

Would you
know what to do
if someone told you
they were thinking
of suicide?

Understanding suicide and its prevention

AN INFORMATION BOOKLET FOR FAMILIES AND FRIENDS



Connecting for Life

This booklet was produced with the assistance of professionals and family members with a specific interest in supporting someone who is experiencing suicidal thoughts.



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About this booklet

In Ireland, over 500 people die by suicide every year. It is one of the greatest tragedies of our society. Every death by suicide devastates close family members, friends, colleagues, neighbours and the surrounding community. Some people suffer in silence, others speak out. Often we don't understand how someone who is suicidal is feeling and don't know what will help.

When a friend or loved one tells you they are thinking of taking their own life, it can be frightening and unnerving. You might find it hard to understand or it may seem unbelievable. You may feel helpless or hopeless, or both.

This booklet is for everyone in that situation. It gives basic information to help you understand what brings someone to a point in their lives where they are feeling suicidal. It also gives practical information on how you can support them and how you can mind yourself through it all.

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Suicide – myths & facts

Myths

People who talk about suicide don't die by suicide.

People with suicidal thoughts are absolutely intent on dying.

Suicide happens without warning.

Once a person thinks of suicide they will have those thoughts forever.

An improvement after a crisis means the suicide risk is over.

Suicide happens mainly among the poor.

You are either the suicidal type or you're not.

Facts

Most people who kill themselves have given definite warning signs of their intention. Some of these signs are direct, others are more subtle.

Most people who think of suicide have mixed feelings about living and dying. Many don't really want to die but they don't want to live the way they are living and may not be able to see an alternative other than suicide.

People thinking of suicide may talk or act in ways that indicate they are thinking of taking their own life.

Suicidal thoughts may return, but they are not permanent. In some people, they may never return if they get the support they need.

Some suicides happen when things seem to be getting better because the person now has the energy and will to turn despairing thoughts into self-destructive action.

Suicide happens in all groups in society.

Anyone can turn to suicide as a way of coping with obvious or perceived stress.

How does someone feel when they are suicidal?

Someone who is feeling suicidal is generally in a state of extreme emotional pain. They may believe their situation and how they are feeling won't or can't improve, and feel powerless to create change in their lives. They may see themselves as being worthless and a burden on those around them.

These thoughts lead to feelings of guilt and shame. They may believe it will be best for everyone if they are no longer around. They may just want to end the pain they are living with and believe that there is no other solution to the problems they face.

It is possible that someone who is feeling suicidal has withdrawn from those around them and is not talking about their feelings. Therefore, it can be very hard for you to know what they are feeling and thinking.

Many 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. Their suffering is real. Very often they are undecided, almost disconnected, about their death, and are confused about their suicidal thoughts or intentions. It is likely to be a very exhausting time for them and this can add to their despair. Although they may have a plan around what they are going to do, many people still wish and hope for a different option up until the very end.

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Who is at risk of suicide?

Suicidal thoughts or feelings don't arrive out of the blue. Many factors come together to increase someone's risk. Usually, there is a mix of personal and social factors. It is rare that one event makes someone's life so unbearable that suicide seems the only option. However, it is important to remember that you may not know the sources of stress that could contribute to the likelihood of suicide. Here are some of the more common factors.

Men. Most deaths by suicide happen in men aged 20-64. In Ireland, statistics suggest that young men are most at risk. However, the rates remain high for men up to their mid-60s.

Women. Suicide in women is most common during middle age. However, in recent years, the rate of suicide has been increasing in young women aged 15-19.

Mental health difficulties. These can arise for any of us at any stage in our lives. Research has shown that people who are diagnosed with a mental health difficulty by a doctor are at a higher risk of suicide than those who have not. However, it is important to note that not all of those who have been diagnosed will experience suicidal thoughts. In the same way, not everyone who is suicidal will have a mental health difficulty.

History of self-harm. This involves doing something that causes injury to the body. The most common methods of self-harm are cutting and taking overdoses. Self-harm is generally used to cope with, or ease, emotional distress. Over time, it may become less effective, and the emotional distress may increase. As this happens, thoughts of suicide may become more likely. Sometimes people who self-harm may accidentally end up taking their own life through their self-harming actions.

