

Resource Pack Two

Information for carers of adults at risk of self harm or suicidal behaviour

Compiled specifically for the
Rapid Response Program



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Support services

- Designated support person: _____ Ph _____
- Lifeline: 13 11 14 (24 Hrs)
- Suicide Support Services: 1800859585 (5pm-9am weekdays, 24hrs weekends)
- Lakeside Counsellor _____ 5562 0466

OTHER RESOURCES

www.beyondblue.org.au: Australian site with information on depression

www.livingworks.org.au: Provides training for caregivers

www.sane.org: Help for sufferers of mental health difficulties, their families, and friends

www.menslineaus.org.au: 24 hr professional counselling service for men (1300 789978)

Salvo Care Line: 1300 363622

For more help lines / online support, see the "More Information" sheet included in this pack

Crisis Contacts

- Emergency ambulance: 000
- Hospital Emergency Department
 - ❖ Gold Coast Hospital: 108 Nerang St, Southport 55198211 (24hrs)
 - ❖ Robina Hospital: 2 Bayberry Lane, Robina 56686399 (24hrs)
 - ❖ Tweed Hospital: Powell Street, Tweed Heads 55067416 (24hrs)
- Acute Care Treatment Team 5519 7660

More information on phone help lines and websites (Adult)

If you need to talk to someone, find more information or find out where you can go to see someone, the numbers and websites below may be helpful.

Lifeline

- * 13 11 14 (cost of a local call)
- * www.lifeline.org.au

For urgent assistance call Lifeline 13 11 14 which is a 24-hour telephone counselling service.

The Lifeline Information Service (www.lifeline.org.au/find_help/info_service) provides access to a variety of self-help tool kits with information about issues such as mental illness, depression, panic attacks, suicide prevention etc.

The Lifeline National Service Finder (www.lifeline.org.au/find_help/service_finder) is a comprehensive online national database of low-cost or free health and community services offered throughout Australia.

beyondblue info line

- * 1300 22 4636
- * www.beyondblue.org.au

For the cost of a local call, the beyondblue info line provides callers with access to information and referral to relevant services for depression and anxiety-related matters.

MensLine Australia

- 1300 78 99 78
- www.menslineaus.org.au

MensLine Australia is a dedicated service for men with relationship and family concern

- * All men, all relationships
- * Counselling, information and referral
- * Staffed by trained professionals
- * Confidential
- * Anonymous
- * Australia-wide
- * 24/7
- * Cost of a local call (excl.mobiles)

MoodGYM

www.moodgym.anu.edu.au

MoodGym is an online treatment program, where you can learn the Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) techniques that are used to prevent and treat depression.

depressioNet

www.depressionservices.org.au

depressioNet is an independent resource for information, help and support. depressioNet offers a 24-hour email service to answer depression-related questions and help locate resources available in your area. There is also the opportunity to communicate with others via their chat room and message board.

The Black Dog Institute

www.blackdoginstitute.org.au

The Black Dog Institute website contains:

- expert information on depression and Bipolar Disorder
- information about causes and treatments
- online self-assessment tools
- a section on getting help for people experiencing depression and their carers
- a page on depression in teenagers and young adults:
www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/public/depression/inteenagersyoungadults.cfm

Anxiety Network

www.anxietynetwork.com.au

Anxiety Network Australia was established as an information, education and support resource for people all around Australia who live with anxiety disorders, their carers, relatives and health practitioners.

The Panic Anxiety Disorder Association (PADA)

www.panicanxietydisorder.org.au

The PADA website provides non-clinical information about panic/anxiety attacks, the five main anxiety disorders, prevention, self-help strategies, treatment options and membership services. A printable order form is available for the purchase of books and tapes.

BluePages

www.bluepages.anu.edu.au

For people living with depression, BluePages provides information about the illness and about its treatments (medical, psychological and alternative). It also has a bulletin board and a state-by-state list about where to get help.

Eating Disorders Foundation of Victoria

www.eatingdisorders.org.au

The Eating Disorders Foundation of Victoria is the primary source of support, information, community education and advocacy for people with eating disorders and their families in Victoria.

Centre for Clinical Interventions

- www.cci.health.wa.gov.au

CCI has developed a number of resources for consumers, mental health practitioners, and doctors, many of which are freely available through this website..

State-based Alcohol and Drug Information Services

- * ACT - (02) 6207 9977
- * QLD - 1800 177 833
- * NSW - 1800 422 599 or (02) 9361 8000
- * NT - 1800 131 350
- * SA - 1300 131 340 or (08) 8363 8618
- * VIC - 1800 888 236
- * TAS - 1800 811 994
- * WA - 1800 198 024 or (08) 9442 5000

National Cannabis Prevention and Information Centre

www.ncpic.org.au

Cannabis Information and Helpline

- * 1800 30 40 50

Druginfo Clearinghouse

- * 1300 85 85 84

Are you concerned that someone close to you is considering suicide?

Have you noticed changes in their attitude and behaviour?

Has someone you know attempted suicide?

Would you like to know how to help them keep safe?

It is distressing to realise that someone close to you may be considering suicide. This tool kit will help you identify signs to look for, decide what to do and learn what help is available.

