



Information for friends,  
family & carers



Berkshire Healthcare  
NHS Foundation Trust

# It's safe to talk about suicide

## Does someone close to you seem really down?

Might they be thinking about suicide? The only way to know is to ask.

## Suicide is rare but it happens

- There are over **6,000 deaths** by suicide in the UK every year – an average of **16 per day**
- Intense emotional strain and mental exhaustion can cause people to behave in uncharacteristic and unpredictable ways
- Between 2012 – 2022 - 26% of all suicides in the general population were by individuals in contact with mental health services. Therefore, 74% were by individuals not in contact with mental health services.

### If someone tells you they're feeling suicidal:

- Make sure they are not left alone
- Remove anything they could use to take their own life e.g. tablets, ligatures, rope, anything sharp
- Get medical help immediately
- Don't be afraid to involve their family, friends or colleagues
- Share this leaflet with others & plan together how you are going to keep the person safe

### Get medical help:

- Phone your GP surgery or access their out of hours support if necessary
- Call our Mental Health Crisis Team **0800 129 9999** or Call **111**
- Call 999 or take them to A&E and **stay with them until they are seen by a member of the mental health team**



Search **Crisis Resolution & Home Treatment team**

# What are the warning signs?

There may not be any. An emotional crisis is not like a heart attack or a stroke, where there are visible warning signs. People who have reached rock bottom can be very skilled at hiding their thoughts and feelings.

## They may be:

- Quiet
- Brooding
- Withdrawn or distant
- Not making eye contact
- Agitated
- Irritable or rude
- Drinking a lot
- Talking about suicide or saying it's all hopeless

I can't go on

## They may also be:

- Busy
- Chirpy
- Living life as normal
- Going to work
- Laughing and joking
- Talking about future plans
- Telling you not to worry about them

I'm fine

So how will you know if they are thinking about suicide? The safest way is to ask.

## How to start a conversation

If you think that someone you know is showing signs of poor mental health and in need of help, approach them about your concerns. Consider how you will do this, what you will say and how you convey an interest in listening to them. Think about the following:

- **Try to find a suitable time & space:** Find a place where you both feel comfortable (if the situation permits). Try to make sure it's somewhere quiet and you won't be interrupted.
- **Let the person know what you may have noticed:** Tell them what has caused you to be concerned for them.
- **Ask open questions:** Explore how they're feeling. This will encourage a dialogue and two-way conversation. Avoid putting pressure on them to talk right away.
- **Offer reassurance:** Someone in distress needs to hear from you that you care. Acknowledge their courage in sharing their feelings.
- **Be patient:** It's hard for people to open up and this might be their first time. It can take time before someone is ready to access support.
- **Leave silence:** Silence can feel uncomfortable but it's important. Silence and space allows someone to think and respond in their own time.
- **Don't make false promises or minimise someone's pain:** Avoid saying that you know how they feel or that things will be fine or that they need to calm down and put things in perspective.
- **Listen attentively and don't judge.** Show you are listening by summarising what they are saying. Clarify important points. Don't avoid using the word "suicide". It's important to discuss the issue directly without expressing negative judgement.
- **Offer information about services:** Try to help them access support from professional services. Agree a plan about how you'll help them access support.

## Why it's important to ask

If someone is suicidal, they are likely to be feeling:

- cut off from everyone around them
- frightened and ashamed about wanting to die
- a burden to friends or family
- desperate for help but afraid to ask

They need someone to start the conversation for them. This shows them that they have permission to talk about it and that they don't have to wrestle with their dark thoughts alone.

**“Won't talking about suicide put the idea in her head”**

No – If a person is suicidal, the idea is already there. If they aren't suicidal, it won't do any harm

**“What if I say the wrong thing? It could damage our relationship”**

Showing a person you care about them won't damage your relationship. Saying nothing could result in losing them forever

It's important to trust your gut instincts. If something about the person doesn't look or feel right, say something. **Saying something is safer than saying nothing. Saying the word won't make it happen.**

## What to say

It can be really scary starting this kind of conversation. Explore how they're feeling. Don't deny what they're telling you. Don't pretend you know how they feel.

I'm a totally useless person

No – you're not  
Don't say that

How long have you been feeling like this?

### Questions you might want to ask:

- I've noticed that you don't seem yourself – what can I do to help?
- What's been happening?
- How are things?
- Tell me more about .....

### Phrases to help to offer reassurance:

- You're not alone in this
- Thank you for trusting me and being open
- You are important
- You're doing the right thing by asking for support
- It sounds like it was difficult to talk about this – I'm here to listen
- I can't imagine what you're going through but I'd like to know more so I can help
- If they say they're fine but you're not sure – keep trying, quietly and gently.

## Ask the 'S' question:

- **Suicidal thoughts** are the thoughts someone may have when they no longer feel they can continue to live. **Suicide behaviour** is making plans or acting on suicide thoughts
- If they give any indication that they're feeling hopeless or can't see the point in going on, ask clearly and calmly – **Are you having any thoughts of suicide?**
- Don't ask about suicide in a leading or judgemental way e.g. You're not thinking of doing anything stupid, are you? Don't be too quick to accept denials or joking responses.
- You may need to ask additional questions such as - **Do you have a suicide plan? Do you have what you need to carry out your plan?**

Don't worry. I'm not going to do anything stupid

## You may say:

We should still think about getting you some help

## Try not to say:

Phew – that's a relief

## Some things that drive people to think about suicide are:

- Personal catastrophes such as being made redundant, the collapse of their own business, the break-up of a relationship or being refused access to children
- A persistent sense of worthlessness or failure; uncertainty about sexual identity or personal goals
- Good things happening to other people, such as friends getting married, going off to university or getting new jobs, and feeling left behind
- A diagnosis of depression. Not everyone with depression will have suicidal thoughts but it can significantly increase the risk of suicide.
- A combination of the above. A whole series of little setbacks can sometimes be more devastating than one big thing.

## Take care of yourself:

- Talk to your own GP
- Confide in a trusted friend
- Find a support group for carers of people with mental health problems
- It is not always possible to prevent suicide. If the person does take their own life, you are not to blame
- Visit our website for links to confidential helplines and sources of support



[www.berkshirehealthcare.nhs.uk](http://www.berkshirehealthcare.nhs.uk)



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