

# Suicidal thoughts

## How to support someone

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Suicide is when someone purposely ends their own life. This factsheet looks at why someone might think about suicide and how you can help them.



### KEY POINTS

- People might think about suicide for different reasons.
- If you are worried that someone may be thinking about suicide, talk to them. Ask them about how they are feeling and offer to help.
- Talking to someone about their suicidal thoughts does not make them more likely to end their life.
- You can help someone who is feeling suicidal by listening to them without judging them and trying to help them think about other options.
- You may need to get crisis help from mental health services or the emergency services.
- Helping someone with suicidal thoughts is likely to have a big impact on you. Find out what support is available to you.
- If someone does try to end their life, this is not your fault.

### This factsheet covers:

1. [What makes someone think of suicide?](#)
2. [What are the warning signs that someone feels suicidal?](#)
3. [How can I help someone who is feeling suicidal?](#)
4. [What services can help someone who is feeling suicidal?](#)
5. [Are people with mental illness more likely to feel suicidal?](#)
6. [Are self-harm and suicide linked?](#)
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## 1. What makes someone think of suicide?

There is rarely a single thing that makes someone want to end their own life. Experts believe that a number of complex issues can make someone feel this way.<sup>1</sup>

If someone is thinking about suicide, they often feel nothing will help with the problems that are making them feel suicidal.

Certain things can make someone more likely to think about suicide. These might include:

- difficult life events – such as having a traumatic childhood or experiencing physical or emotional abuse,
- something upsetting or life-changing happening such as a relationship ending or a loved one dying,<sup>2</sup>
- misusing drugs or alcohol,
- living alone or having little social contact with other people,
- having a mental health condition such as depression, schizophrenia or personality disorder,<sup>3</sup>
- having a physical health condition, especially if this causes pain or serious disability,
- problems with work or being unemployed.<sup>4</sup>

### **Why do people choose to end their lives?**

A person may choose to end their lives to:

- escape what they see as an impossible situation,
- relieve unbearable thoughts or feelings,
- show other people how they feel,<sup>5</sup>
- relieve physical pain or incapacity.

### **What kind of thoughts might someone be having?**

When someone feels suicidal, they may think:

- I have let myself and other people down
- What is the point in living?
- I will never find a way out of my problem
- I have lost everything
- Things will never get better for me
- Nobody cares

Some people might feel confused why they want to take their own life. Some people may definitely want to die while some people may not care if they live or die.

Some people feel guilty for thinking about suicide if they have people who care about them.

## 2. What are the warning signs?

A change in someone's personality and behaviour might be a sign that they are having suicidal thoughts. You may be the best judge of when someone you know is behaving differently.

Changes can include:

- becoming anxious, irritable or confrontational.
- having mood swings.
- acting recklessly.
- sleeping too much or too little.
- preferring not to be around other people.
- having more problems with work or studies.
- saying negative things about themselves.

There are some signs that suggest someone is more likely to try suicide. These include<sup>6</sup>:

- threatening to hurt or kill themselves.
- talking or writing about death, dying or suicide.
- actively looking for ways to end their life, such as stockpiling medication.

It is rare for someone to be certain that they want to end their own life. Most people will be undecided about suicide, seeing some 'pros' and 'cons' of living and dying.

A lot of people try to seek help before attempting suicide by telling other people about their feelings or by self-harming to show people that they are in emotional pain.

## 3. How can I help someone who is feeling suicidal?

If you think that someone may be feeling suicidal, encourage them to talk about how they are feeling.

Remember that you don't need to find an answer, or even to completely understand why they feel the way they do. Listening to what they have to say will at least let them know you care.

### **It might help to:**

- let the person know that you care about them and that they are not alone,
- make sure someone is with them if they are in immediate danger,
- try to get professional help for the person feeling suicidal and support for yourself.

You could reassure the person that they will not feel this way forever and that they can get help, including help from a doctor.

If you are not sure that someone is feeling suicidal, you could ask:

“Are you thinking about suicide?” or  
“Are you having thoughts of ending your life?”

These questions might seem direct but it is better to address the person’s feelings directly than to skirt around the issue. Most people do not have this sort of conversation every day and so you may feel uncomfortable and unsure of what to say. This is entirely normal and understandable. However, you can help by being calm, supportive and non-judgemental.

Try to see the world as the person sees it. Try to do this without judging, criticising or blaming them.

### **What won’t help someone who is feeling suicidal?**

When someone tells you that they are feeling suicidal you may feel like trying to cheer the person up or telling them that they have no reason to feel like that. These are understandable responses but may not help that much.

Someone who wants to end their life will not want:

- to feel rejected by friends, family or colleagues,
- people to change the subject when they are talking about how they feel,
- to be told that they are wrong or silly,
- to be patronised, criticised or analysed,
- to be told to cheer up or ‘snap out of it’,<sup>7</sup>
- to be told that they should be grateful for having such a good life.

Reassurance, respect and support can help a person recover at this difficult time.

### **What if someone is saying they want to end their life now?**

Talking about suicide can be a plea for help. Don’t assume that because someone has talked about suicide they won’t try to take their own life. You should always take this seriously.

If you talk to someone about their feelings and it seems as though they want to end their life soon, try to keep them safe in the short term. It is unlikely that you will be able to make their feelings go away, but you can help by making them see that there are some things worth living for.

It might help to:

- be supportive and accept what they are telling you,
- ask whether they are thinking about ending their life now or soon,
- try and get a better understanding of why,
- ask about their reasons for living and dying and listen to their answers. Try to explore their reasons for living in more detail,
- ask whether they have tried to kill themselves before,
- ask if they have a plan for how they would do it in the future,
- try to make them safe and be open to making reasonable steps to help them,
- follow up any commitments that you agree to.<sup>8</sup>

If you live with the person, you could also try to remove things from the house that they could use to take their own life. The kind of thing you could try to remove depends on the person's immediate plan for taking their own life. They could include sharp objects and knives, cleaning products, medicines and belts. If the person is in crisis, do not leave them alone.

Section 4 goes into more detail about how to get professional help for someone.

You can find out more about how to get someone help in the following factsheets:

- Are you worried about someone's mental health
- Getting help in a crisis

You can download these at [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org), or call 0300 5000 927 and ask for the information to be sent to you.

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#### **4. What services can help someone who is feeling suicidal?**

##### **Crisis and home treatment teams**

Crisis teams (sometimes also called home treatment teams) are part of mental health services. They are help people who are having a mental health crisis. They should be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week and are an alternative to going into hospital.

How someone gets help from a crisis team varies between different areas of the country. You may be able to contact them as a friend or family member. GPs, Accident and Emergency departments (A & E) and the police can also ask them to see someone.

You can get more information in our '**Crisis Teams**' factsheet available from [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org). You can also get a hard copy by calling us on 0300 5000 927.

### **Accident and Emergency**

If someone is feeling suicidal, you could try and take them to a local hospital that has an Accident and Emergency department (A&E). Staff can speak to them about how they are feeling and 'triage staff' (such as a psychiatrist) will decide whether or not they need to be admitted to hospital.

You can give A&E staff as much information as possible so they can make the right decision.

### **Emergency services**

If you think that someone is in urgent danger, is going to try and take their life immediately or has already tried, call 999.

### **Other services**

- Crisis houses help people in crisis and are an alternative to going into hospital. Usually people only stay in a crisis house from a couple of days up to a month. The NHS, charities and other services run them. They are not available in every area of the country but you can check what there is locally through the local crisis team or doing a search online.
- Emotional support services help by listening to someone's concerns and giving them space and time to talk through how they feel. Details of emotional support services are at the end of this factsheet.

### **What happens next?**

#### **Hospital**

When someone is feeling suicidal and has tried to take their own life or plans to, usually they will be taken to hospital. Sometimes they might be treated at home or visited regularly by the crisis or home treatment team.

After someone has been in hospital, going back home can be difficult and someone may still need a lot of support.

### **Links between services**

There should be good links between Accident and Emergency departments (A&E) and mental health services. However, these links are not always good enough.<sup>9</sup>

A&E do not always pass details onto the local crisis team. If they don't, then you can contact the crisis team instead.

