

How to Respond to Someone Who is Suicidal

In the following chapters I will show you how to identify possible signs of suicide, but before then I want to teach you how to respond to someone who is suicidal. I have already talked about sudden same-day-crisis suicides where there is little warning. Often the final decision to attempt suicide happens very quickly. But in other situations, there are often visible signs that someone is heading into a bad situation or they are likely to become suicidal. There will be some people who will hide mental illness very well so that there are no visible signs. But for a lot of other people, there will be visible signs that someone is in a bad situation. I cover a lot in the following chapters on mental illness but for now here are some of the main ones.

Some warning signs may include...

- Talking a lot about death.
- Saying things like there's no point any more
- Suddenly getting better after a long history of depression. Usually, this is not a good sign, because it means they have made a decision to end it and they are often quite peaceful
- Giving away prized possessions for no apparent reason. I'm not talking about a mother who gives her daughter a family heirloom on a wedding day, I mean when someone does this out of the blue
- Writing goodbye notes

- Significant negative changes/events, such as a relationship break up
- Talking about wanting to die by suicide
- Feeling hopeless

The last one, feeling hopeless can be hard to spot unless you know what you're looking for. Most suicidal people don't go around saying I feel hopeless. However, they may say after a relationship breakup, I'll never ever find anyone to love me, or after losing a job, no one will ever hire me again, or others may say things will never get better. It's about reading between the lines.

I'm going to summarise the rest of the chapter here to make the steps clear and concise. The rest of the chapter gives a lot more detail about some of the ins and outs of this.

- If you are concerned that someone might be at risk of suicide you should explicitly ask "Are you planning to kill yourself?"
- If they say yes, you should respond by saying "I am so glad you told me that."
- You should stay with the person and get them help.
- Look after yourself.

That's the simple version; here is some more detail.

If ever you notice any of the signs mentioned above, or if you feel that something is not right then you should explicitly ask "Are you planning to kill yourself?" You may want to start by saying what you have seen. For example, you may say "I've noticed that you have been looking sad all the time. I heard you say the other day there is no way anything will ever get better. This might be a really tough question but are you planning to end your life?"

Most people are comfortable if they get the answer “No, I’m not planning to kill myself.” It’s the yes response that fills people with fear, and I include myself in that.

Empathy

If a person does say “Yes,” they want to kill themselves, a lot of people want to reply by trying to solve the problem. They may say “Have you thought about seeing a counsellor? When people hear problem-solving as the first response, they often feel that they haven’t been heard. If you jam the photocopier at work and someone asks if you have read the instruction manual, you often feel like punching them! People want to hear empathy, especially if they are suicidal. Empathy can be expressed by saying something like, “That is just awful, it sounds like you have been through a lot”. Empathy is not, I’ve been there I know exactly what you’re going through. No two people have ever had exactly the same experiences so you can’t know what someone is going through. Sometimes I might say something like “I can’t understand everything that you are going through, but I want to try and understand as much as I can”.

After that, I often say, “I’d really like to know what led to this, can you tell me what’s been going on for you lately.” Unless someone is in danger of immediate death or serious harm, it sounds much better to say I want to listen to you rather than you need to see a shrink. Taking the time to listen to some of the story shows you care.

After you have shown empathy and listened to a little of their story then you can look at solving some of the problems.

Some people ask, “What do I do if they cry in front of me?” Well they cry and you give them a tissue. Preferably a clean one; a used one will almost certainly make them feel worse. ☺

We need to become comfortable with people crying in front of us. It is okay for people to express their emotions. Sometimes people will apologise and say I am so sorry for doing this. You need to say something like “Please don’t apologise, we all have rough patches in our lives, I am so glad that we are here now and that we are talking.”

Other people won’t know what to say, so you need to let them know that silences are okay too. In western society, we’re taught that long pauses or awkward silences are really bad in a conversation. Sometimes people are so overwhelmed they don’t know what to say. Well, if someone has a long pause, you don’t need to fill that. You can just say, "It's okay. Take all the time you need. That's absolutely fine". Often after people have had time to think they say something important.

What can I say?

Many people want to know “What is the right thing to say.” Well there often isn’t one sentence that will fix everything. But you can start by saying “I am so glad you told me that.”

Sometimes in other situations, there are things you can say that can make a big difference. A young man rang me once and told me he owed a phone company \$7000. He thought he would never be able to pay this back. I listened for a while then I said worst case scenario do you know you can be declared legally bankrupt and the debt can be wiped? He said he had never heard of this. Once he knew there was the possibility of having the debt wiped his suicidal thoughts went away. So sometimes there are things you can say that can change a person’s mind, but more often than not there isn’t anything you can say but listening really helps.

