

AUTHENTIC RESPONSES & KILTTI

# SUICIDE PREVENTION

UNDERSTAND, RESPOND & SUPPORT





## UNDERSTAND

Suicide is the act of intentionally taking your own life. Not all people thinking about suicide want to die; instead, they may want a way to escape from the pain they're feeling or the circumstances they're facing. Individuals can constantly feel suicidal and think about suicide, some may have thoughts of suicide every now and then or some individuals may only have suicidal thoughts at one specific point in their life.

Thoughts of suicide can be challenging, frightening and worrying for the person experiencing them and for the people around them. Thoughts and feelings are specific to the individual and can affect them in different ways. This can make suicidal thoughts harder to understand for those around as there is no one clear set of symptoms, or an easy way to spot people who might be thinking about suicide.

Our aim is to provide a toolkit to support someone who shares their suicidal thoughts and feelings with you.

## RESPOND

There is no one "correct" way to talk to someone struggling with suicidal thoughts. Sometimes suicidal people can be reluctant to talk. It can be helpful to remember that you are providing a space and time for someone to share how they are feeling and that you are prepared to listen.

You don't need to fix or change anything in the person's life to be of real help, and you shouldn't try to. The most reliable way to de-escalate someone is to give them the experience of feeling heard, and having their suicidal thoughts and feelings acknowledged. For many of us it can be difficult to get out of the problem-solving mindset, but it's absolutely vital. This is often one of the toughest challenges. Sometimes, even highly empathic people just can't function without clear goals - that's why we say that most of the time building rapport is the solution.

Suicidal people typically don't feel change is possible. Anything that can be prefaced with "you should" can make them feel even more powerless. They often feel unworthy of help. "Fixing" or "advising" will reinforce that and make things worse. Listening, validating and affirming can help.

Suicidal people often don't see all the options they actually have. If they've indicated to you that you've achieved a solid rapport and they may do this by a change in their tone of voice, and/or they may acknowledge there's hope and/or they may have options, it could be of real benefit to point out some options they may have, but there is a vital difference between "you should do.." and "you could do..". "Have you thought of doing...?" or "What do you think about doing ....?" are other good phrasings.

### **Listen and empathise**

If they say harsh things about themselves or others this can be the truth of their experience even if it doesn't match objective reality. Consider the emotions embodied by the self-loathing or the tales of woe. You can connect with the person on a feeling level and simply set aside any questions of "fact".

Examples:

- If they say: "I'm useless, no-one will miss me" "The world would be a better place without me," simply disagreeing can make them feel even more "intrinsically wrong". Instead, you might say, "It worries me to think of you feeling so bad about yourself." This respects their emotional experience and shares your concern without getting into whether their self-assessment is accurate or not.
- If they say: "Everyone is mean to me", you could respond with "It must be so hard when every interaction hurts." This tells them that you hear their pain, but you have not judged (i.e. you have neither supported nor challenged) their assertion about how they're actually being treated.

Don't disagree with suicidal people about how bad things are. It's not about their circumstances; it's about their suffering, and you can't measure that from the outside. A message that in any way tries to tell or show the suicidal person that "it's not so bad" is just another way of saying "I don't understand what you're going through". It's likely to increase their risk by making them feel more alienated than they already are and instil and/or reinforce a belief that they can't be helped.

Describing suicidal behaviour as "selfish" is not helpful. The suicidal mindset usually includes a firm conviction that "I can improve the world by taking myself out of it." Telling them how much their deaths will hurt others reinforces their sense of personal failure.

Never use any kind of "tough love". Everything you say to suicidal people needs to be grounded in the belief that they are doing the best they can to help themselves.

Focus on being present and providing the space for someone to share their thoughts and feelings.

### Active listening

This can demonstrate and refine your understanding, and is a powerful rapport- building technique. People in a suicidal state of mind usually feel profoundly alone. Saying "I understand" without proving it will often reinforce this sense of alienation. Some ways you can "actively listen" effectively are:

- Ask open-ended ("How do you feel?") versus closed ended ("Are you sad?") questions. This will ensure that they feel able to express whatever they need to. If you ask if they're "sad" and they're actually feeling something else (anxious, numb, etc.), you may not get the information you need, and they may feel invalidated.
- Reflect back the emotions they say in their story, and what you have heard but they may not have said.
- Summarise, paraphrase and interpret what you're hearing. This shows that you're taking in what they're saying, and thinking deeply about it. It also offers them the chance to correct anything that you got wrong.
- Respond genuinely and supportively. If you feel a strong empathetic response to what someone is telling you, share it. This shows that what they are going through matters to you, and that they're getting through to you.
- Do not react with expressions of panic or urgency. This doesn't demonstrate a high level of concern or empathy, it telegraphs "I can't deal with what you're thinking and feeling". You may end up rushing through the conversation or trying to find a solution because it is uncomfortable for you.
- Suspend your judgement and listen. Remember that you're just building your understanding. You may hear some ugly truths, or even ugly untruths. The point is to understand, to go to the dark place with them, be beside the individual providing a safe space.
- You may need to ask tough or personal questions. Your goal is to "map" the dark place as well as you can. You can frame sensitive questions with: "May I ask you about....?"
- If, and only if, they indicate to you that they feel "heard", you might try some gentle re-framing of their view of the situation or exploring options. Tread lightly. The aim is to bring the individual with you and if there is resistance, pause and return to active listening. Continue to explore, listen, and respond to what is being shared.
- When someone discloses suicidal thoughts to you your words and actions can help the suicidal person to feel less alone and, as a result, hopeful. Good questions to ask yourself are, "How can what I want to say help this person? How can it do harm?"
- Your answer may mean the difference between the person feeling judged and even more alone – or accepted and understood.

