

Caring for someone who is suicidal



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Why do people attempt suicide?

Suicidal people feel that they can no longer cope with their problems and feel that suicide is the only way out. There may be a trigger incident prior to the attempt. The suicidal person's feelings usually result from their perception that their life is a never ending downward spiral. Even if they seem to have a lot going for them, they may feel powerless to live up to their own expectations of themselves.

They feel hopeless, helpless and worthless. They can't feel the love, support, acceptance of friends and relatives. They often hide their pain from those who care and those who can help.

A recent theory suggests that people kill themselves when they i) felt a burden on others ii) felt they didn't belong and had acquired the ability having been exposed to previous painful experiences which may include previous attempts. Joiner (2005)

Is there anything we can do?

While society can offer help and support, ultimately it is the suicidal person who has to choose to accept help; to choose life over death. But when a loved one is hurting we want to step in and “fix it”.

BECAUSE WE CARE WE CAN'T JUST WALK AWAY...OR STAND BY HELPLESSLY...

With suicide, real change only begins when the suicidal person begins to believe there is hope and help. While our direct “take charge and fix it” actions are not likely to be effective, we don't need to back away completely. We can provide networks of caring and support for both ourselves and the suicidal person.

Three important initial steps;

- Show you care – offer support, let them know you care.
- Ask the question – don't be afraid to discuss suicide. Asking about suicide won't put the idea in the person's head.
- Get help

What can help?

1. Obtain immediate help for the crisis

If the person is currently suicidal, telephone their doctor or take the person to the A&E Department. If you are not satisfied with the results, go back to their doctor or other organisations (see back for a list) but keep trying. Remember you can call Lifeline 24 hours for help for yourself and the person you are caring for 0808 808 8000.

However sometimes you find out about an attempted suicide long after the event, via an old suicide note, or a casual comment. The person who attempted suicide is not currently in crisis – but now you probably are! You need help too. You don't know what to do, where to start. And because of the perceived stigma of suicide, you may feel it is not OK to turn to family, friends or church for emotional support and information. You feel desperately alone.

Contact one of the organisations on the resources list to get immediate emotional support, to help you to come to grips with the situation, to guide you on how to approach the suicidal person, and to help you find further support and information.

2. Get the person to a Doctor

Prior to the appointment, alert the doctor to the suicide issue, so he/she will look for depression or other medical issues that might be contributing to the person's current problems. If possible, give the doctor information which might help provide a broader picture and also help the doctor to see past the "happy face" a suicidal person often wears: comments by teachers, friends, employers, the person's own writings e.g. school records, etc.

If their doctor is unaware of specialised resources, you can help make them aware of some of the organisations you know about.

3. Prepare a network of support for the suicidal person

While respecting the suicidal person's right to privacy, develop a "caring community" of resources, this may include Doctors, Counsellors, select friends and colleagues who will not only watch for suicide signs, but includes people whom the suicidal person might be likely to trust and feel safe to share their pain with.

Be aware that suicidal thoughts / behaviour can reoccur. The Concerned About Suicide leaflet will help identify suicide warning signs. Learn who to contact and what to do if there is another suicide attempt.

4. Learn new ways to respond

Living with a person who has attempted suicide is difficult. They can be loving and “up” and fine and maybe they are, - but they can also seem happy even when they aren’t. When they are hurting, they may not know how to ask for help, so they “ask” by acting out, or withdrawing and then rebuff your offers to talk or help.

You may feel like you’re walking a tightrope – you don’t know when to reach out, and when to stand back. You, your friends and relatives may have conflicting views about what to do. Normal boundary setting or everyday differences may now be terrifying. Maintaining too high expectations, ignoring the problem, giving in continually, or allowing yourself to become victimized is not healthy for you nor helpful to the suicidal person.

There are difficult decisions to make and as a loving parent/partner you want to make the best choices, GET HELP to learn new ways to respond and help you understand the options that are available.

Some people who care for a loved one who is suicidal have found it very helpful to attend an ASIST (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training) workshop. Details of workshops are included in the resources list.