Safety plan

If they have just said “Yes, I want to die” you need to make sure that you are safe. If you are not safe, then you need to get out of the situation and call for help immediately, probably the emergency services, e.g. 911 in America, 111 in New Zealand.

If you are safe you need to make a safety plan to keep the person alive. I can’t fully talk you through a crisis plan as each situation is different. If you aren’t sure what to do you can ring a local suicide crisis line (Google suicide crisis line in your area, most are toll-free so you don’t need credit on your phone) and you can ask for advice.

If the person is in danger of immediate death or serious harm you need to call an ambulance or the police. The only exception to this could be in countries where police shoot first and ask questions later.

I have only needed to call the police on three people who were about to die right in front of me. All of them were furious at the time and said you F#\$%ing... However, all of them thanked me eventually; one thanked me that night, one thanked me a week later and one thanked me a few months later. So, in the long term they will be grateful, but they may be very angry at the time. Calling the emergency services may be especially necessary if the person is under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or they are experiencing a psychotic episode.

In most cases you don’t need to call the emergency services you can talk to them, listen and then help them to find help.

Confidentiality

If someone says, I will only tell you if you promise not to tell anyone, you should say, I won’t tell anyone what you tell me unless I think you or some else is in danger. As far as I’m aware, this has not stopped anyone speaking up. If you have to

break their confidentiality to keep them alive, so be it, human life is more important than confidentiality.

Does asking give people ideas?

Some people worry that if someone is not suicidal and you ask them this question it may give them ideas to try suicide. Research is very clear, asking does not give people ideas. Asking either has no effect on them or it decreases their suicidal thoughts.¹

What should I do if I'm not sure?

Some people will ask do I need to be certain that they are suicidal before I ask. One of the problems is that many people ask for help without directly saying they are suicidal. If you are not sure whether someone is suicidal or not it is better to ask and be safe rather than sorry. I've asked thousands of people this question, as far as I'm aware no one was offended when I asked, they were glad I asked and understood why I did it.

Is it a joke?

One day a woman laughingly said to me "Well I'm going to go kill myself now." As she was laughing, I was almost certain it was a joke. I stopped her and said, "Do you really mean that?" She stopped laughing, her face turned very serious and said yes. She was planning to end her life that day. I got her some help and she is still alive today. Sometimes people laugh when they are nervous or uncomfortable, it doesn't always mean they are joking. So, it is always better to be safe than sorry.

Will they tell the truth?

I often get asked, if someone is suicidal will they tell the truth. I have asked thousands of people this question and as far as I am aware only one person has lied to me. This person did not die by suicide, but I later found out they were suicidal.

Everyone else has given me an honest answer. It seems to be one of those questions that gets a really honest answer. Some nod their head very slowly, but for many, it is a relief to be able to tell someone.

Finding more support

Later in the book, I have a whole chapter on finding help. So, I'll leave most of that for then, but there is one point I want to make here. If someone has said "yes" they are suicidal you should not leave them alone until more help comes. If you do need to tell a family member, you do need to be careful who you tell. If you tell someone who doesn't understand or who will be angry then that might make it worse. I often say "You've just told me you are planning to kill yourself, I don't think you are safe. We need to tell someone else, is there anyone you would like me to tell?" Sometimes you need to specifically list out people such as a partner, brother, sister, mum, dad, aunt or uncle.... If possible, you should let them choose someone who they feel comfortable telling. Sometimes when I work with teenagers I ask about their parents and they pause and think. Often when I see the pause I say would you like me to tell them. They usually say yes. Sometimes the reason they don't want to tell someone is they don't know how to tell them.

Self-care

Many kind and caring people will want to help the person on their own. It's important to know that this is a huge responsibility and it is not something any one person should have to carry on their own. All the doctors and psychiatrists I've worked with never take the responsibility solely on themselves either. After you have helped someone who may be suicidal, you need to think about what impact this has had on

you. You might think, "Well, surely I don't need help. That person was worse off than me." It's important to know if this has affected you in any way, shape, or form, then you can get help, too.

References

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ⁱ Dazzi, T., Gribble, R., Wessely, S., & Fear, N. T. (2014). "Does asking about suicide and related behaviours induce suicidal ideation? What is the evidence?" *Psychological medicine*, 44(16), 3361-3363.