### **Letting someone who is suicidal leave hospital**

Doctors should carry out a risk assessment when thinking about discharging someone from hospital. This might look at whether someone is feeling suicidal and is thinking about ending their life. Carers should also be part of this decision if possible.

### **Getting more help from mental health services**

Some people get passed back to their GP with no other support.

If this happens, the GP should think about asking for help from the local mental health services such as the Community Mental Health Team (CMHT). This sort of team can give more specialist help.

The person you are supporting could get help under the 'Care Programme Approach' (CPA) if they meet the criteria. CPA is used to organise many people's care who are under mental health services and who have complex needs.

You can find more information about CMHTs and CPA at [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org), or call 0300 5000 927 and ask for the information to be sent to you.

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## **5. Are people with mental illnesses at greater risk of suicide?**

People with mental illnesses are generally more likely to feel suicidal and try to take their own lives than people who do not have mental illnesses.<sup>10</sup> Research also shows that a person could be more likely to try to end their own life if they have recently been discharged from a mental health hospital or unit.<sup>11</sup> At this time, it is important someone gets the right support.

Making sure that someone attends appointments with health services and has a care plan in place is important to keep someone well and prevent them feeling suicidal.

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## **6. Self-harm and suicide**

Self-harm is when someone deliberately tries to harm or injure themselves. Someone may do this more than once.

There are different views on whether someone trying to take their own life is the same as self-harm.

People do not normally self-harm to take their own life. Instead, people can self harm to deal with emotional pain, punish themselves or express distress to other people.<sup>12</sup>

If the person you care for self-harms, they may do this privately and may not want to talk openly about it. You can try to talk to them about why they do it. Let them know that you do not judge them and are there to talk if they need to. If they refuse to stop self-harming then you may be able to persuade them to do it safely, or to try safer alternative methods. It is unlikely that they will stop altogether just because you have asked them to.

You can get more information in our '**Self-harm**' factsheet which you can download at [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org).

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## 7. How can I get support?

If you know someone who talks about or has tried suicide, you might feel upset, frustrated, confused or scared. These are all normal responses.

Supporting a person who is suicidal is likely to be a stressful time in your life, and a time when you are likely to need support yourself. You could:

- talk to friends and family,
- talk to someone on an emotional support helpline (see our useful contacts),
- talk to your own doctor,
- join a support group for carers, friends and family,
- take some time out to concentrate on yourself.

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If the person you care for would like to talk to someone in confidence about their feelings, you could suggest that they contact the following organisations. You may also want to talk to someone about the effect the situation is having on you.

**Samaritans** provide telephone, letter and email emotional and practical support. Their volunteers are trained in supporting people who feel suicidal but are able to provide a listening ear to anyone that needs it, whether or not they are suicidal.

Tel: 08457 90 90 90 (24 hours)

Address: PO Box RSRB-KKBY-CYJK, Chris, PO Box 90 90, Stirling FK8 2SA

Email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

Website: [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

**Saneline** is a national helpline offering emotional support and information for people affected by mental health problems.

Tel: 0845 767 8000 (6-11pm everyday)

You can also email Sane using their online form -

[www.sane.org.uk/what\\_we\\_do/support/email/](http://www.sane.org.uk/what_we_do/support/email/)

Web: [www.sane.org.uk](http://www.sane.org.uk)

**Support Line** offers confidential emotional support to adults and children by telephone, email and post. They try to help people find positive ways to cope, feel strong on this inside and feel better about themselves.

Tel: 01708 765200 (hours vary)

Address: SupportLine, PO Box 2860, Romford, Essex RM7 1JA

Email: [info@supportline.org.uk](mailto:info@supportline.org.uk)

Web: [www.supportline.org.uk](http://www.supportline.org.uk)

**CALM (The Campaign Against Living Miserably)** is an organisation that raises awareness of depression in young men between 15 and 35. It has a free helpline offering support, advice and information to young men who need someone to talk to.

Tel: Outside London 0800 58 58 58

Inside London 0808 802 5858 (5pm – midnight, everyday)

Web: [www.thecalmzone.net](http://www.thecalmzone.net)

**Maytree** is a London-based charity supporting people who feel suicidal. They offer different services including a sanctuary where people can stay for a few nights and have someone to talk to. The environment is non-medical and is calm and supportive. The service is confidential with trained volunteers for people to speak to as well as time for rest and relaxation. People can only stay there once.

Tel: 020 7263 7070

Address: The Maytree 72 Moray Road Finsbury Park London N4 3LG

Email: [maytree@maytree.org.uk](mailto:maytree@maytree.org.uk)

Web:

**PAPYRUS (prevention of young suicide)** is an organisation that aims to prevent suicide in young people. It can offer advice if you are worried about a young person who might be suicidal.

Tel: 0800 068 4141

SMS (text): 07786 209697

Email: [pat@papyrus-uk.org](mailto:pat@papyrus-uk.org)

Web: [www.papyrus-uk.org](http://www.papyrus-uk.org)

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<sup>1</sup> NHS Choices. Causes

<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Suicide/Pages/Causes.aspx> (Accessed March 2014)

<sup>2</sup> NHS Choices. Who is at risk of suicide.

<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Suicide/Pages/Causes.aspx> (Accessed March 2014)

<sup>3</sup> 'Arsenault-Lapierre et al, Psychiatric diagnoses in 3275 suicides: a meta-analysis' BMC Psychiatry. 2004; 4: 37. Available online at

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC534107/> (Accessed March 2014)

<sup>4</sup> Preventing suicide: A resource for general physicians, World Health Organisation (2000) WHO/MNH/MBD/00.1 at pages 8-10. Also see Scottish Government Social Research (2008) 'Risk and Protective Factors for Suicide and Suicidal Behaviour: A Literature Review', chapter 3. Available online at

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/251539/0073687.pdf> (Accessed March 2014)

<sup>5</sup> How to...help someone who is suicidal, Mind (2004). pg3

<sup>6</sup> NHS Choices. Suicide Warning signs.

<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Suicide/Pages/warning-signs.aspx> (Accessed March 2014)

<sup>7</sup> Preventing suicide: A resource at work, World Health Organisation (2006) pg19

<sup>8</sup> Suicide Intervention Handbook – LivingWorks 10th Ed. (2004) pages 63-70

<sup>9</sup> RCPSych (2004) 'Psychiatric services to accident and emergency departments' (CR118) at pg 11-12

<sup>10</sup> See references 1 and 4

<sup>11</sup> Crawford, M.J. (2004). Suicide following discharge from inpatient psychiatric care. *Advances in psychiatric treatment*, 10, 434-438.

Available from <http://apt.rcpsych.org/content/10/6/434.full.pdf+html> (Accessed March 2014)

<sup>12</sup> Self-harm, Suicide and Risk: helping people who self-harm, Royal College of Psychiatrists (2010) CR158 at pg 22-23. Available online at <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/files/pdfversion/CR158.pdf> (Accessed March 2014)

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in large print.



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## Rethink Mental Illness

Phone 0300 5000 927

Monday to Friday, 10am to 2pm

Email [advice@rethink.org](mailto:advice@rethink.org)

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### Did this help?

We'd love to know if this information helped you.

Drop us a line at: [feedback@rethink.org](mailto:feedback@rethink.org)

### or write to us at Rethink Mental Illness:

Feedback  
PO Box 68795  
London SE1 4PN

or call us on 0300 5000 927.

We're open 9am to 5.30pm, Monday to Friday.



Leading the way to a better  
quality of life for everyone  
affected by severe mental illness.

For further information  
on Rethink Mental Illness  
Phone 0300 5000 927  
Email [info@rethink.org](mailto:info@rethink.org)

[www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org)

### Need more help?

Go to [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org) for information on symptoms, treatments, money and benefits and your rights. Or talk to others about your problem at [www.rethink.org/talk](http://www.rethink.org/talk).

### Don't have access to the web?

Call us on 0300 5000 927. We are open 9am to 5.30pm, Monday to Friday and we will send you the information you need in the post.

### Need to talk to an adviser?

If you need practical advice, call us between 10am and 2pm, Monday to Friday. Our specialist advisers can help you with queries like how to apply for benefits, get access to care or make a complaint.

### Can you help us to keep going?

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