

Conversations Matter

when someone is thinking about suicide

I am worried someone I know may be thinking about suicide: What do I say? What do I do?

Many of us will notice changes in people around us and get the feeling that 'something is not right'.

You may not want to say anything for fear of making the situation worse or because you don't know what to say if they confirm your concerns.

While these conversations can be very difficult and confronting, there is a lot you can do. By talking to the person and getting further information, you can assist them to talk to others and get the professional support they may need.

You may be thinking...

"What if I am wrong?"

"What if I plant the idea in their mind?"

"What if they say 'no' I am not OK?"

"What if I say the wrong thing?"

They may be thinking...

"I don't know how to explain what's going on."

"I don't want to be a burden."

"They will think I'm weak."

"They'll think I just want attention."

"No one can help me."

This resource will give you basic tips to help you talk to someone you are worried may be thinking about suicide. These can be difficult conversations that get easier with training and practice. It is recommended that you seek out further training and support.

Things to remember:

- ✓ Act on observations
- ✓ Manage your thoughts and fears
- ✓ Prepare in advance
- ✓ Start the conversation
- ✓ Listen without judgement
- ✓ Get the person talking
- ✓ Ask directly
- ✓ Ask about plans
- ✓ Ask further questions to determine risk
- ✓ Keep the person safe
- ✓ Encourage and support the person to seek help
- ✓ Look after yourself
- ✓ Learn about other services and resources that are available.

Act on observations

There are a number of risk factors or warning signs that might indicate a person is thinking about suicide (see box opposite for examples).

- If you know the person well, it may also be a general sense that 'something is not quite right'. For example, the person may be behaving or talking differently.
- People may express a belief that they are a burden on others or that others will be better off without them:

“ No one would care if I was gone. ”

“ If I was dead people wouldn't have to worry about me. ”

- They may also talk about death or suicide:

“ I don't want to be here anymore. ”

“ I wish I could go to sleep and never wake up. ”

- They may also talk explicitly about suicide:

“ I want to kill myself. ”

- Take these statements seriously. The person may be trying to indicate how they are feeling and it may be a relief to talk to someone about their thoughts.

Possible warning signs for suicidal behaviour include:

- Previous suicide attempts
- Talking or writing about suicide or death, even jokingly
- Seeking access to something lethal
- Being moody, withdrawn or sad
- Saying goodbye or giving away possessions
- Losing interest in things they previously enjoyed
- Taking less care of their appearance
- Anxiety or agitation, including difficulty concentrating or sleeping
- Engaging in self-destructive or risky behavior
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Withdrawal from other people.

For further information see:

Supporting Fact Sheet: *Risk factors and warning signs.*

Manage your thoughts and fears

It is natural to find the issue very confronting and it can be difficult to start the conversation.

- You might be concerned that you will make the situation worse or that you will ask about suicide and be mistaken.
- It is better to ask and be mistaken than to say nothing.
- Experts generally agree that asking someone whether they are thinking about suicide is unlikely to make the situation worse or 'put ideas in their head'.
- You can help someone if you show that you care, are willing to listen and try to get them to talk to a professional to assist them with how they are feeling.
- Having someone to talk to may provide the person with relief at being heard and understood and it provides an opportunity to get more information.
- If the person is not thinking about suicide, it can still be an opportunity to have a discussion about why you were concerned about them and let them know you're someone they can talk to if things get tough.

While it may be easier to manage the conversation with someone you know, you may end up talking to someone you have no previous connection with.

If this happens, it is important to help the person feel comfortable and keep them talking while you explore their feelings and find out who else they might be able to tell.

Prepare in advance

Sometimes conversations will be unexpected and you will not have time to prepare, but getting prepared can make you feel more comfortable.

- Where possible, plan to have the conversation in private and somewhere you will both feel more at ease and unlikely to be interrupted.
- It will usually be best to have the conversation in person, but this may be difficult if you do not live close to the person, or an opportunity comes up in another way.
- You can talk to the person over the telephone or via private chat or email. It may be best to find out where they are and if anyone is with them in case you get worried about their safety.
- It is not recommended to have the conversation in a public setting (such as in a group setting or on a social media page).
- It is best to make time for the conversation rather than rushing between other things.
- This is a tough conversation to have with someone. If you don't feel like you can follow through with the conversation, try to find someone who can.
- The person may be open to talking confidentially to someone over the telephone and you could encourage them to call one of the services listed at the end of this fact sheet or on the 'Supporting Information' section of the website at www.conversationsmatter.com.au

Start the conversation

You will need to use your connection to the person and your own style to start the conversation.

- You can start by saying you are worried and what in particular has made you concerned.

✓ For example:

"I have been worried about you lately."

"I've noticed some differences in you lately and I'm just wondering how you are?"

- If someone posts a comment **online** that makes it sound like they're thinking about suicide, encourage them to chat to you in private by contacting them directly.

For example, look out for statements like:

“ I am completely over it. ”

“ No one would miss me if I wasn't around anymore. ”

✓ An example response might be:

"Hi mate, I saw your post on Facebook and I am a bit worried about you. Do you have time for a chat?"

Listen without judgement

Make the person feel comfortable talking to you by listening without judgement or criticism, offering support and understanding.

- Let the person express their feelings without interruption. They need an opportunity to talk about how they are feeling and may be relieved to be able to do so.
- Regardless of what the person discloses, you should take them seriously and acknowledge the reasons the person wants to die.
- Remember, it doesn't matter whether you think the issue is serious, it is what the person thinks that is most important.

X Don't try to minimise their problems by saying things like:

"Try not to worry about it."

"It doesn't sound so bad."

"I know how you feel."

✓ Instead, say things like:

"It sounds like you are really low"

"I can see this is worrying for you"

Get the person talking

It is best to listen to what they say rather than trying to give advice or 'fix' their problem.

- Use open-ended questions so that you get a better understanding of their situation, thoughts and feelings. Encourage the person to seek help and support from others close to them, bereavement support services or health professionals.

✓ Use open-ended questions:

"How long has this been going on?"

X Avoid closed questions:

"Has this been going on for long?"

- Remember that someone's gender, age, cultural background and a range of other factors about them may impact on how they talk about what they are experiencing.
- Non-verbal communication (e.g. your gestures, tone of voice) can be really important to setting the person at ease.
- If you are talking via telephone or sending a message you can still put them at ease by responding in breaks to show you are listening and encouraging them to keep communicating.

Ask directly about suicide

To find out whether a person is suicidal, it is usually best to ask directly whether the person is thinking about taking their own life.

✓ Ask:

"Are you having thoughts about suicide?" or "Are you thinking about killing yourself?"

X Avoid phrases like:

"You don't want to kill yourself do you?"

"You're not thinking of suicide are you?"

- Once rapport has been built, the question should be easier to ask, but make sure you ask without judgement and in a way that allows people to tell the truth.
- Let the person know that many people think about suicide. Try to offer hope and suggest that people can find ways to get through difficult times.

✓ For example:

"I may not know how you feel, but I do want to help you get through this."

Tips for non-verbal communication

- ✓ Make yourself comfortable but ensure you look interested in what the other person is saying
- ✓ Maintain eye contact. Where this is not culturally appropriate or makes the person uncomfortable, sit alongside them
- ✓ Show you are listening – e.g. by nodding.

Ask about plans

If the person confirms they are thinking about suicide, it is important to try and find out if they are in immediate danger.

- People are usually at higher risk of suicide when they have a specific way in mind and the ability to carry it out. The more detailed the plan is, generally the higher the risk will be.
- You may need to ask direct questions to find out how detailed their plans are.

✓ For example:

“Have you thought about how you would kill yourself?”

“Have you thought about when you would kill yourself?”

“Have you taken any steps to get the things you would need to carry out your plan?”

Ask further questions to determine the risk

You are not expected to be an expert, but getting further information can be important if you need to talk to a professional about how the person is feeling.

- People who have attempted suicide in the past or have been exposed to the suicide of someone close to them can be at increased risk of dying by suicide. So too can people who have recently had a loss or crisis.

✓ For example, you may want to ask:

“When did you first have thoughts about suicide?”

“Has anything happened recently that has made you feel worse?”

Keep the person safe

Take steps to keep the person safe. If the person has access to lethal means of suicide close by (or on them) you may want to talk to them about handing them over safely.

- If you are concerned the person may be at imminent risk (that is, they might take their life soon) then contact emergency services immediately and tell them what you know. Stay with the person or ensure someone else is with the person until support arrives.
- If the person is not at imminent risk, or you are uncertain about their level of risk, talk to them about who else they could tell and involve.
- When talking to someone with suicidal thoughts, remember that suicide should not be kept a secret. The number one priority is to keep the person safe, this may mean breaking confidentiality if you need to get someone else involved.

Encourage and support the person to seek help

Involve the person in identifying other people that might be able to help them with the problem.

- This may be a professional or people who have supported them in the past (such as family, friends, elders, clergy, teachers, etc).
- There are a range of options available to the person. They can make an appointment with their doctor, talk to a counsellor or other health professional or access a confidential telephone or online counselling service.
- You or another person may need to support them to make the first appointment.
- You may need to talk to a professional about what you have learned, or contact a service on their behalf.

Look after yourself

Be kind to yourself. It can be draining talking to someone about suicide and supporting them.

- Make sure you check your own responses and get help if you need it. It can be good to talk it through with someone you trust.
- If you have had the conversation with someone you're worried about and later they make an attempt to end their life, seek immediate help for yourself through your doctor, other health professional or one of the services listed within this resource.

Learn about other services and resources

This resource is a basic introduction to what you can say or do if you think someone you know is suicidal. There are a range of other services and resources that can assist.

Take a look at the links on the next page, or for further information visit the **Conversations Matter** website – www.conversationsmatter.com.au

Services and supports

Lifeline

24-hour national telephone crisis counselling service and online counselling
Telephone: 13 11 14 or www.lifeline.org.au

Kids Helpline

Free confidential 24 hour telephone and online counselling for young people between 5 and 25 years
Telephone: 1800 55 1800 or www.kidshelpline.com.au

Suicide Call Back Service

24-hour national telephone counselling and online service for people 18 years and over
Telephone: 1300 659 467 or www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au

Mindhealthconnect

Website aggregates mental health resources and content from the leading health organisations
www.mindhealthconnect.org.au

beyondblue: National depression initiative

24-hour telephone support and online chat service with links to local services
Telephone: 1300 22 4636 or www.beyondblue.org.au

e-headspace

Online counselling for young people aged 12 to 25 years – www.eheadspace.org.au

Useful training

LivingWorks Australia

Targeted training for communities, caregivers and professionals - www.livingworks.com.au

Mental Health First Aid

Training for those assisting adults, young people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Vietnamese communities with mental health problems or in a mental crisis - www.mhfa.com.au/cms

Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) Suicide Prevention Training

Free online training course for Australian residents – www.suicideprevention.salvos.org.au/training

For a more comprehensive list of links refer to the 'Supporting Information' section at www.conversationsmatter.com.au

This work is copyright. It may be reproduced in whole or in part for study or training purposes subject to the inclusion of an acknowledgement of the source. It may not be reproduced for commercial usage or sale. Reproduction for purposes other than those indicated above requires written permission from the NSW Ministry of Health.

© NSW Ministry of Health 2013