Most people who consider suicide get through the crisis. Family, friends and professionals can make a big difference in helping people stay safe and re-establish reasons for living.

Are you yourself thinking of suicide?

You are not alone. Thoughts of suicide occur to many people and for a range of reasons. The most important thing to remember is that help is available. Talking to someone is a good place to start, even though it may seem difficult. Approach a trusted friend or call one of the 24-hour numbers listed on page five. Tell someone today!

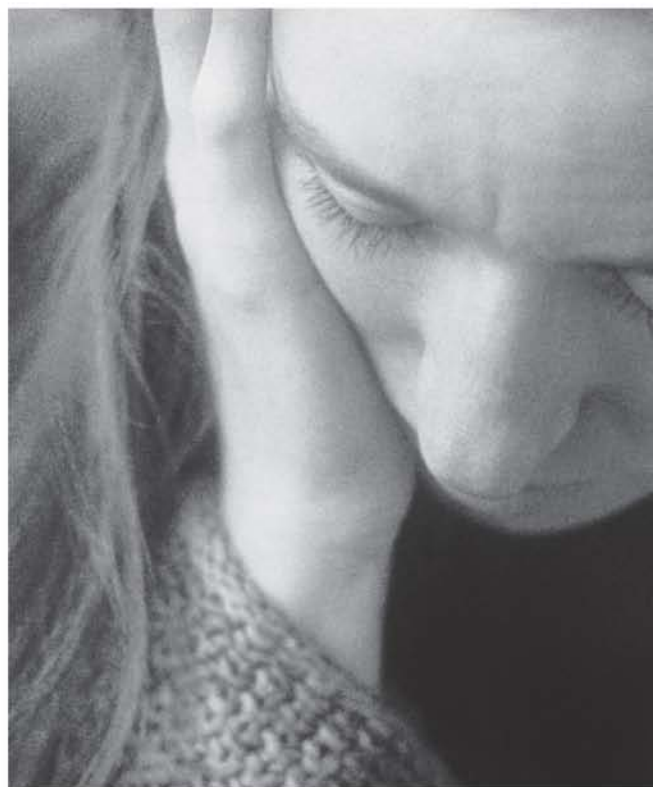
Why does someone consider suicide?

Typically, many factors are involved. It is known that mental health problems, particularly depression, can increase vulnerability to suicide. Here are some clues about what to look for.

Situations - what's happening in the person's life?

Have they experienced any life changes recently?

- Recent loss (a loved one, a job, an income/ livelihood, a pet)
- Major disappointment (failed exams, missed job promotions)
- Change in circumstances (retirement, redundancy, children leaving home)
- Mental disorder or physical illness
- Suicide of a family member, friend or a public figure
- Financial and/or legal problems



Feelings – how does the person feel about it?

Events like the above can be difficult and sometimes devastating. Most people who experience them do not consider suicide, but some do. Be aware of:

- How the person feels about what happened
- What it means to them
- Whether the pain feels bearable

Behaviours – what are they doing?

People at risk of suicide usually give clues by their behaviour. These may include:

- Previous suicide attempts
- Being moody, sad and withdrawn
- Talking of feeling hopeless, helpless or worthless
- Taking less care of themselves and their appearance
- Losing interest in things previously enjoyed
- Finding it hard to concentrate
- Being more irritable or agitated
- Talking or joking about suicide
- Expressing thoughts about death through drawings, stories, songs etc
- Saying goodbye to others and/or giving away possessions
- Engaging in risky or self-destructive behaviour
- Increasing alcohol/drug use

Mental Health

Mental health problems can increase the risk of suicide. We may not know a person's mental health history, however we may notice that a person seems depressed or anxious, and/or is misusing alcohol or other drugs. They may have told us that they are receiving treatment for a mental health problem.

Having a mental health problem does not mean a person will have thoughts of suicide – many don't. However, mental health problems can affect the way people view problems. They affect motivation and openness to seek help, therefore we need to be particularly aware of the possible risk of suicide.



People who have recently been discharged from hospital for treatment of mental health problems may also be at higher risk of suicide. It is important that they receive ongoing support in the community. You may be able to help by supporting them to attend any follow-up visits with their GP or mental health specialists.

What do I do now?

People considering suicide often feel very isolated and alone. They may feel that nobody can help them or understand their psychological pain. When unable to see any other way of dealing with pain, suicide may seem to be a way out. Sometimes people who have been distressed and openly suicidal become outwardly calm. Be aware that this may mean many things, including their quiet resolution to complete their suicide plan.

The important thing to remember is that if someone is not their usual self or if they are showing signs that arouse your concern you need to check it out. This tool kit will help you to talk to someone about suicide and then decide what steps to take.

Most people who consider suicide get through the crisis. The help and support of family, friends and professionals can make a big difference. The following tips will help you know what to do.

Tool Kit

1 Do something now

If you are concerned that someone you know is considering suicide, act promptly. Don't assume that they will get better without help or that they will seek help on their own. It's easy to avoid being part of that help, or to hope that someone else will step in. Reaching out now could save a life.

