Mental Health

Helping Someone in Crisis

If a family member or friend is in crisis, one of the most helpful things you can do is get that person access to professional medical care. If you think someone is suicidal, seek help immediately. Either get him or her to the nearest hospital emergency room or call 911. Do not leave the person alone. Don't let the person have access to weapons or anything else that could inflict harm, including medications or poisons. Trust your instincts, but if you are unsure whether someone you care about is suicidal, call a suicide help line such as 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline offers guidance on how to help someone who is threatening suicide. Some of the recommendations include:

- Stay calm and try not to overreact.
- Keep the person away from items they could use to hurt themselves.
- Listen to the person and accept what he or she is saying and feeling in a nonjudgmental fashion.
- Don't agree to keep the crisis a secret or to aid them in any way in hurting themselves. Try to get them to agree to seek professional help, and offer to assist in finding that help.
- Talk honestly and openly about suicide with the person, but be careful not to debate the rights and wrongs or morals of suicide.
- Tell them how much they mean to you and what you will do to support them. Also reassure them that they can and will get out of this crisis.

There are signs that someone might be suicidal, or at the very least be going through a depressive or mixed depressive and manic episode. There is, however, no surefire way to predict whether someone will actually attempt suicide. What's more, people do sometimes commit suicide without ever displaying symptoms.

A full list of the symptoms of depression—which substantially increases a person's risk for attempting or committing suicide—is covered here. They include, among other things, persistent sadness, guilt and feelings of self-hatred, withdrawal from family and friends, as well as physical symptoms such as change in appetite and sleep patterns. People experiencing a mixed manic and

depressive episode may be at particularly increased risk of suicide. Such states include the typical features of depression, including low mood and poor self-worth, combined with restlessness and agitation.

Other signs that a person might be contemplating suicide include:

- Talking or writing about death and dying, including writing a will
- Expressing feelings of being trapped and hopeless, that their negative circumstances and feelings will never change
- Acting recklessly and impulsively
- Quitting activities that they used to enjoy or that contributed to goals for their future

Paradoxically, a person might actually appear to be more happy and calm in the days or weeks before a suicide attempt. This may be due, in part, to the belief on their part that suicide will mean an end to painful feelings and circumstances.

The most important thing to remember is to take suicide seriously. Whenever people hint that they want to hurt themselves, take them at their word. Don’t assume they’re just looking for attention. Up to 75 percent of people who ultimately commit suicide exhibit symptoms beforehand, and many try to tell others their plans.

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