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Supporting Someone at Risk: Suicide and Self-Harm Awareness

If you or someone you know is in crisis or having thoughts of self-harm, please reach out for immediate support. Call 9-1-1 for emergency services, contact 9-8-8 (Suicide Crisis Helpline), or text a crisis service right away. You do not have to face this alone.

If reading this article feels overwhelming at any point, it's okay to pause, take a break, or return to it later. Please take care of yourself and reach out for support if needed.

Suicide can affect every part of a person's life, including relationships, families, workplaces, and communities. The impact often reaches far beyond the individual, leaving loved ones, coworkers, friends, and communities carrying grief, confusion, guilt, or unanswered questions long after the crisis has passed. For many people, suicide is difficult to talk about. Conversations around emotional pain, mental health, or thoughts of suicide may feel uncomfortable, overwhelming, or frightening. Yet avoiding these conversations can make it harder for people to receive support when they need it most.

For many individuals, suicidal thoughts can emerge during periods of intense emotional pain, hopelessness, exhaustion, trauma, loneliness, or distress that feels too heavy to carry alone. During these moments, it may become harder to see a way forward or imagine things could improve. Supportive conversations, compassionate intervention, and access to professional help can make a meaningful difference.

In this article, we'll explore common risk factors and warning signs associated with suicide and self-harm, ways to support someone experiencing emotional distress, and practical strategies that can help foster connection, safety, and hope.

Different Life Experiences and Cultural Expectations

People's experiences with emotional pain, mental health, and suicide can be shaped by many factors, including culture, identity, family dynamics, community expectations, religion, discrimination, financial stress, past trauma, and access to support. For some individuals, conversations about mental health or suicide may feel especially difficult because they were taught to keep emotions private, stay strong for others, avoid burdening family members, or handle challenges on their own.

In some communities, suicide and mental health challenges may carry significant stigma or be viewed as something that should not be discussed openly. Fear of judgment, shame, discrimination, community reactions, or concerns about being misunderstood can sometimes make it harder for people to talk about suicidal thoughts or seek support. Some individuals may worry they will be seen as weak, attention-seeking, or incapable if they admit they are going through a difficult time.

For some people, these beliefs can become internalized over time, making it harder to recognize when support is needed or to believe they deserve help in the first place. As a result, emotional pain may remain hidden until distress becomes overwhelming or reaches a crisis point.

Experiences of racism, discrimination, bullying, financial hardship, isolation, gender-based violence, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, or intergenerational trauma can also affect mental well-being and a person's sense of safety, belonging, or hope. At the same time, culture, community, spirituality, identity, and connection can be important sources of strength, resilience, healing, and support.

Recognizing that emotional distress and that help-seeking may look different from person to person can help create more compassionate conversations and reduce assumptions about what someone may be experiencing internally.

Work, Stress, and Emotional Well-Being

Work can be an important source of purpose, connection, routine, and financial stability. Yet, ongoing stress, emotional exhaustion, workplace conflict, job insecurity, or high-pressure environments can affect mental well-being over time.

Some occupations may involve additional challenges, such as exposure to trauma, emotional labour, public scrutiny, shift work, long hours, or physically demanding work. People working in helping professions such as healthcare, education, emergency services, caregiving environments, customer service, or leadership roles may carry stress that gradually builds over time.

For others, stress may come from balancing work with caring for children or aging family members, financial strain, family challenges, discrimination, chronic illness, or uncertainty about the future. Even positive life changes, such as starting a new job, becoming a parent, moving, or taking on new responsibilities, can sometimes feel emotionally overwhelming. When stress becomes chronic and support feels out of reach, it can gradually affect sleep, relationships, emotional regulation, coping abilities, and overall mental well-being.

Over time, some people may begin to feel emotionally exhausted, disconnected, hopeless, or trapped in patterns they no longer know how to manage. Creating space for support, rest, meaningful connection, and open conversations about mental health can encourage people to seek help earlier.

Understanding Suicide Risk Factors

Suicide is complex and rarely caused by one single event or circumstance. In many cases, suicidal thoughts develop through a combination of emotional, psychological, social, physical, and environmental factors.

Understanding risk factors can help identify when someone may need additional support.

Mental health challenges

Conditions such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, bipolar disorder, substance use disorders, or unresolved trauma can increase suicide risk, particularly when someone feels isolated or unsupported. Mental health conditions can affect how people view themselves, their future, and their ability to cope.

