

When You're Worried About Someone: A Practical Guide to Knowing What to Do When Someone You Care About May Be Suicidal

A person who is considering suicide may be experiencing emotional pain that feels unbearable. They may not see another way for the pain—or their present circumstances—to change. Compassionate support and timely help can make a lifesaving difference.

It is not always easy to know whether someone you care about is going through a difficult time or may be considering suicide. To help you determine this better, use the following link to learn more about the [risk factors and warning signs of suicide from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](https://www.afsp.org/risk-factors-protective-factors-and-warning-signs).

www.afsp.org/risk-factors-protective-factors-and-warning-signs

You do not have to be certain that someone is suicidal before speaking with them. If you notice warning signs—or simply feel concerned—trust your concern and speak to them directly. The following guidelines can help guide you through that conversation.



Steps to Take if You Suspect Someone You Know is Suicidal

1 – Ask directly – “I care for you and have been worried about you. Are you thinking about suicide?”

Research shows that asking someone directly about suicide does **not** increase suicidal thoughts or behavior. Asking calmly and without judgment can open the door to an honest conversation and give the person a safe opportunity to share what they are experiencing.

Other helpful questions include:

- “What feels most painful right now?”
- “What can I do to help?”
- “How can I support you while we find additional help?”

A person who is thinking about suicide may ask you to keep the conversation confidential. **Never promise to keep thoughts of suicide a secret.** If you have already made that promise, you must break it and involve someone who can help. The person contemplating suicide may be upset with you, but protecting their life and safety is more important than keeping that promise.

Give the person your full attention and allow them to describe what they are thinking and feeling. Listen to understand—not to correct, debate, or immediately solve the problem. Acknowledging their emotional pain can help them feel less isolated and more willing to accept support.



Listen both for the pain they are experiencing and for any reasons they may have for continuing to live. These might include family, friends, pets, faith, responsibilities, hopes, or future events. You might gently ask:

- “What has helped you hold on until now?”
- “Is there anyone or anything that helps you feel that continuing to live is a good option?”
- “What would help you feel safer right now?”

Empathize; don’t criticize. Help them recognize **their** reasons for living rather than imposing **your** reasons on them. Avoid arguing, lecturing, expressing shock, or minimizing what they are feeling. If they say they are not thinking about suicide, continue to take their distress—and your concern—seriously. You might say:

“I’m glad you told me. I care about you, and you do not have to handle this alone.”

If prayer is appropriate and consistent with their beliefs, let them know you are praying for them. Continue checking in regularly, encourage them to seek professional support, and remind them through your words and actions that they matter.

2 — Ask Whether They Have a Plan

If they say they are thinking about suicide, ask calmly:

“Have you thought about how you might end your life?”

You may also ask whether they have decided when or where they would do it. Listen calmly, without displaying shock, criticism, or judgment.

Whether or not they have developed a specific plan, take all thoughts of suicide seriously. Encourage them to call or text **988** with you, and help them connect with a qualified mental-health professional. Stay with them and continue offering calm support while you determine the safest next step.

3 — Ask Whether They Have Access to the Means

If they have thought about how they might end their life, ask:

“Do you have access to the things you were thinking about using?”

Reducing access to lethal means can create lifesaving time for the immediate crisis to pass and for help to arrive. If they have a plan, intend to act soon, or have access to the means, **do not leave them alone.**

Call 911 or 988 immediately and follow the crisis counselor’s or emergency responder’s instructions.

Do this carefully and, whenever possible, with guidance from a 988 crisis counselor, healthcare professional, or emergency responder. This may include safely securing firearms and ammunition, medications, or other potentially dangerous items.

Never put yourself in danger or attempt to physically take a weapon from someone. If you cannot safely reduce access, move to a safe location and call 911.



4 — Ask About Their Immediate Intent

Ask directly:

“Do you think you might act on these thoughts?”

“Do you think you might do this today or soon?”

A specific plan, access to the means, stated intent, an immediate timeframe, or actions taken in preparation may indicate an emergency.

If the person says they may act today or soon—or you believe there is immediate danger—again, **do not leave them alone. Call 911 immediately. Call or text 988 for additional crisis guidance.**



If immediate danger is not present, continue taking the person’s suicidal thoughts seriously. Stay with them while you help them with step 5.

5 — Help Them Connect

Do not try to manage this crisis alone. Help the person connect with one or more trusted sources of ongoing support, such as:

- A family member or friend
- A mental-health professional
- A physician or other healthcare professional
- A pastor, chaplain, or trusted spiritual advisor
- Another appropriate community resource

When possible, make the connection together rather than simply giving the person a telephone number and leaving them to call later.

6 — Follow Up Regularly

Continue checking in after the immediate crisis has passed or after the person has been discharged from care. A telephone call, text, visit, or invitation to spend time together can remind them that they are valued and are not facing their pain alone.

Supportive, ongoing contact can play an important role in suicide prevention. Continue encouraging the person to follow the safety plan and treatment recommendations provided by qualified professionals.

Remember

If someone tells you they intend to die by suicide—or you believe there is immediate, life-threatening danger—do not leave them alone. If there is immediate, life-threatening danger, call 911 immediately. Call or text 988 for additional crisis guidance.



If you are not physically with the person, remain connected by phone or text, if possible, and provide emergency responders with the person's location.

You are not responsible for managing a suicidal crisis by yourself or for controlling another person's actions.

Your responsibility is to take the concern seriously, remain present when it is safe to do so, and involve qualified help. Your willingness to notice, ask, listen, and act can make a lifesaving difference.

About Dr. Melissa Rich

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