2 Acknowledge your reaction

When you realise that you need to take action to help someone who is considering suicide, your natural reaction may be to:

- Panic
- Ignore the situation and hope it will go away
- Look for quick-fix solutions to make the person feel better
- Criticise or blame the person for their feelings

These reactions are common but not helpful. It's natural to feel panic and shock but take time to listen and think before you act. Following the tips below will help you get through. If you find you're really struggling, enlist the help of a trusted friend.

3 Be there for them

Spend time with the person and express your care and concern. Ask them how they are feeling, hear their pain and listen to what's on their mind. Let them do most of the talking. Problems can seem more manageable after speaking about them.

This tool kit will help you identify signs to look for, decide what to do and learn what help is available. Most people who consider suicide get through the crisis. Family, friends and professionals can make a big difference in helping people stay safe and re-establish reasons for living.

4 Ask if they are thinking of suicide

Unless someone tells you, the only way to know if a person is thinking of suicide is to ask. Asking can sometimes be very hard but it shows that you have noticed things, been listening, that you care and that they are not on their own. Talking about suicide will not put the idea into their head but will encourage them to talk about their feelings. It opens up options for checking out risk, attending to safety and getting further help.

5 Check out their safety

If a person is considering suicide it is important to know how much thought they have put into it. Ask about the following:

- Have they thought about how and when they plan to kill themselves?
- Do they have the means to carry out their plan?
- Have they ever deliberately harmed themselves?
- What support can they access to stay safe and get help?
- How can you help them draw on links to family, friends, pets, religious convictions, personal coping strengths?

Use this information to decide what to do. If you are really worried, don't leave the person alone. Seek immediate help – see contact numbers below or phone Lifeline on 13 11 14. Remove any means of suicide available, including weapons, medications, alcohol and other drugs, even access to a car.



6 Decide what to do

Now that you have this information you need to discuss together what steps you are going to take. What you decide to do needs to take into account the safety concerns that you have. Do not agree to keep it a secret.

You may need to enlist the help of others to persuade the person to get professional help – or at least take the first steps to stay safe. These may include their partners, parents, or close friends. Only by sharing this information can you make sure that the person gets the help and support they need.

Sometimes the person at risk says they do not want help. Yet we know most people are in two minds about suicide. Make keeping them safe your first priority. Consider the long-term benefits of getting help for the person. It may mean risking the relationship but you could be saving a life.

7 Take action

The person can get help from a range of professional and supportive people:

- GP
- Counsellor, psychologist, social worker
- School counsellor, youth group leader, sports coach
- Emergency services – police and ambulance
- Mental health services
- Community health centres
- Priest, minister, religious leader
- Telephone counselling services such as Lifeline and Kids Help Line

When the person has decided who they are most willing to tell, help them prepare what they will say. Many people find it difficult to express their suicidal thoughts.

Offer to accompany the person to the appointment. After the appointment, check that they raised the issue of suicide and ask what help they were offered. Help them follow through with the recommendations.

In some situations the person may refuse to get help. While it's important that you find them the help they need, you can't force them to accept it.



You need to ensure that the appropriate people are aware of the situation. Do not shoulder this responsibility alone.

8 Ask for a promise

Thoughts of suicide often return and when they do it is important for the person to again reach out and tell someone. Asking them to promise to do this makes it more likely that it will happen. Encourage the person to promise to call you or Lifeline 13 11 14 if the suicidal thoughts return, and to do this before they harm themselves.

9 Look after yourself

If you're helping someone who is considering suicide, make sure you also take care of yourself. It is difficult and emotionally draining to support someone who is suicidal, especially over an extended period.

- Don't do it on your own. Find someone to talk to, maybe friends, family or a professional.
- Recruit other people to help support the person you are worried about.
- Get in touch with carer organisations or support groups. Contact Lifeline on 13 11 14 to find what's available in your area.
- Try not to let your concerns about the other person dominate your life. Make sure you continue to enjoy your usual activities, take time out to have fun and keep a sense of perspective.
- Contact Lifeline on 13 11 14 (24 hours a day) for support.

10 Stay involved

Thoughts of suicide do not easily disappear without the person at risk experiencing some change. Their situation, or their feelings about it, may change, or they may feel more supported and able to deal with it. In either situation, the continuing involvement of family and friends is very important. Below are some tips to ensure the person at risk continues to get the best help possible:

- Ensure the person has 24-hour access to some form of support. This may be you, other family members and friends, or Lifeline 13 11 14.
- Accompany the person to appointments if possible. Your support can be a great encouragement.
- If you are the primary carer, try to establish a good relationship with the health professionals responsible for the person's treatment. Your opinion and input is valid and may be very valuable.
- Advocate for the person. Sometimes a service or health professional may not be capable of meeting all the person's needs. You can advocate for appropriate services.



Suicidal thoughts do not easily go away on their own.

People need to see change in their life and they need help to achieve that change.

You are part of that help.

- Discuss with the person what issues or situations might trigger further suicidal thoughts. Plan how to reduce this stress and what coping strategies can be used.
- Continue to be supportive but not overprotective.