## SUPPORT

Once you have fully explored and understood what has been shared you may naturally come to a point where the conversation pivots to how best to continue supporting the individual.

By providing a safe space and actively listening to an individual you will have gained information that will assist you in assessing the level of risk presented. A key question to ask is whether the individual has felt like this before. This will assist you in finding out what helped last time and whether there is already a safety plan in place. If the individual has not felt like this before then we need to ascertain how developed their thinking is.

For many people who are thinking about suicide, while they may not be certain that they want to stay alive, they may also not be sure that they want to die. This means they're in a position where they're torn between living and dying.

If the person does not feel that they have any control over this decision or they're losing control of other aspects of their life then their plan of suicide can become something to focus on, something that they have the ability to take control of – and that they may be afraid to tell anyone about in case it is taken away from them.

Building trust and rapport whilst actively listening is key to unpacking how advance someone's thoughts are.

If you assess, feel or believe that the individual is struggling with suicidal thoughts then in addition to providing a safe space to share these thoughts, our aim is to ensure the person remains safe. You can do this by coming up with a **safety or support plan** with the person.

You can do this by asking them a few questions for example:

- How they can help themselves. This can include continuing talking to you, in addition to sharing with family/friends.
- Creating routines to keep themselves safe. For example, always going for a walk every day, being in nature, reading, listening to music.
- Support from the GP, mental health specialists, helplines, support groups.
- Asking them if they have felt like this before
- Asking them if they have a plan, or any thoughts about how they would end their lives

By asking these questions it will help you support them, and signpost them to the most appropriate organisation.

The changing nature of suicidal thoughts can at times cause immediate crisis. If this is the case, then it is important to ask the individual if they have a plan,, and have they tried before. How developed the plan is will indicate how you proceed. It would also be helpful to consider assistance from professionals. Asking closed questions can help to direct next steps.

For example:

Would you like to get some help?

Have you talked to your GP?

Ideally you would like to obtain permission from the individual in crisis when involving other agencies or professionals, however if the individual is reluctant and refuses external intervention, you may need to contact these without permission.

### **Support for you**

Supporting someone who is suicidal can lead to a range of feelings and emotions in you. Speak to someone you trust to share the impact this has had, consider speaking to a helpline which offers emotional support or seek support from your GP.



# TRAINING & SUPPORT

Whether you regularly support callers who are sharing their suicidal thoughts or this is a rarity but you would like to be best prepared, then we can help.

Our **Beyond Blue** training course focuses on callers who are at risk of suicide. The course explores the skills that are critical to responding to thoughts around suicide ideation and identifying the callers to your helpline who are at immediate risk.

We commence with an overview on prevalence and factors that can contribute to the vulnerability of a caller. We go on to identify the possible signs presented by a caller and how we can best respond. This practical, skills orientated course aims to develop confidence so you are able to respond and support callers.

Our courses can be tailored to your organisation, delivered in person or online and supported by a range of materials.

Our range of courses are:

**Comprehensive Communication** is a two day course for anyone starting on a helpline or wanting to refresh their helpline skills. We focus on your role in assisting others, maintaining boundaries, listening effectively and developing core techniques to enable you to respond to the caller.

The parallel course for those delivering a livechat channel is our **Language of Livechat** course.

**Reflection & Resilience** offers information on how to manage the impact of calls. Listening and responding to people who are in distress on a regular basis can have a cumulative effect on you. This course will explore your resilience, provides an opportunity to reflect and shares the tools to enable your own self-care and build resilience.

The **Vicarious Trauma** course focuses primarily on the impact of listening and responding to complex emotional calls. We address the difference between Burnout, Compassion Fatigue and Vicarious Trauma. How to assess and create a toolkit for building resilience.

If you are considering or setting up a new service, our **Helplines How to** course provides you with guidance on the key components.

**Optimising your Outcomes** is all about the difference you make to your caller and how we measure quantitative and qualitative data.

We have two shorter sessions; **Bounce from Burnout** and **Combat Stress with Kindness** and on a monthly basis deliver free sessions on **Boundaries** and **Self Care**.

If you would like to know more or book a course please contact

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