History of suicide attempts. Someone who has attempted suicide in the past has a higher risk of attempting again, especially in the days and weeks after an attempt. An attempted suicide may increase their sense of isolation, guilt and worthlessness. It is important to take all attempts or possible attempts seriously, and to get help and support for your loved one. You will find more details about support services later in this booklet.

Discharge from in-patient care or emergency department. The risk of suicide is high immediately after discharge from a psychiatric hospital or an emergency department, if the person attended because of suicidal thoughts or

behaviours. They may have a sense that they will be living with mental health difficulties for a long time, or they may believe they do not have the supports or inner resources to deal with their difficulties. They are at greater risk if they live alone or are returning to significant stresses that they feel they cannot change.

Alcohol or drug misuse. This is common among people who die by suicide. Drugs and alcohol can work in a number of ways when someone is in distress. They can lead to impulsive behaviours where someone may make decisions without considering what may happen afterwards. Also, alcohol is a depressant which increases the likelihood that someone will take a more negative view of their lives. If someone is using alcohol or drugs to deal with their problems, this may prevent them from using healthier coping strategies. Misuse of alcohol or drugs over a long time can lead to poor quality of life and damage relationships, work and other areas of life.

History of suicide in family or friends. This can increase someone's risk as suicide can appear a more acceptable option once it has been taken by others. The way in which a community responds to a death by suicide, can sometimes glorify the death. This may make suicide appealing to someone who is vulnerable. Young people, in particular, might feel that they will be more loved after their death than when alive. Communities that support grieving families while at the same time showing the finality of death, can help prevent other deaths from happening.

Low levels of social contact. People who are isolated and withdrawn from others or who don't have a support network to draw on in times of difficulty are more vulnerable to suicide than those who are well connected and have a strong sense of belonging.

Poverty. The difficulties associated with poverty can increase suicide risk. These include low levels of education, poor living conditions, social isolation, increased reliance on drugs and alcohol, and less access to services.

Loss of employment. Unemployment can challenge someone in ways they haven't been challenged before. The loss of a job can also mean that someone has lost the supports they previously relied on, such as a regular income, social contact, a reason for living, a sense of self-worth, and so on.

Loss. Any kind of loss is linked with increased suicide risk. It can include bereavement, relationship breakdown, job loss or financial loss. The risk is greater if the person feels that, as a result of the loss, life will never be good or they will never experience happiness again. An example could be if someone makes a bad decision at work which results in a major loss of status.

History of abuse. The emotional impact of past abuse can make someone more vulnerable to suicide. People who have experienced abuse can feel shame, depression and anxiety, and believe they are worthless. They may have poor family support and may be isolated. This can make it difficult to cope when times are tough.

Personal behaviour. It is possible that someone's personal behaviour has greatly hurt or angered the people they love. This, along with blaming themselves for their behaviour, can add to someone's distress, isolation, feeling of hopelessness, or feeling that they deserve to die.

Impulsivity. For some, taking their lives can be a spur-of-the-moment decision. This is more likely among young people who are struggling to cope with what is for them a major life event such as break up of a relationship.

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Triggers. For someone experiencing emotional pain, it often only takes one thing to tip them from a situation of barely coping to one that they see as unbearable. Known as ‘triggers’, these can include:

- ❖ a relationship ending
- ❖ losing a job
- ❖ an argument with a loved one
- ❖ the death of someone close, either through suicide or some other cause
- ❖ the return of symptoms of mental illness, particularly depression
- ❖ trauma such as a violent attack, or bullying
- ❖ failing exams.

Protective Factors. There are many things that can protect someone, even if they are experiencing emotional pain. These protective factors include:

- ❖ a daily structure or routine, for example, education or work
- ❖ employment
- ❖ access to health services
- ❖ good coping skills
- ❖ personal resilience (being able to bounce back from difficult situations)
- ❖ reasons for living
- ❖ good physical and mental health
- ❖ taking part in physical activities such as sport
- ❖ feeling connected to the family (having a sense of belonging)
- ❖ social supports such as friends, family, support groups
- ❖ religious or spiritual beliefs and practices
- ❖ self-care such as exercising daily.