Where to get help

For immediate crisis intervention when life may be in danger ring the police on 000 or go to your local hospital emergency department

24-hour crisis telephone counselling services:

National

Lifeline..... 13 11 14

Kids Help Line..... 1800 55 1800

ACT

Crisis Assessment and Treatment Team..... 1800 629 354

New South Wales

Suicide Prevention and Crisis Intervention..... 1300 363 622

Salvo Care Line..... 02 9331 6000

Northern Territory

Crisis Line Northern Territory..... 1800 019 116

Queensland

Crisis Counselling Service..... 1300 363 622

South Australia

Mental Health Assessment and Crisis Intervention Service 13 14 65

Tasmania

Samaritans Lifelink - country..... 1300 364 566

Samaritans Lifelink - metro 03 6331 3355

Victoria

Suicide Help Line Victoria..... 1300 651 251

Western Australia

Samaritans Suicide Emergency Service - country 1800 198 313

Emergency Service - metro..... 08 9381 5555

Web sites:

www.livingisforeveryone.com.au

A site that builds community capacity for suicide prevention

www.justlook.org.au

A large online national database of low cost or free health and community services throughout Australia

www.beyondblue.org.au

An Australian site with information on depression

www.depressionnet.com.au

An on-line Australian resource on depression

www.kidshelp.com.au

A site offering telephone and email counselling for young people

www.livingworks.org.au

A site that provides training for all kinds of caregivers, increasing their ability to reach out to a person at risk

www.reachout.com.au

Information about suicide prevention for young people, families, communities and professionals

www.suicideinfo.ca

Suicide Information and Education Centre (SIEC)

Services:

Your GP (see Yellow Pages for listing)

Mental Health Team

(see Community Health Centres in the White Pages)

Counselling/Psychological Services

(see Yellow Pages for listing)

Sane Australia help line..... 1800 187 263

For help finding services, call Lifeline on 13 11 14.
or visit the web site at www.lifeline.org.au

Resources:

Beyond Suicide Attempts booklet – information for parents, foster parents and guardians following the suicide attempt of a young person. Available from the Lifeline Information Service

Survivors of Suicide – a compassionate resource developed to support people who have lost a loved one to suicide. Available from the Lifeline Information Service

Training:

ASIST - many Lifeline Centres throughout Australia provide Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) if people are looking for further training in this area. Contact LivingWorks to find an ASIST training near you, 03 9894 1833 or info@livingworks.org.au



This Tool Kit has been produced by the Lifeline Information Service as a public service. You are welcome to reproduce it without alteration.

We invite your feedback and comments at infoservice@lifeline.org.au



Prime Super is the proud sponsor of the Lifeline Information Service – your mental health and self-help resource. Prime Super is the largest not-for-profit superannuation fund dedicated to serving the needs of rural and regional Australians. For more information on Prime Super, please ring 1800 675 839 or visit their website www.primesuper.com.au. Lifeline and Prime Super are working in partnership to promote mental health awareness, help-seeking and suicide prevention.



The assistance of the Illawarra Institute for Mental Health in producing this health promotion resource is gratefully acknowledged.

Knowing the warning signs that someone is having trouble coping is important. For some people, this could result in them getting the help they need.

SUICIDE

For some people, the pressures, worries and stressful or painful events of life become so huge that they feel like they can't go on living.

Knowing the warning signs that someone, such as a friend, family member or a classmate is having trouble coping is important. For some people, this could result in them getting the help they need.

Signs that might tell you a friend or family member isn't coping include:

- Depression
- Previous suicide attempts, thinking about death all the time or talking about suicidal thoughts
- Giving away valuable personal possessions
- Problems with eating (too much or too little)
- Problems with sleeping (too much or too little)
- Withdrawal from family and friends
- Personality changes such as outbursts of anger and out of control behaviour
- Regular bad temper or unexplained crying
- A sudden improvement in mood following warning signs of suicide such as depression - this might be an indication that the person has made the final decision to commit suicide
- They tell you or write to you about their plan to commit suicide – lots of people who end up committing suicide tell someone that they intended to kill themselves

- No interest in the future or normal activities such as school and hobbies
- Behavioural problems and substance abuse

"I had been reading an article about the warning signs and risk factors for suicide. A friend of mine had been acting really different lately and as I read each of the warning signs, I realised that my friend seemed to have a lot of them. At the bottom of the article was a suggestion to ring Kids Help Line (call 1800 55 1800). So I did. They said that I should tell a parent or teacher and that they would help me to do that if necessary. So I told my parents that I was worried about my friend and showed them the article. In the end, help was obtained with a good outcome"

It's not always easy to see the signs in a friend or relative that they're not coping. Sometimes there are no warning signs at all as their appearance and personality appear 'normal'. Remember that not all suicides can be prevented, so you shouldn't feel guilty if you weren't able to help.

Now that you're more aware of the warning signs, check out the fact sheet (number 8) on **'What to do if someone you know is having trouble coping'**.

There's also heaps of false information around about youth suicide that can make it difficult for young people who are having trouble coping to get the help they need.

See over the page for some common myths about suicide.