Feelings of hopelessness or being trapped

Hopelessness is one of the strongest indicators of suicide risk. Someone may feel emotionally overwhelmed, believe things will never improve, or feel trapped in pain with no clear way forward.

People experiencing hopelessness may say things like:

- “Nothing is ever going to get better.”
- “I can’t do this anymore.”
- “Everyone would be better off without me.”
- “What’s the point?”

Even when these comments seem casual or indirect, they should be taken seriously.

Substance use

Alcohol and drug use can lower inhibitions, increase impulsivity, and intensify emotional distress. Some people may use substances to numb emotional pain, avoid traumatic memories, or cope with stress.

Isolation and disconnection

Feeling disconnected from others can increase vulnerability during difficult periods. Isolation may happen gradually. Someone who once engaged with friends, family, coworkers, or activities they enjoyed may begin withdrawing socially or emotionally.

Previous suicide attempts or self-harm

A previous suicide attempt or history of self-harm can increase future risk. Ongoing support and professional care remain important, even if the crisis appears to have passed.

Chronic pain or ongoing health challenges

Living with chronic physical pain, chronic illness, disability, or ongoing emotional distress can affect a person's sense of hope and quality of life.

Access to lethal means

Easy access to firearms, medications, or other lethal means can increase risk during moments of crisis or impulsivity. Reducing access during high-risk periods can help create time and space for support and intervention.

Recognizing Warning Signs

People experiencing suicidal thoughts do not always openly ask for help, which is why noticing changes in mood, behaviour, or emotional well-being can matter. Warning signs are not always obvious. Some people speak directly about suicide, while others hide their distress or try to appear fine.

Emotional warning signs

Someone may appear:

- Hopeless or emotionally overwhelmed
- More anxious, irritable, or agitated than usual
- Emotionally numb or disconnected
- Intensely guilty, ashamed, or self-critical
- Sad, withdrawn, or persistently exhausted

Behavioural warning signs

You may notice:

- Withdrawal from friends, family, coworkers, or activities
- Loss of interest in routines or hobbies
- Increased substance use
- Risk-taking or reckless behaviour
- Changes in sleep or appetite
- Giving away belongings or money
- Increased absences or difficulty managing responsibilities
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions

Verbal warning signs

Some people directly mention suicide, while others communicate distress indirectly. Statements may include:

- "I feel like a burden."
- "I'm tired of fighting."
- "People would be better off without me."
- "I don't see a way out."
- "Soon this won't matter anymore."

Any mention of suicide, hopelessness, or wanting to disappear should be taken seriously.

Sudden mood changes

A sudden shift from severe distress to calmness can sometimes signal increased risk, particularly if someone has decided on a plan or feels a sense of resignation.

Planning or preparing

Warning signs may also include researching suicide methods, collecting medications or weapons, writing goodbye messages, or making unusual preparations.



What to Say When You're Worried About Someone

Many people worry that talking about suicide will make things worse or put the idea into someone's mind. Research shows this is not true. You do not need to have perfect words or all the answers. What matters most is approaching the conversation with empathy, openness, and care.

Choose a private, calm moment

If possible, talk somewhere quiet and free from interruptions. Try to create a space where the person feels emotionally safe.

Lead with concern, not judgment

You might say:

- "I've noticed you don't seem like yourself lately, and I'm worried about you."
- "You've been carrying a lot. How are you doing really?"
- "You do not have to go through this alone."

Avoid criticizing, minimizing, or pressuring the person to "stay positive."

Listen more than you speak

Sometimes people need space to talk openly without being interrupted or immediately reassured. Try to listen calmly and attentively, even if what they share feels difficult to hear.

Ask directly about suicide

If you are concerned, it is okay to ask directly and calmly about what the person is experiencing. Some people may openly describe suicidal thoughts, while others may talk more indirectly about not wanting to be here anymore, wishing they could go to sleep and not wake up, or feeling like people would be better off without them. Taking these comments seriously can help create space for support and connection.

You might ask:

- "Are you thinking about suicide?"
- "Have you been having thoughts about not wanting to be here?"
- "Have you been feeling like you don't want to wake up or keep going?"

Asking clearly and compassionately does not increase suicide risk. Instead, it can help the person feel safer talking honestly about what they are experiencing.

