

SUICIDE PREVENTION:

Identifying Warning Signs & How to Help

Almost 50,000 people in the U.S. died by suicide in 2023, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Florida Health Charts reports that 176 people took their lives that same year in Duval County alone. Even one life lost to suicide is one too many. Together we can work toward zero suicides by educating ourselves on the warning signs and lending our support to someone who is struggling.

HOW TO HELP

If you suspect someone is considering suicide, it is important to take immediate action. Please familiarize yourself with these communication techniques and proven best practices* for intervention.

1. Ask Direct Questions

If someone exhibits suicide warning signs, remain calm and gently, but directly, ask them if they are considering suicide. Studies show that asking this question, does not cause suicide - it often comes as a relief, offering an open door for them to share their pain. If possible, ask follow-up questions about whether they have a plan and if they've tried to end their life before. This provides them with the opportunity to talk through their feelings and supplies you with valuable information that may help you offer better support.

2. Listen Without Judgment

Although it's tempting to try to change their outlook, your job is to listen without judgment. That means not pointing out all the good things in their lives, applying guilt about how upset their family would be or implying they don't mean what they are saying. Simply let them know you care and practice active listening.

3. Remove Dangerous Items

If the person you are helping has items that could be used to end their life – such as pills or a gun – and you can safely remove them, do so. Multiple studies have shown that eliminating access to lethal means is a powerful way of reducing suicide.

4. Call 988 (or 911) if Necessary

If you have reason to believe the person you are helping is in imminent danger of harming themselves, it's critical to get them professional help quickly. If they have a firearm, have already taken medication or it is a life-threatening situation, 911 is the best way to proceed. Otherwise, call the Suicide & Crisis Line at 988 as they are specifically trained to assist the person who is struggling and the person trying to help.

5. Stay and Make Connections

Do not leave the person you're helping alone. And do not agree to keep it a secret. Share the responsibility of providing support by helping them build a safety net of personal and professional resources.

6. Help Create a Safety Plan and Follow Up

Once the person you care about is past the initial danger, stay engaged. One way to do this is by helping them create a safety plan. A safety plan is a resource that contains helpful information including warning signs that indicate they are starting to have suicidal thoughts, coping strategies and distractions they can implement, trusted people they can contact when in need and ways they can make their environment safer in the moment.



WARNING SIGNS

Please reach out with your support, if you notice someone who:

- Seems hopeless about the future
- Withdraws from family and/or friends
- Displays severe or overwhelming emotional pain or distress
- Exhibits drastic mood or behavior changes such as:
 - eating or sleeping a lot more or less
 - using drugs and alcohol more often
 - engaging in self-harm behaviors
- Acts in ways that suggest tying up loose ends such as giving away important items, creating a will or making comments that feel like "goodbyes"
- Engages in risky behaviors such as driving extremely fast, substance misuse or unsafe sexual activity
- Collects pills or buys a weapon
- Talks about, researches or makes plans for suicide (it is vital to take this seriously)

If you notice any of these symptoms in yourself, please get support by calling 988.

**Primary Source: BeThe1To.com/bethe1to-steps-evidence*

Learn more at ZeroSuicideJax.org



WHAT TO SAY:

Asking directly if someone has suicidal thoughts may be intimidating, but doing so does not cause suicide or increase suicidal thoughts. It gives someone struggling the chance to share their pain and get help. It is just as important to listen without judgment and respond in a helpful way. There is no set script of what to say, but these are a few ways mental health experts* suggest broaching the conversation:

"I'm so glad you told me."

This simple phrase offers no advice, no condemnation – it shows that you are non-judgmental and provides an open door for them to talk. Acknowledge their courage in sharing and thank them for their trust.

"I'm sad you're hurting like this."

This is a great way to express empathy – as long as you do so without adding anything that negates how they are feeling or noting all the good things in their life. You can accompany a statement like this with gentle follow-up questions that allow them to express their pain, then actively listen.

"What's going on that makes you want to die?"

It can be helpful to ask questions that allow them to share their reasons. Refrain from trying to solve their problems or note why things aren't that bad. You can acknowledge their feelings with comments like "I can see why that's painful," or "That sounds hard."

"When do you think you'll act on your suicidal thoughts?"

This type of risk-assessment question, along with others like "What ways do you think of killing yourself?" and "Do you have a gun?" will help you determine how quickly you need to access outside help or if you need to remove things like prescription pills or a firearm. If you feel they are in immediate danger, it's essential to call 911.

"Help is available."

It's important to let them know they are not alone and connect them with help. One of the best ways to get immediate assistance is by calling the Suicide & Crisis Hotline at 988, which is available 24 hours per day, 365 days per year. There is also a text and chat service available at 988lifeline.org. In addition to making this connection, ask the person struggling in what ways you can continue to provide support.

**Source: Stacey Freedenthal, PhD, LCSW as reported online by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI).*

WHAT NOT TO SAY:

In addition to educating yourself on helpful things to say, it's also helpful to eliminate some common responses that can make those struggling regret sharing their feelings. Although everyone is different, here are a few things experts** generally suggest not saying:

"You don't mean that. You don't really want to die."

Although this is often an initial expression of shock when one hears about another's pain, it can feel dismissive and hurtful to someone already in a bad place. It's a hard thing to share, so always assume the person is serious.

"You have so much to live for."

While the intentions of this statement are good and it seems intuitive to list reasons a person has to live, it can convey a deep lack of understanding to the person who is struggling.

"I (your parents, your spouse, etc.) would be devastated if you killed yourself."

Even though you are trying to express how valued and loved that person is, this can layer guilt on top of the pain they are already feeling.

"Suicide is selfish or cowardly."

These statements can cause more guilt or shame when they are already carrying a heavy load. Consider that while it's certainly not the case, those who are suicidal often think they are relieving others of a burden by ending their own life.

***Source: Stacey Freedenthal, PhD, LCSW as reported online by SpeakingOfSuicide.com.*

RESOURCES

There are a wide range of resources that provide suicide awareness information and connections for obtaining help. Here are a few helpful links:

[988Lifeline.org](https://988lifeline.org) | SpeakingOfSuicide.com
StaceyFreedenthal.com | Child-Suicidal.gr8.com

For Crisis Assistance call 988

Learn more at
ZeroSuicideJax.org