Common myths about suicide include:

- **Suicidal behaviour is manipulative and should be ignored or even punished**
All suicidal behaviour is serious. It shows that the person isn't coping and may need help. The response of family and friends is very important to their recovery.
- **People who talk about their suicidal intentions just want attention**
Talking about suicidal intentions should be treated seriously, especially if they appear to have a plan.
- **If you are worried about a friend or a family member and you ask them if they intend to commit suicide it will "put the idea into their head"**
This is a common mistake. In reality, if you are at the point where you feel like you need to talk to that friend/family member about suicide, they are already exhibiting worrying and perhaps suicidal behaviour. Talking with them about it actually lets them know you are taking their pain seriously.
- **A friend or family member tells you of their intention to commit suicide and you agree to keep it secret**
It's important that help is sought sooner rather than later. It's more important for your friend or relative to be safe and getting them help than trying to deal with it on your own.
- **People who attempt suicide and survive will never do it again**
If a young person who has attempted suicide does not get the help they need following their attempt, or the crisis in their lives continues, they are at risk of attempting suicide again in the future.

- **If someone wants to commit suicide, nothing will stop it happening i.e. once a person is suicidal, they will be that way forever**
With the right help a young person who has attempted suicide can go on to lead a normal life.
- **A sudden improvement in the mood of someone you suspect is suicidal means the crisis is over**
In actual fact this could be an indication that the young person has made the final decision to complete suicide and feels better because of this.
- **Only mentally ill or clinically depressed people attempt suicide**
Yes, a lot of people who commit suicide have some form of mental illness, but many people go through tough times that leave them feeling like they can't cope. A more accurate sign is feelings of hopelessness or despair.
- **Suicide is hereditary**
Even though the rate of suicide is sometimes higher within families, this has more to do with family life than genetics.
- **The only people who can help someone who is suicidal are mental health professionals**
The support of friends and family members is really important when a young person is coping with crisis. Often just having someone to talk to about their problems is enough.
- **Most suicidal people never seek help for their problems**
A lot of young people who commit suicide seek help before their death. They may not be able to communicate their problems directly, but often show clear indications that they aren't coping.





Fact sheet 21

Suicide warning signs and tipping points



It is important that friends and family understand the warning signs and know what to do to help.

This fact sheet describes warning signs and tipping points for suicide, and how to respond in order to keep the person safe.

The importance of understanding suicide warning signs and tipping points

Suicide is usually the result of a complex range of factors, but it is often just one or two things that can trigger a person's actions such as making a suicide plan or finding a means to take their own life.

Most people who are thinking of taking their own life do not actually want to die but can't see any other way out of their situation. They are likely to be deeply ambivalent or confused about their suicidal thoughts or intentions and their state of mind may change rapidly in a short period of time.

The potential for suicidal behaviour exists at a certain threshold level in many people. The threshold in each person is determined by their family background, physiology, personality traits, emotional state, and family and social support systems. The warning signs and tipping points for suicide can be likened to signposts that give early warning of the potential for suicidal behaviour. Knowing the main warning signs for suicide and responding to them quickly and effectively may save someone's life. However, it must also be noted that in many cases the warning signs are not obvious and even the most skilled professionals may miss them.

What are the warning signs for suicide?

A suicide warning sign is the earliest indication that someone might be at a heightened risk of immediate suicide. A warning sign indicates that a person is having serious thoughts about taking their own life and may even be making plans to take this action.



Suicide warning signs may be a cry for help and they can provide a chance for family, friends, associates and health professionals to intervene and potentially prevent the suicide from happening.

If you notice someone acting strangely or particularly out of character it is important that you talk to them about it. The following behaviours are more common among people who are considering taking their own life:

- threatening to hurt or kill themselves;
- looking for ways to kill themselves, or talking about their suicide plan;
- talking or writing about death, dying or suicide (especially when this is out of character or unusual for the person);
- expressing feelings of hopelessness;
- expressions of rage, anger or revenge;
- engaging in reckless or risky behaviours;
- expressing feelings of being trapped, like there's no way out;
- increased use of alcohol or other drugs;
- withdrawing from friends, family or the community;
- anxiety or agitation;
- abnormal sleep patterns – not sleeping or sleeping all the time;
- dramatic changes in mood, such as sudden feelings of happiness after a long period of sadness or depression;
- giving away possessions or saying goodbye to family and/or friends; and/or
- saying they have no reason for living or have no purpose in life.

Although most people show some of these signs at some time, especially when they are tired, stressed or upset, it is better to act safely rather than not to act at all, particularly if someone is showing several of these signs at the same time. It is important to respond quickly by talking to the person and enlisting the help and support of others.

What is a tipping point?

The point at which a person's risk of taking their own life increases due to the occurrence of some precipitating event, such as a negative life event or an increase in symptoms of a mental disorder. This may be called a tipping point. Tipping points vary for every individual but there are some indicators of times at which people may be under particular stress. These indicators and tipping points can give early warning of the potential for someone to take their own life and are referred to as triggers or precipitating events. They include mental disorders or physical illnesses, alcohol and/or other substance abuse, feelings of interpersonal loss or rejection, or the experience of potentially traumatic life events (unexpected changes in life circumstances). Tipping points can be thought of as the final straw that may lead someone who has been considering suicide to take action. Examples of events and circumstances that may act as a tipping point include:

- an argument with a loved one or significant person
- the breakdown of a relationship
- the suicide of a family member, friend or public role model
- a media report about suicide
- the onset or recurrence of a mental or physical illness
- unexpected changes in life circumstances; or
- experiencing a traumatic life event, such as abuse, bullying or violence.

