

What can I do to help someone that may be suicidal?

1. Take it seriously and Report it.

Myth: The people who talk about it don't do it. Studies have found that more than 75% of all completed suicides did things in the few weeks or months prior to their deaths to indicate to others that they were in deep despair. Anyone expressing suicidal feelings needs immediate attention.

Myth: Anyone who tries to kill himself has got to be crazy. Perhaps 10% of all suicidal people are psychotic or have delusional beliefs about reality. Most suicidal people suffer from the recognized mental illness of depression; but many depressed people adequately manage their daily affairs. The absence of craziness does not mean the absence of suicide risk.

Those problems weren't enough to commit suicide over, is often said by people who knew a completed suicide. You cannot assume that because you feel something is not worth being suicidal about, that the person you are with feels the same way. It is not how bad the problem is, but how badly it's hurting the person who has it.

2. Remember: suicidal behavior is a cry for help.

Myth: If a someone is going to kill himself, nothing can stop him. The fact that a person is still alive is sufficient proof that part of him wants to remain alive. The suicidal person is ambivalent -- part of him wants to live and part of him wants not so much death as he wants the pain to end. It is the part that wants to live that tells another I feel suicidal. If a suicidal person turns to you it is likely that he believes that you are more caring, more informed about coping with misfortune, and more willing to protect his confidentiality. No matter how negative the manner and content of his talk, he is doing a positive thing and has a positive view of you.

3. Be willing to give and get help sooner rather than later.

Suicide prevention is not a last minute activity. All textbooks on depression say it should be reached as soon as possible. Unfortunately, suicidal people are afraid that trying to get help may bring them more pain: being told they are stupid, foolish, sinful, or manipulative; rejection; punishment; suspension from school or job; written records of their condition; or involuntary commitment. You need to do everything you can to reduce pain, rather than increase or prolong it. Constructively involving yourself on the side of life as early as possible will reduce the risk of suicide.

4. Listen.

Give the person every opportunity to unburden his troubles and ventilate his feelings. You don't need to say much and there are no magic words. If you are concerned, your voice and manner will show it. Give him relief from being alone with his pain; let him know you are glad he turned to you. Patience, sympathy, acceptance. Avoid arguments and advice giving.

5. If the person is acutely suicidal, do not leave him alone.

If the means are present, try to get rid of them. Detoxify the home.

6. Urge professional help.

Persistence and patience may be needed to seek, engage and continue with as many options as possible. In any referral situation, let the person know you care and want to maintain contact.

7. No secrets.

It is the part of the person that is afraid of more pain that says Don't tell anyone. It is the part that wants to stay alive that tells you about it. Respond to that part of the person and persistently seek out a mature and compassionate person with whom you can review the situation. (You can get outside help and still protect the person from pain causing breaches of privacy.) Do not try to go it alone. Get help for the person and for yourself. Distributing the anxieties and responsibilities of suicide prevention makes it easier and much more effective.

8. From crisis to recovery.

Most people have suicidal thoughts or feelings at some point in their lives; yet less than 2% of all deaths are suicides. Nearly all suicidal people suffer from conditions that will pass with time or with the assistance of a recovery program. There are hundreds of modest steps we can take to improve our response to the suicidal and to make it easier for them to seek help. Taking these modest steps can save many lives and reduce a great deal of human suffering.