see Mind's booklet *Understanding self-harm* for more information).

Men are particularly vulnerable to suicide. The reason for this is uncertain, but it may be partly because men tend to be less open about their feelings and may be less likely to seek professional help.

What can I do to help?

Try not to judge

It can be very upsetting if someone close to you thinks about taking their own life. It's understandable to feel shocked, frightened or angry. However, it's important to try not to judge that person or blame them for the way they are feeling. Often, finding someone who is prepared to listen and be supportive is the first step towards a person seeking help.

👉👉 *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.* 👉👉

Talk to the person about how they feel

If you think someone is suicidal, one of the most important things you can do is to talk to them about how they feel and be there to listen.

If you find it difficult to know where to start, you could try:

- Asking open, non-judgemental questions about their situation such as, "When did that happen?", "How did you feel?".
- Exploring their thoughts about suicide, by asking "Are you having thoughts of suicide?" or "What thoughts have you had about suicide?". This can help them talk about their feelings and can give you an understanding of their thoughts and intentions.
- Giving them time to talk by listening and reflecting back what they have said.

👉👉 *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.* 👉👉

It's understandable that you may feel pressure 'to say the right thing', but remember by just being there and listening in a compassionate way, you are helping that person to feel less isolated and frightened.

Encourage them to get help

Even when someone appears to be absolutely determined to take their own life, it is important to explore every possible option and source of support with them. You could talk to them about the idea of getting help and ask them how they feel about this. By doing this, you can start to encourage them to get support. This may be by going to see a therapist or a counsellor (see 'Find out what support is available' on p.9 and 'Useful contacts' on p.16).

Ask them how you can help

Someone may know what helps them or what has worked in the past. If they know, they can tell you what it is. If they don't, you could have a conversation with them about what you can do and perhaps write a support plan together (see p.13). It is important they agree to the help you offer. Ideas of how you can provide support include:

- helping them to book appointments if they find it difficult to ring the GP
- going with them to appointments
- helping them to identify sources of support, and together learning more about the help these sources offer (see 'Find out what support is available' on p.9 and 'Useful contacts' on p.16).

Help them stay safe

If someone is feeling suicidal and talks to you about intending to end their life, stay with them. Remove anything that could cause harm, such as sharp objects.

You may want to seek support and advice (see 'What should I do in an emergency' on p.11 and 'Useful contacts' on p.16).

How to support someone who feels suicidal

●● *When I tell my husband I'm having suicidal thoughts, he hides things that I can hurt myself with and makes sure I'm not on my own. He also knows which friends he and I can trust to help and understand so he can phone them for help. ●●*

Help them think about positive things

Exploring reasons for living can be a positive way of supporting someone who is feeling suicidal. You could do this by helping them to:

- Write a list of positive people or things in their life (there is a space on p.14 for this list).
- Keep a memory box of positive things to look at when they are feeling low. These could include photos, a favourite CD or perfume, letters or jokes.

●● *Even when I've been in the midst of despair and unable to see any way forward, being reminded that suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary state of affairs has helped me focus on the hope that all things pass. ●●*

Look out for warning signs

It can be very difficult to recognise when someone is intending to take their own life. Sometimes, a suicide attempt can seem to come suddenly, without warning. Often if someone is feeling suicidal, they may find it very hard to talk about these feelings, and go to great lengths to disguise these feelings or to convince friends and family that they are coping. If someone often experiences suicidal feelings, they may know their own warning signs and might be able to tell you what these are or write them down. This could help you to look out for the signs in the future.

Warning signs to watch out for include:

- stressful events such as failing exams or being made redundant
- experiencing bereavement or loss
- feelings of shame
- isolation or loneliness
- loss of self-esteem
- giving away possessions
- sleep problems – particularly waking up early
- use of suicide-promoting websites
- someone taking less care of themselves, for example eating badly or not caring what they look like
- a sense of uselessness and having no purpose – feeling "What's the point?"
- someone talking about ending their life or about suicide in general
- a marked change of behaviour – someone may appear to be calm and at peace for the first time or, more usually, may be withdrawn and have difficulty communicating.

Find out what support is available

Finding out there is support available can often be a relief for people experiencing suicidal feelings and for family and friends close to them. There is a range of support options available. For example:

- talking treatments, such as psychotherapy or counselling (see 'Useful contacts' on p.16)
- support groups – many organisations around the country, including local Minds, run support groups for people with mental health problems (see 'Useful contacts' on p.16)
- online support – there are many forms of online support, such as Mind's Elefriends community (see 'Useful contacts' on p.16)
- community mental health or social care support
- helplines – organisations such as the Samaritans offer emergency helplines for people who are feeling suicidal (see 'Useful contacts' on p.16)
- medication, such as antidepressants.

How to support someone who feels suicidal

If your friend or family member wants to seek professional help, the first step would usually be to visit their GP. However, this can be a difficult step and your friend or family member may need support to help them do this. Getting professional help on the NHS can also take time – waiting lists for talking treatments can be long in particular. You may need to think about what they can do in the short-term to help themselves whilst waiting for treatment.

Create a support plan

Discussing strategies for seeking help and creating a personal support list is a useful way of reviewing options with the person you are concerned about (see the 'Support plan' on p.13). The list may include the contact details of family and friends, helplines, organisations and professionals available for support. Encourage the person to keep this list by the phone and to agree to call someone when they are feeling suicidal. Some people may resist sharing their personal feelings and problems. If they are reluctant to seek outside help, helping them make a personal support list may provide some things to think about, allowing them to consider the options when they feel ready.