The diagram below shows different types of precipitating events and circumstances that are linked to the increased likelihood of suicidal behaviour (although they do not necessarily occur sequentially).

Triggers and precipitating events

Risk factors

- mental health problems
- gender – male
- family discord, violence or abuse
- family history of suicide
- alcohol or other substance abuse
- social or geographical isolation
- financial stress
- bereavement
- prior suicide attempt

Warning signs

- hopelessness
- feeling trapped – like there's no way out
- increasing alcohol or drug use
- withdrawing from friends, family or society
- no reason for living, no sense of purpose in life
- uncharacteristic or impaired judgement or behaviour

Tipping point

- relationship ending
- loss of status or respect
- debilitating physical illness or accident
- death or suicide of relative or friend
- suicide of someone famous or member of peer group
- argument at home
- being abused or bullied
- media report on suicide or suicide methods

Imminent risk

- expressed intent to die
- has plan in mind
- has access to lethal means
- impulsive, aggressive or anti-social behaviour

Responding to the warning signs and tipping points for suicide

- **Be aware** – if someone you know is showing some or all of the warning signs for suicide and/or has experienced a potential tipping point, you should act immediately to ensure their safety. Remove access to any means of suicide and do not leave the person alone. If in doubt about a person's risk of suicide, talk to them and seek help from others.
- **Assess the risk** – talk to the person who you think may be feeling suicidal and assess the situation. Does the person have a plan to take their own life? Do they have the means to carry it out? If so, the person is at a high risk of suicide and you should seek immediate help by calling 000 (police, ambulance), a health professional, or you may need to take the person to hospital. If they or you are in immediate danger, call 000 immediately. If the person is at a lower risk of suicide, talk to them about their suicidal thoughts and develop a plan together to help keep them safe (see Living Is For Everyone Fact sheet 23: I know someone who is feeling suicidal, for tips on how to help someone in need).
- **Talk to other people who know the person** you're concerned about – if you think someone may be having thoughts of suicide, talk to other people who know the person to see if they have noticed anything out of the ordinary.
- **Don't panic** – if someone you know is showing warning signs of suicide or has reached their threshold, try not to over-react. Simply talk to the person, assess the situation and respond as quickly and efficiently as possible.
- **Give the person hope** – while showing them that you understand they are feeling desperate or are in a difficult position right now, also give the person hope that help is available, that they have not always felt this bad, and that with the right help it is possible they could deal with their problems and feel better in the future.

- **Know where to go for support** – find out what support services are available in your community. Keep a list of contact details and when services are available. Provide practical help to get the suicidal person to an appropriate service. Have a backup plan if that service turns out to be not available or has a long waiting list.

Build community capacity to respond to warning signs for suicide

On a community level, strategic approaches to responding to warning signs of suicide can provide help early to the person at risk and reduce the number of people who reach crisis point.

- **Educate key community gatekeepers** – There are many people in the community, such as general practitioners, mental health workers, other health professionals, community services personnel, telephone crisis line workers, ministers of religion, local service providers, who may come in contact with people who are showing the warning signs of suicide or who have experience in dealing with these situations. It is important that local community leaders are aware of the warning signs for suicide and know how to respond appropriately.
- **Build a local suicide prevention network** – It can be helpful for people who are most likely to come in contact with people who are feeling suicidal to have a list of contact numbers for local support services. This should include local emergency services, community mental health services, hospitals, and other community-based resources, who they can contact quickly when necessary. Regularly bring representatives of these services together and implement a local suicide prevention strategy and response plan, so that everyone who needs it will get to the appropriate service more quickly and each service knows they are not being left to assist large numbers of people on their own.



More information

- American Association of Suicidology (AAS) – a broad range of information about suicide and suicide prevention including fact sheets on warning signs for suicide: www.suicidology.org
- Lifeline – 24 hour crisis counselling available across Australia:
Ph: 13 11 14; www.lifeline.org.au
- The Ministerial Council for Suicide Prevention (WA) – suicide prevention information for professionals, researchers and community members: www.mcsp.org.au
- Reach Out – a website aimed at helping young people to deal with problems and maintain their mental health and wellbeing: www.reachout.com.au
- Read the Signs – provides information about suicide, depression and other issues: www.readthesigns.com.au
- SANE Helpline – offers a wide range of information on mental illness and suicide prevention Australia:
Ph: 1800 18 SANE (7236); www.sane.org



Fact sheet 22

I don't know what to do, I don't know what to say

'My biggest problem was that I just didn't know what to say to them. In the end, I decided not to say anything. Much later I realised that I had probably caused them even more grief – not saying anything was probably the worst thing I could have done.' (Anonymous)

This fact sheet provides information on how to support and assist someone experiencing a stressful or traumatic life event.