Little things can make a big difference to our mental health and wellbeing.

Here are some examples:

- ❖ **Keeping active** – being active every day, even something as simple as taking a walk, will help lighten your mood
- ❖ **Talking about your problems** – problems feel smaller when they are shared with others, with-out having to be solved or fixed. Just talking about it will do you good
- ❖ **Looking out for others** – listening to someone else in trouble or chatting with someone who seems distant can change their day, and even their lives. You don't have to fix it for them, just listening is a huge help
- ❖ **Doing things with others** – taking part in a group activity that you enjoy will help you feel connected with others, whether it be a game of football, joining a choir, volunteering or whatever interests you
- ❖ **Eating healthily** – a regular healthy, balanced and nutritious diet will help your physical and mental health as well as your mood
- ❖ **Staying in touch** – catching up with friends and family is good for our mental health, reminding us that we're part of a community
- ❖ **Sleeping well** – getting a good night's sleep of 7 or 8 hours, as often as you can, will help you feel better.



How can I tell that someone is thinking of suicide?

Most people experiencing emotional pain show signs of distress, but the only way to know if someone is thinking of suicide is to ask them.

Sometimes, people thinking of suicide may hide the signs so as not to be discovered. This may mean they don't want help or that they are ashamed because they are not coping and don't want anyone to know.

The following signs are common among people who are experiencing extreme emotional pain and may be considering taking their own life:

- ❖ withdrawing from friends and family
- ❖ depression or very low mood (not necessarily a diagnosed mental illness) which may appear as:
 - loss of interest in usual activities
 - extreme sadness, hopelessness or irritability
 - changes in appetite
 - changes in sleep patterns
 - loss of energy
 - negative comments about self
- ❖ feelings of hopelessness, powerlessness and worthlessness
- ❖ thinking constantly about suicide
- ❖ sudden change from distress to saying they are 'at peace' or 'okay' (this may indicate that they have decided to take their life)
- ❖ talking about going away or saying goodbye
- ❖ threatening suicide
- ❖ talking or writing about suicide
- ❖ putting personal affairs in order
- ❖ giving away the things they own.





This is not a full list. Signs can be difficult to recognise. Some people may show no signs yet still feel suicidal, others may show many signs yet be coping OK. Sometimes we don't recognise the signs even though they may seem obvious when we look back. This is often because we were too close to the situation at the time.

The fact that there are signs doesn't always mean that someone is suicidal. However, checking out what we see and getting the right kind of help will hopefully prevent the situation getting worse. The only way to know for sure if someone is thinking of taking their own life is if they tell you themselves or you ask them directly.

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What to say to someone who is thinking about suicide

1. **Let the person know you are concerned about them.**
2. **Ask about suicide.**
3. **Listen and understand.**
4. **Take all threats seriously.**

Talking to a friend or family member about their thoughts and feelings on suicide can be extremely difficult. It is hard to hear that a family member or friend is thinking of ending their life. However, it is important to check if your loved one is experiencing suicidal thoughts and if they have a plan as to how they will end their life. Just because they are behaving in some of the ways listed above doesn't mean they are suicidal.

If you're unsure, the best way to find out is to ask if they are thinking about suicide. Allowing someone to express their feelings in a safe space can give them a sense of relief and may help them to see that they have other options.

The following suggestions may help you start the conversation:

Step 1

Let the person know you are concerned about them

- ❖ I noticed some changes in you lately and I am worried about you. I am here if there is anything you would like to talk about.
- ❖ You don't seem yourself. Would it help to talk?
- ❖ How long have you been feeling like this?
- ❖ Did something happen that led to you feeling like this?

Step 2

Ask about suicide

- ❖ Are you having thoughts of suicide?
- ❖ Sometimes when people feel lonely or like there is no hope they may think of ending it all. Are you thinking of suicide?
- ❖ Have you been thinking of ending your life?



Many people don't ask about suicide for two reasons:

- ❖ they're afraid of putting the idea into someone's head, or
- ❖ they are afraid that if the answer is yes, they won't know what to do next.

Simply asking the question does not give someone the idea. Thoughts of suicide generally develop slowly over a period of time and after a series of difficulties in life. By asking the question, you're acknowledging their distress and giving them an opportunity to talk about something that is probably very frightening for them. If the answer is yes, don't panic. Listen to them without judgement or blame.

Step 3

Listen and understand

Give them space to explain what is going on for them and how they feel about it. Avoid responses which reject how they are feeling, lessen how they feel, or try to change their view of their situation.

Examples of what **NOT** to say:

- ❖ It's not that bad
- ❖ Things will get better
- ❖ How could you be so selfish?

These reactions may make the person feel misunderstood and more isolated than ever.

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Instead, acknowledge how hard life is for them:

- ❖ Can you tell me more about what's going on for you?
- ❖ If you want to tell me more, I'm here to listen
- ❖ It sounds like you're dealing with a lot at the moment
- ❖ I'm really sorry to hear that you're feeling like this right now.

Step 4

Take all threats seriously

You may be tempted to believe it is just talk, an accident or attention-seeking behaviour. However, it is really important to show that you believe your loved one and that you take any talk of suicide seriously. Most people do not talk or think about suicide lightly and there may be a serious risk of death. It is important that you accept that your loved one needs help to stay alive and that you support them in finding the help they need straight away.

Remove potential means of suicide

Such as medications, firearms, and so on.

Don't leave them alone

It is important to keep them safe. This will mean staying with them or organising for someone else to stay with them until they get help.

Don't promise confidentiality

Be honest and say that you cannot agree to keep this confidential because the most important thing is for them to stay safe while they get help to deal with the issues that are leading to their thoughts of suicide. It may be helpful to agree together who you can tell. Where possible, support them to tell someone else such as their family doctor (GP).

Focus on their positive strengths

How have they solved earlier problems? In the past, was there anyone they could rely on in bad times? Is there anyone who might help now?

Get professional help

Do everything you can to get the help they need. Your loved one is going to need help and support from others, not just you. Think about who else can help such as other family members, friends, work colleagues or professional help.

Other ways to support someone who is suicidal

Follow-up on treatment. Encourage them to keep attending services they find useful and to put into practice what they have learned from attending these services.

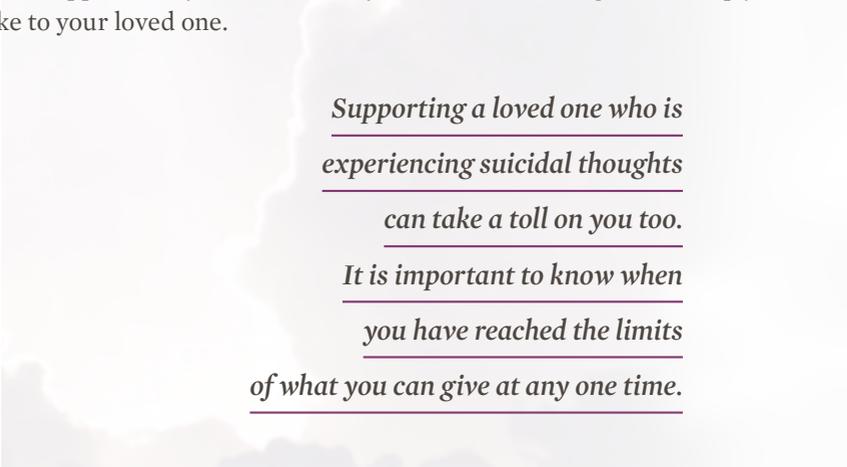
Be proactive. People with suicidal thoughts often believe they can't be helped. Encourage them to get help and support them in doing so.

Encourage positive lifestyle changes, such as exercise and a healthy diet. Exercise is extremely important as it relieves stress, and promotes emotional well-being. What we eat and when we eat it can have a positive or negative effect on our mental health so it is important to encourage your loved one to stick to healthy foods and to eat regularly.

Help identify triggers. Helping someone to identify the things that may lead to a suicidal crisis can be really useful. You can also support them in identifying how to manage these triggers and where to get support when the triggers are present or are likely to be present in their lives. Encourage them to keep contact numbers handy for the people and places they can contact for support.

Continue your support. Your support is very important to make sure your loved one continues to access the help they need.

Know your limits and support yourself. Supporting a loved one who is experiencing suicidal thoughts can take a toll on you too. It is important to know when you have reached the limits of what you can give at any one time. Put in place supports for yourself so that you can continue to give the help you would like to your loved one.



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Accompanying someone to the health services

Make sure that the health professional you meet knows that your loved one has expressed suicidal thoughts to you. They may not be as clear with a health professional as they were with you, or they may say they are feeling better now.

Questions to ask the health professional

At this time of distress, it may be helpful if you can speak on behalf of your loved one. Here are some questions you may want to ask.

- ❖ How can I keep my loved one safe especially over the short term?
- ❖ How will I know if the problem is getting worse?
- ❖ Where can I get more information?
- ❖ What other supports are available for us?
- ❖ Would counselling be helpful? If so, how do we access it locally?
- ❖ Is there anything I need to know about these tablets, for example, any side-effects (if your loved one is on prescribed medication)?
- ❖ What is the care plan for my loved one?
- ❖ In an emergency, who do I contact?
- ❖ My child is under 18, are there dedicated services for young people?



After a suicide attempt

After a suicide attempt, you may feel shocked that you did not ‘see this coming’ or you may feel guilty for not having noticed the signs. You may also feel anxious about how best to support your loved one now. These reactions are common and understandable, but it is important to know that there are things you can do to help, protect and support your loved one following a suicide attempt.

- ❖ Show that you are willing to hear about the pain that led to their suicide attempt. Create an atmosphere for listening if they want to talk (‘I know at the moment you don’t want to talk, but I’m here if you do’).
- ❖ Encourage them to let someone know if they have thoughts of suicide any time in the future.
- ❖ Be involved in their care by encouraging and supporting them to attend appointments. If you continue to have concerns about them, get professional help.
- ❖ Model self-care. Instead of telling them what they should do to be healthier and happier, show them by your own behaviour healthy ways of living and coping with life’s challenges.

And finally...

Suicidal thoughts represent unbearable emotional pain, caused by a wide variety of problems. This is often a cry for help. People experiencing suicidal thoughts are often so distressed that they are unable to see other options that are available to them. Recognising the signs and taking steps to respond to someone who is in emotional distress can help to reduce their risk of suicide.

The only way to know for sure if someone is suicidal is to ask them. Do what you can and never leave anything to chance. Offer support and seek professional help. Know that there are things you can do to help, protect and support your loved one following a suicide attempt.

Most people do not want to die, but instead want to escape from and stop the pain they are feeling or the problems they are experiencing. For many, with understanding and support this is possible.

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Where to get help

A GP

A GP can offer support for anyone in crisis. If possible, ask someone to come along with you. Find a service near you:

- GP or health centre
 - Out of hours GP service
-

HSE Mental Health Services

If you are being supported by a mental health team, or have been in the past, contact the service for support in a crisis.

Samaritans

Samaritans services are available 24 hours a day, for confidential, non-judgmental support.

- Freephone **116 123**
 - Email jo@samaritans.ie
 - Visit www.samaritans.ie for more information
-

Pieta

Pieta provide a range of suicide and self-harm prevention services.

- Freephone **1800 247 247** anytime day or night
 - Text **HELP** to **51444** (standard message rates apply)
 - Visit www.pieta.ie for more information
-

Text About It

Text About It is a free, anonymous, 24/7 messaging service providing everything from a calming chat to immediate support for our mental health and emotional wellbeing.

- Text **HELLO** to **50808**, anytime day or night
 - Visit www.textaboutit.ie for more information
-

Childline

A free 24/7 support service for children and young people up to and including those age 18 years of age.

- Freephone **1800 66 66 66**
 - Live chat at www.childline.ie
-

Hospital and emergency services

If you, or someone you know is at immediate risk of harm, go to or call the emergency department of your local general hospital. You can also contact emergency services on **112** or **999** anytime, day or night.

More information

Visit www.yourmentalhealth.ie for information on how to mind your mental health, support others, or to find a support service in your area. You can also call the Your Mental Health Information Line on **1800 111 888**, anytime day or night, for information on mental health services in your area.



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