5. Self-Care is essential at a time like this.

People living in long term high stress or uncontrollable situations, such as this, are prime targets themselves for clinical depression, stress aggravated physical ailments (like arthritis, stroke and heart attack) and have diminished ability to effectively manage family, relationship and work issues.

If you feel your own life is out of control, it is more difficult to provide a positive framework for someone else in crisis.

Techniques like eating right, exercising, balancing work and play can help, but are only a start. Serious attention to your own physical and emotional health is imperative.

Share your situation with a family doctor who can provide proper support and referral. Tackle family, marital and work issues by taking advantage of community resources or your company's Personnel / Human Resources Department. – This is what they are for!

Find that special friend to share your pain. Explore meditation, spiritual retreats, self help courses, support groups, reading or music to find your inner peace and strength.

The important thing is that you find safe places and safe people willing to support you on this difficult journey.

Suicide Facts

You are not alone. While suicide may not have the same visibility as AIDS or cancer, you probably have a friend or relative who has lost someone to suicide:

- All groups in Irish society experience loss through suicide.
- The suicide rate on the Island of Ireland was traditionally low but is now around the European average.
- More men take their own lives than women by as many as 4 male suicide deaths to 1 female suicide death
- Suicide is the leading cause of death in young people.
- There is no single cause for suicide.
- Anyone of us could potentially become suicidal
- Between 10-14% of people who attempt suicide go on to complete.

Between 25-40% of those who complete suicide have made a previously known attempt. A suicide attempt is a stronger predictor of potential suicide than known depression, a substance abuse history, failed exam stress, etc.

We can make a difference

1. In a positive sense, following a suicide attempt, the person has the opportunity to become aware that help is available.
2. Many people who accept help following a suicide attempt are able to untangle the puzzle causing them to feel suicidal and learn new coping skills which reduce the likelihood of further attempts.
3. Many of those who initially refuse help after a suicide attempt accept help at a later date. Don't give up.
4. To educate yourself about issues that contribute to suicidal behaviour, contact some of the organisations on the resource list.

Tips from Professionals

- A suicidal person is ambivalent – things seem hopeless, but a part of them wants to find a better way to live.
- Continue to gently remind the suicidal person that there are other options than suicide.
- Educate your support systems; start by showing them this leaflet

Note: This leaflet has been customized with permission from and credit to SAFER and the Reed J. Ball Memorial Fund.

For parents, partners, family members and close friends of someone who has attempted suicide or feels suicidal.

Prepared by a parent who lived with a suicidal child, in collaboration with SAFER, the Suicide Counselling Service of the Greater Vancouver Mental Health Service Society. 300-2425 Quebec St., Vancouver B. C., Canada, V5T 4L6 (604)879-9251

Carer's Bill of Rights

I have the right to take care of myself. This is not an act of selfishness. It will give me the capability of taking better care of my relative.

I have the right to seek help from others even though my relatives may object. I recognise the limits of my own endurance and strength.

I have the right to maintain facets of my own life that do not include the person I care for, just as I would if he or she were healthy. I know that I do everything that I reasonably can for this person, and I have the right to do some things just for myself. I have the right to get angry, be depressed and express other difficult feelings occasionally.

I have the right to reject any attempts by my relative (either conscious or unconscious) to manipulate me through guilt and/or depression.

I have the right to receive consideration, affection, forgiveness and acceptance from my loved one for what I do, for as long as I offer these qualities in return.

I have the right to take pride in what I am accomplishing and to applaud the courage it has sometimes taken to meet the needs of my relative.

I have the right to protect my individuality and my right to make a life for myself that will sustain me in the time when my relative no longer needs my help.

Resource Ideas

Most of us feel Stressed, Anxious, Worried or Afraid from time to time

We may also have experiences that are very difficult to cope with.

Doing something positive can make all the difference for you and others.

Accepting who you are

Our beliefs, background, culture, religion, sexuality and experiences make us who we are. Everyone is entitled to respect, including you.