The importance of responding to someone who is facing a crisis

The tragedies of life can often leave people speechless. How do we best respond to a friend or colleague who is experiencing the devastating effects of a sudden unexpected death, a terminal illness, financial loss or a relationship breakdown?

People respond differently to stressful events; some may feel that their trust in the world and in others has been betrayed or feel helpless, threatened, vulnerable, cheated or disbelieving about what is happening to them. To rebuild trust, they need more, not less, support from family and friends. They need to know that they are not alone, that the world has not turned against them, and that they have the support and the security they need to cope with life's challenges.

When friends and colleagues ignore or are unable to respond helpfully to someone who is having a stressful time, it can often make the situation worse.



How to support someone having a really tough time

- Say something, no matter how clumsy you may feel. If you are stuck for words, ask the person how they are feeling or even tell them 'I don't know what to say'. Don't be afraid of showing your own emotions. Remember that if you say nothing, the person may see this as rejection. Crisis and loss are very isolating – if you stay away you may well increase the person's pain and sense of loss.
- Respond carefully and thoughtfully. Don't be dismissive or flippant and be sensitive to how the person is feeling.
- Be patient – understand that everyone responds to life events in their own way and their own time. Don't try to rush someone back into their normal routine before they are ready or make someone feel guilty if they seem to be coping better than you think they should. Often the best thing you can do is listen, quietly, carefully and sympathetically, without making any judgements.
- Be sincere, accepting, supportive and loving.
- Be open and honest. Let them know that you want to be there for them.
- Offer to help with practical tasks. This can give the person a chance to get other important tasks done, spend some time dealing with their situation or give them much needed time-out. Accept that your offers of help may be refused; sometimes people find it difficult to accept support or don't want to admit that they might need help.
- Be there to listen and provide support. Let the person know that you are available to help in whatever way they need.
- Offer accurate and helpful information and resources. Often people don't know where to find the best support and information for their particular situation. If you don't know how to help, ask people who do know; go to your local health centre or doctor. Offer the information and resources as options only – don't attempt to solve their problems for them.
- Try to be supportive during especially difficult times for the person such as anniversaries, birthdays, or holidays.
- Encourage the person to seek help from other sources, such as family members, friends, their local doctor, other health professionals, support groups or community organisations. Offer to go with them if this would help.
- When assisting children or teenagers, be honest and supportive. Children and teenagers may react differently to situations than adults do. Don't judge a young person's problems as insignificant or ignore the situation and hope they'll 'get over it'. Talk to them about their situation and offer to help them find good solutions and ways to cope.
- Take care of yourself – helping someone to cope with trauma and stress can be exhausting and draining. Find some time for the things you enjoy and enlist others who can help you to support the person in need.

More information

- Australian Psychological Society – Coping With Traumatic Events available at www.psychology.org.au
- beyondblue - Practical Ways to Help Someone With Depression available at www.beyondblue.org.au; Ph: 1300 22 4636.
- Buckman R (1992). *I Don't Know What to Say...: How to Help and Support Someone Who is Dying*. Vintage Books: New York.
- HealthInsite – Coping in a Crisis: www.healthinsite.gov.au
- Healthy Place – If You Know Someone Who's Depressed: www.healthyplace.com
- Kaplan RM (2004). *How to Say It When You Don't Know What to Say: The Right Words for Difficult Times*. Prentice Hall Press: New York.
- SANE Australia – Is someone close to you bereaved by suicide? www.sane.org



Fact sheet 23

I know someone who is feeling suicidal

For immediate crisis intervention when life may be in danger, ring the police on 000 or go to your local hospital emergency department.

This fact sheet helps you to identify warning signs to look for in someone who is feeling suicidal so you can decide what to do and know what help is available.

Are you concerned that someone close to you is thinking about suicide?

It is distressing to realise that someone close to you may be thinking about taking their own life and it is often difficult to know what to say and do, and how to make sure the person is safe.

Most people who feel suicidal do recover from these intense feelings. Family, friends and health professionals can make a big difference in helping people stay safe and to find positive reasons for living.

What you might look for

Many factors are involved in someone feeling suicidal. People at risk of taking their own life often feel very isolated and alone. They may feel that nobody can help them or understand their pain. When they can't see any other way of dealing with their difficulties, suicide can seem to be the only way out.

Sometimes people who have been distressed and openly suicidal for some time become outwardly calm. Be aware that while this could be a sign of recovery it may be because the person has decided to complete their suicide plan.

If someone is not their usual self or if they are showing signs that cause you concern, you should not ignore it. You need to talk to them about how they are feeling.

Mental health problems, previous suicide attempts, and stressful or traumatic life events can increase a person's vulnerability to suicide.

The following are characteristics and occurrences that may indicate a person could be thinking about suicide.

Events – what's happening in the person's life?

Have they experienced recent life events such as:

- Diagnosis of a physical or mental illness;
- Recent loss of a loved one, a job, income or livelihood, a pet;
- Relationship breakdown, separation from children;
- Major disappointment such as failed exams, missed job promotions;
- Major change in circumstances such as retirement, redundancy, children leaving home;
- Suicide of a family member or friend, or a public role model; and/or
- Financial and/or legal problems.