Plan for a crisis

It can help to talk with the person and make a plan of what they need in a crisis and what role you might play. You might find it helpful to:

- Know the steps you would take in a crisis to support your friend or family member. (You can make a note of these steps in the 'Support plan' on p.15.)
- Help the person you are supporting to write down how they would like to be treated in a crisis. This may include what they would like to happen if they become unable to make a decision about their treatment or domestic arrangements. (See Mind's booklet *The Mind guide to crisis services* for more information.)

What should I do in an emergency?

If you're worried that someone is at immediate risk of taking their own life, you should stay with that person and take one of the following steps:

- encourage them to ring the Samaritans, 08457 90 90 90, open 24 hours a day
- contact their GP for an emergency appointment or the out of hours service
- call their Community Mental Health Team (CMHT), if they have one
- ring 999 or NHS direct (111 from any landline or mobile phone, free of charge)
- go to the nearest Accident and Emergency (A&E) department.

If someone has attempted suicide, you should ring 999 and stay with them until the ambulance arrives.

If you feel someone is in immediate danger of suicide and will not approach anyone for help, you may want to think about contacting social services or your GP. Under the Mental Health Act 1983, a person can be treated without their consent. This means that they will be sectioned. The assessment of whether someone should be sectioned usually involves an approved social worker, two doctors and/or a relative. This is, inevitably, a heavy responsibility and can lead to the person being detained under the Mental Health Act. It's important that you are fully informed about what might happen before you make this decision (see Mind's booklet *The Mind guide to the Mental Health Act 1983* for further information). It might also be a good idea to talk this through with someone you trust.

How can I support myself?

Look after yourself

Knowing someone you care about is having suicidal feelings can be very distressing and emotionally draining. Some people make repeated suicide attempts and appear to express a strong wish for death. Accepting that someone has suicidal feelings and making sense of how you feel can be difficult.

It's important to look after your own physical and mental wellbeing. For example, make sure you get enough sleep, eat regularly and do things you enjoy. (See Mind's booklets *How to improve and maintain your mental wellbeing* or *How to cope as a carer* for more information.)

Try not to blame yourself

You may feel guilty, upset or angry with the person who is considering ending their life. It is understandable to experience a range of feelings. If you are in a close relationship with someone who has suicidal thoughts, you may feel that what is going on for the person is in some way your fault. If you do feel like this, it can be helpful to talk to someone you trust about how you feel.

Get support

It is important that you are able to look after your own health and ask for help to deal with the emotions you may be experiencing. For example, you could:

- talk to a friend or family member
- get a talking treatment if you are finding things difficult, (see Mind's booklet *Making sense of talking treatments* for more information)
- go to a carer's support group or get support from a carer's organisation, (see 'Useful contacts' on p.16 for more information).

How to support someone who feels suicidal

What can I do to help myself feel better?

This could include, 'exercise like walking, swimming or yoga', 'expressing myself by writing down how I feel', 'writing down the positive people in my life' or 'phoning my friend'.

Who should be contacted in an emergency?

This could include names and contact numbers of helplines, support groups, family members, friends and professionals.

Useful contacts

Mind

Mind Infoline: 0300 123 3393
(Monday to Friday 9am to 6pm)
email: info@mind.org.uk
web: 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.

British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP)

tel: 0161 705 4304
web: babcp.com
Online directory of accredited therapists.

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

tel: 01455 883 300
web: bacp.co.uk
Information about counselling and therapy. See sister website, itsgoodtotalk.org.uk for details of local practitioners.

Carers UK

helpline: 0808 808 7777
web: carersuk.org
Information and advice on all aspects of caring.

Depression Alliance

information pack request line:
0845 123 2320
web: depressionalliance.org
Information and support for anyone affected by depression. To receive an information pack, call the request line and leave your name and address.

Elefriends

web: elefriends.org.uk
Mind's online support community.

Mental Health Law Online

web: mentalhealthlaw.co.uk/Mental_Health_Act_1983_Overview
Information about mental health law in England and Wales.

NHS direct

tel: 111 from any landline or mobile (free)
textphone: 18001 111
web: nhsdirect.nhs.uk
Health and medicine information service.

Papyrus

tel: 0800 068 4141

text: 07786 209 697

email: pat@papyrus-uk.org

web: papyrus-uk.org

Advice for the prevention of young suicide.

Samaritans

Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK

Chris PO Box 90 90

Stirling FK8 2SA

24-hour helpline: 08457 90 90 90

email: jo@samaritans.org

web: samaritans.org

24-hour emotional support.

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SOBS)

helpline: 0844 561 6855

(Every day 9am to 9pm)

web: uk-sobs.org.uk

Emotional and practical support
and local groups.

Further information

Mind offers a range of mental health information on:

- diagnoses
- treatments
- practical help for wellbeing
- mental health legislation
- where to get help

To read or print Mind's information booklets for free, visit mind.org.uk or contact Mind Infoline on 0300 123 3393 or at info@mind.org.uk

To buy copies of Mind's information booklets, visit mind.org.uk/shop or phone 0844 448 4448 or email publications@mind.org.uk

This booklet was written by Lily Marsh

Published by Mind 2014 © 2014
To be revised 2017

ISBN 978-1-906759-90-2

No reproduction without permission
References available on request
Mind is a registered charity No. 219830

Support Mind

Providing information costs money. We really value donations, which enable us to get our information to more people who need it.

Just £5 could help another 15 people in need receive essential practical information booklets.

If you found the information in this booklet helpful and would like to support our work with a donation, please contact us on:
tel: 020 8215 2243
email: dons@mind.org.uk
web: mind.org.uk/donate

Mind
(National Association for Mental Health)
15-19 Broadway
London E15 4BQ
tel: 020 8519 2122
fax: 020 8522 1725
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.

Mind Infoline: 0300 123 3393
info@mind.org.uk
mind.org.uk