Talking about it

Most people feel isolated and overwhelmed by their problems sometimes – it can help to share your feelings. If you feel there is no one to talk to you could call a helpline.

Keeping in touch with friends

You don't have to be strong and struggle on alone. Friends are important, especially at difficult times. Keep in touch.

Getting involved

Meeting new people and getting involved in things can make all the difference for you and others.

Keeping active

Regular exercise really helps if you're feeling depressed or anxious. It can give you more energy too. Find something you enjoy – sport, swimming, walking, dancing or cycling.

Drinking in moderation

Drinking alcohol to deal with problems will only make things worse. It's best to drink in moderation and avoid binges, but if you're worried about your drinking speak to a doctor.

Learning new skills

Learning a new skill can increase your confidence – whether it's for pleasure or to make new friends.

Doing something creative

All kinds of creative things can help if you are anxious or low. They can also increase your confidence. Music, writing, painting, drawing, poetry, cooking, gardening – experiment to find something you enjoy.

Relaxing

Try and make time for yourself. Fit things into your day that help you unwind – reading, listening to music, prayer or mediation – whatever you enjoy or find relaxing.

Asking for help

Everyone needs help from time to time. It's ok to ask for help, even though it feels difficult – whether it's from friends or family, or from your local doctor, practice nurse, support group, faith community or helpline.

Surviving

When times are difficult, it is sometimes all we can do to survive. Take one day at a time and don't be too hard on yourself. Take time out if you need it.

Resources

Lifeline 0808 808 8000

For anyone in Northern Ireland no matter what age who is in distress or despair. Lifeline is available 24 hours a day 7 days a week.

Lifeline also gives support and guidance to families and carers, concerned friends, professionals, teachers, youth workers, clergy and communities.

Calls to Lifeline are free from all landlines and mobiles.

Hopeline 0800 684 141

Hopeline UK is a confidential helpline service staffed by trained professionals who can give SUPPORT, PRACTICAL ADVICE AND INFORMATION to anyone concerned that a young person may be at risk of harming themselves.

The helpline is open Monday – Friday from 10am – 5pm and 7pm – 10pm and 2pm – 3pm on weekends.

Calls are free from BT landlines, other networks and mobiles may vary.

- It may be cheaper for you to call HOPELINE UK on this number 01978 367 333
- The helpline advisors will call you back if you leave a message.

Who can call:-

- Concerned friends
- Academic / pastoral staff
- Ancillary staff
- Relatives

The helpline also accepts calls from emotionally distressed young people.

**CAUSE for Mental Health:
Carers Helpline 0845 603 0291**

Cause provides a helpline, carer advocacy, support groups and educational training and respite courses.

Helpline

- Open 9am to 9pm every day of the year
- Answered by experienced carers
- A confidential service
- Local call rates

Samaritans 08457 90 90 90
www.samaritans.org.uk

24 hours a day
Confidential emotional support helpline for anyone in a crisis.

Further Reading

Title: Children who don't want to live

Author(s): Orbach, Israel.

Sub-Title: understanding and treating the suicidal child

Edition:

Series: Jossey-Bass Social and Behavioral Science Series Jossey-Bass social and behavioral science series

Price: £25.99 (12 Apr 08)

Publisher:

Jossey-Bass,

ISBN: 9781555420765 (1555420761) Hardback

Publication Date: 22 May 06

Status: In Print (12 Apr 08)

Title: A parent's guide to childhood and adolescent depression

Author(s): Shapiro,Patricia Gottlieb

Series: The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia series

Publisher:

Dell Pub

ISBN: 9780440506331 (0440506336) Paperback

Status: In Print (08 Oct 05)

Suicide: The Forever Decision...for Those Thinking About Suicide, and for Those Who Know, Love, or Counsel Them

Publisher: Crossroad/Herder & Herder (Jun 1993)

The International Handbook of Suicide and Attempted Suicide

by Keith Hawton (2000)

Why People Die By Suicide

by Thomas Joiner (2005)