Feelings – how does the person feel?

Difficult life events and changing circumstances affect each person in different ways. Most people who experience them do not consider suicide, but some do. Be aware of:

- How the person feels about what is happening to them and around them;
- What this means to them;
- Whether they are feeling stress or pain; and
- Whether the pain (physical, emotional or psychological) seems bearable.

Behaviours – what is the person doing?

People at risk of suicide usually give clues by their behaviour. These may include:

- Previous suicide attempts
- Being moody, sad and withdrawn
- Increasing their use of alcohol or other drugs
- Talking of feeling hopeless, helpless or worthless
- Taking less care of themselves and their appearance
- Losing interest in things they previously enjoyed
- Finding it hard to concentrate
- Being more irritable or agitated
- Talking or joking about suicide
- Expressing thoughts about death through drawings, stories or songs
- Saying goodbye to others and/or giving away possessions
- Leaving organised group activities such as social or hobby groups or study; and/or
- Engaging in risky or self-destructive behaviour.

What to do

Act immediately to respond to the person by following these steps:

- 1. Do something now.** Take warning signs seriously and ask the person if they are considering suicide and if they have any plans. Reaching out could save a life. Seek urgent help if it is needed by calling 000 or take the person to an emergency department of a hospital.
- 2. Acknowledge your reaction.** You might panic or want to ignore the situation. If you are struggling, enlist the help of a trusted friend.
- 3. Be there for them.** Spend time with the person, encourage them to talk about how they are feeling, identify who they can call on for support and encourage the person to agree to get further support.
- 4. Ask if they are thinking of suicide.** Talking about suicide will not put the idea into their head but will encourage them to talk about their feelings. Don't agree to keep it a secret since the person's safety is your main concern.
- 5. Check out their safety.** Ask how much thought the person has put into taking their own life. If you are really worried, don't leave the person alone. Remove any means of suicide available, including weapons, medications, alcohol and other drugs, even access to a car.
- 6. Decide what to do.** Discuss together what action to take. You may need to enlist the help of others (partners, parents, close friends or someone else) to persuade the person to get professional help. Only by sharing this information can you make sure the person gets the help and support they need.
- 7. Take action.** Encourage the person to get support from local health professionals such as:
 - GPs
 - counsellors, psychologists, social workers
 - Aboriginal Health Workers
 - school counsellors, youth workers, sports coaches
 - religious leaders
 - mental health services
 - community health centres
 - telephone and web-based counselling services
- 8. Ask for a promise.** Ask the person to promise they will reach out and tell someone if suicidal thoughts return. This will make it more likely they will seek help.
- 9. Look after yourself.** It is difficult and emotionally draining to support someone who is suicidal, don't do it on your own. Find someone to talk to, maybe friends, family, or a health professional.
- 10. Stay involved.** Thoughts of suicide do not disappear easily. The continuing involvement of family and friends is very important to the person's recovery.

People at risk of taking
their own life often feel
very isolated and alone.



Useful State and Territory contact numbers

ACT – Crisis Assessment and Treatment Team

Ph: 1800 629 354

New South Wales – Salvo Care Line

Ph: 1300 363 622

Northern Territory – Top End Mental Health Services

Ph: 08 8999 4988

Crisis Line

Ph: 08 8981 9227

Queensland – Salvo Care Line

Ph: 1300 363 622

South Australia – Emergency Mental Health Service

Ph: 13 14 65

Tasmania – Samaritans Lifelink – country

Ph: 1300 364 566

Samaritans Lifelink – metro

Ph: 03 6331 3355

Victoria – SuicideLine (VIC)

Ph: 1300 651 251

Western Australia – Samaritans Suicide Emergency Service – country

Ph: 1800 198 313

Samaritans Suicide Emergency Service – metro

Ph: 08 9381 5555

More information

- Kids Help Line – 24 hour telephone and online counselling service specifically for young people aged between 5 and 25: Ph: 1800 551 800; www.kidshelponline.com.au
- Lifeline – 24 hour crisis counselling available across Australia: Ph: 13 11 14; Toolkit for helping someone at risk of suicide available at www.lifeline.org.au
- Lifeline's Service Finder – a comprehensive online national database of low cost or free health and community services offered throughout Australia www.lifeline.org.au/find_help/service_finder
- Mensline Australia – 24 hour professional counselling service for men: Ph: 1300 78 99 78; www.menslineaus.org.au
- Ministerial Council for Suicide Prevention – Information and Support Pack for those concerned about someone who is distressed or suicidal: www.mcsp.org.au/resources
- Multicultural Mental Health Australia – information and resources about mental health in languages other than English for Australia's multicultural community: www.mmha.org.au
- Salvo Care Line (Salvation Army) – offers a crisis counselling service available throughout Australia: visit www.salvos.org.au for the number in your state.
- SANE Helpline – offers a wide range of information on mental illness and suicide prevention: Ph: 1800 18 SANE (7236); www.sane.org
- Suicide Call Back Service – a free national telephone support service for people at risk of suicide, their carers and those bereaved by suicide: Ph: 1300 659 467