It can also help to avoid language that may feel dismissive, vague, or judgmental, such as "You're not thinking of doing

something stupid, are you?" or asking only about "hurting yourself," which may be interpreted differently by different people. Using calm, direct, and supportive language can help reduce confusion and encourage more open conversations.

Stay grounded and avoid panic

If someone says yes, try to remain calm. Reacting with shock, anger, or panic may make them feel more isolated or ashamed.

You can say:

- "Thank you for telling me."
- "I'm really glad you shared this with me."
- "You do not have to handle this alone."

Supporting Someone Through a Difficult Moment

When someone is experiencing suicidal thoughts, your support can help them stay connected to safety and care.

Encourage professional support. Encouraging someone to connect with a mental health professional, physician, crisis line, peer support program, or another trusted source of support can be an important step. During periods of emotional overwhelm, even small tasks can feel exhausting or difficult to manage. Offering practical support, such as helping someone look up resources, sitting with them while they make a phone call, accompanying them to an appointment, or checking in afterward, can help reduce some of the barriers to reaching out.

Reduce isolation. People experiencing suicidal thoughts often feel disconnected from others. Regular check-ins, even brief ones, can remind someone that they matter and that support is available. A simple message like "Thinking about you today," "How are things feeling right now?" or "I'm here if you want to talk" can help maintain connection during difficult moments.

Encourage small, manageable steps. During emotional crisis, focusing on immediate needs and small coping strategies may feel more manageable than trying to solve everything at once. Encouraging someone to rest, eat something nourishing, take slow breaths, spend a few moments outside, reach out to one trusted person, or attend one support appointment can help create a sense of stability and care. Small steps are still meaningful progress.

Focus on immediate safety. If someone has a plan, immediate intent, or access to lethal means, take the situation seriously. Stay with them if possible and contact emergency services, a crisis team, or 9-8-8 for immediate guidance and support.

Coping Strategies During Emotional Overwhelm

When emotional pain becomes intense, it can make it harder for a person to see options clearly. During these moments, focusing on immediate coping and grounding strategies may help reduce distress enough to create space for support and safety.

Different strategies work for different people, but some helpful approaches may include:

- Reaching out to someone safe and trusted
- Focusing on the next hour instead of the distant future
- Spending time in a comforting or familiar environment
- Using grounding exercises, such as noticing five things you can see, hear, or feel
- Limiting access to substances that may increase impulsivity
- Taking a break from overwhelming news, social media, or stressful situations
- Writing thoughts down instead of carrying them internally
- Practicing slow breathing or calming routines
- Allowing emotions to exist without judging yourself for having them

For some people, simply hearing that their pain matters and that they deserve support can be deeply meaningful.

Taking Care of Yourself While Supporting Others

Supporting someone through suicidal ideation can be emotionally difficult. You may feel fear, helplessness, sadness, guilt, or pressure to say the “right” thing. Remember that you are not responsible for fixing someone’s pain on your own. Supporting someone should not come at the expense of your own well-being.

Consider:

- Talking with a trusted friend, support person, or mental health professional
- Taking breaks and prioritizing rest
- Setting healthy emotional boundaries
- Accessing workplace or community support programs
- Recognizing your own emotional reactions without judgment

Caring for yourself allows you to continue showing up with compassion and steadiness.



Creating Connection and Reducing Stigma

Suicide prevention is not only about responding during a crisis. It's also about creating environments where people feel safe asking for help before reaching a breaking point.

Communities, families, workplaces, and social circles can support mental well-being by:

- Encouraging open conversations about mental health
- Reducing stigma around seeking help
- Promoting connection and peer support
- Providing access to mental health resources
- Supporting healthy boundaries, rest, and recovery
- Responding compassionately when someone shares emotional pain

Small acts of care and connection matter. Checking in with someone, listening without judgment, and creating space for honest conversations can help people feel less alone during difficult periods.

Support is Available

If you or someone you know is experiencing emotional pain, hopelessness, or thoughts of self-harm, support is available. Reaching out may feel overwhelming at times, especially during moments of emotional distress, but you don't have to carry it alone. Talking to a trusted person, mental health professional, crisis line, or support service can be an important step toward support, safety, and healing.

Your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) offers confidential support and access to mental health resources. Connecting with a counsellor or mental health professional can help you explore coping strategies, process difficult emotions, and access support that feels right for your needs.

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