

HOW TO HELP A SUICIDAL PERSON - CRISIS

First, ask the person directly. For a long time there was a myth that if you asked a person about suicide, you were putting the idea into their mind. Research shows this is not true. Suicidal thoughts and feelings need to be brought out into the light, into the open so that they can be examined. The person will usually feel a sense of relief at being able to talk about their thoughts and feelings. You can ask the question in ways such as:

- “I am very concerned about you. From what you have said, you are feeling hopeless. Have you been thinking about suicide?”
- “You have said there’s no point. Does that mean you are thinking about ending your life?”
- “You are telling me you don’t want to go on living. Have you been thinking about killing yourself?”

The question needs to be direct, you need to be very clear about what you are dealing with. If you ask “are you thinking of hurting yourself,” they may say no because suicide is ending the pain for them. My experience has been if a person is suicidal, they will be honest with you. I believe inherent within us as humans is the will to survive. Sometimes this has been overwhelmed by the pain of life’s circumstances and may be fairly deeply buried, but it is there. So an important part of helping a suicidal person is restoring hope, to help them to believe there is help available and they won’t always feel as they do now.

A sentence that expresses hopefulness and yet does not deny the reality of their current experience may be something like “I know it feels like you are in a big black hole and you will never get out, but people have been where you are and they have gotten help and they have gotten better.” Many survivors of suicide have written about how grateful they are to have survived, and how they have gone on to live happy and fulfilling lives. I highly recommend giving the person a copy of inspirational books such as “Life without Limits” by Nick Vujicic.

If the person says yes, the second most important thing is they are not left alone while they are feeling suicidal. If you can’t stay with them, arrange for a friend or family member that can. Having someone with them is a protective factor.

Thirdly, seek *immediate* professional help. Ask the person if they have any kind of support in place - a psychologist, counsellor, psychiatrist or mental health worker. As much as possible, allow them to decide who they want to get help from. Empower them to get the help they need. If they don’t have someone to support them, you can take them to a hospital emergency department, or call the local mental health crisis team. In Australia you can call an ambulance to have them taken to hospital if there is a high risk of suicide.

Often a suicidal person will have kept their feelings to themselves and so it is important to listen actively and provide opportunity for them to talk about the problems or circumstances that are creating their emotional distress. “They need the opportunity to talk about their feelings and their reasons for wanting to die and may feel great relief at being able to do this.”ⁱ

Normalise the feelings that the person is experiencing, let them know thoughts of suicide are common, but that they do not need to be acted on. “A national survey of Australians aged 16 - 85 found that 3.2% had attempted suicide at some time in their life and 0.4% had attempted suicide in the past year.”ⁱⁱ

Further information on helping someone who is suicidal can be found at:

http://www.helpguide.org/mental/suicide_prevention.htm

ⁱKitchener BA, Jorm AF, Kelly CM. Mental Health First Aid Manual. 2nd ed. Melbourne: Mental Health First Aid Australia; 2010

ⁱⁱKitchener BA, Jorm AF, Kelly CM. Mental Health First Aid Manual. 2nd ed. Melbourne: Mental Health First Aid Australia; 2010 (2007 Australian National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing)