Worried about someone?

Supporting people with thoughts of suicide

"Many people think about suicide at some point – around 1 in 4 of us over our lifetime, and 1 in 15 in any given year – but the overwhelming majority do not go on to take their own lives."

Thoughts of suicide can happen to anyone. People may feel suicidal because something has happened that feels too overwhelming to cope with. This might be a situation that has built up over time, a series of difficult events, or a recent experience such as a relationship breakdown, redundancy or money problems. Whatever the cause, people may feel isolated and alone, believing others would be better off without them or that death is their only escape.

But thoughts of suicide aren't permanent. Things can improve, and people can find hope and reasons to keep going.

We can all play a part in supporting someone with thoughts of suicide. You don't have to be an expert. Family, friends and colleagues can all start lifesaving conversations and help someone stay safe and find hope.

Be alert

Some people may be very direct that they are thinking of suicide or that life feels so tough they want to die. Others may not communicate this so openly. They might be scared of these thoughts, worried about what others might think, or confused by how they feel.

Helping someone starts with recognising the signs that they may be struggling with thoughts of suicide. Put the pieces together – like a jigsaw – from what they say, what you notice, and what's happening in their life.

What we might hear

Talking about wanting to stop living:
"I don't want to be here anymore."
"I want to close my eyes and never wake up."

Feeling like a burden or that they have let people down:
"People would be better off without me." "I've let everybody down."

Feeling trapped, like there is no way out of their situation:
"I can't see a way out of this."
"Things are never going to get better."

Saying things feel unbearable:
"I need to find a way to make the pain stop." "I feel like I'm sinking into a dark hole." "What's the point?"

Feeling disconnected or alone:
"No one understands me."
"I'm totally on my own now."

Suggesting they won't be around much longer or saying goodbyes out of context:
"You won't have to worry about me for much longer."
"I won't be around to care."

What we might see

- Avoiding friends or family
- Deterioration in mental health
- Lack of enjoyment or engagement in hobbies, school or work
- Not caring about their appearance or what people think of them
- Becoming increasingly angry with the world
- Looking at suicide-related content on the internet or social media
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Risk-taking behaviour like picking fights, reckless sex, gambling or driving dangerously
- Self-harming, particularly an increase in how often they hurt themselves, or hurting themselves more severely
- Putting things in order, giving away their possessions, or saying goodbye in strange ways
- Sudden improvement in mood after a long time feeling down

What might be happening

- Bereavement
- Relationship breakdowns
- Contact with the police and criminal justice system
- Social isolation
- Shameful or embarrassing events like sextortion or revenge porn
- Bullying, abusive or coercive relationships, or neglect
- Academic or work pressures
- Physical illnesses and chronic pain
- Debt, housing or money issues
- Mental health problems, particularly depression
- An accumulation of different problems

These aren't full lists, and not everyone will show clear signs that something is wrong. Sometimes, we simply have a gut feeling that something isn't right. It's important to trust and pay attention to these gut feelings.

Ask directly

If you see some of the signs, or your gut is telling you something's just not right, and you are concerned that the person might be having thoughts of suicide, then you need to ask, and ask directly, "Are you having thoughts of suicide?"

It might feel like a scary thing to do, but be brave, take a deep breath, and just ask. If we are brave enough to ask, then it might just help that person be brave enough to open up about how they are feeling. Asking someone if they are having thoughts of suicide won't put the idea in their head. This is a common fear, but all the research shows us this does not happen. And asking might just be the start of a lifesaving conversation.

When you ask, do it directly and clearly, and let them know why you are asking – what you have heard them say, how they are behaving, or what's happening in their life. For example:

> **"Sometimes when people say 'they don't want to be here anymore' they might be having thoughts of suicide. Are you having thoughts of suicide?"**
> **or**
> **"Sometimes when people start self-harming more, they might be having thoughts about wanting to die. Are you thinking about suicide?"**

Don't tiptoe around the subject, use euphemisms or make light of the subject. And don't be too quick to accept denials or jokes as responses.

Trust your gut instinct. If you are at all concerned that someone is having thoughts of suicide – ASK them and ask directly:

"Are you having thoughts of suicide?"

Every life matters

Charity No. 1180815

every-life-matters.org.uk

Explore our Suicide Crisis Guides in the Resource Library on our website

Be alert
For the warning signs

Ask directly
Trust your instincts and
ask directly about thoughts of suicide

Listen carefully
Take time to listen to what's going on in their life and how they are feeling.

Safety check
Check whether it's more urgent they get help, or if it's an emergency.

Build support
Explore together where they can get help and support, and agree what they'll do if things get worse.

Check in
Keep checking in, keep the conversation going and keep being there for them.

Listen carefully

- **Reassure them:** Tell them you're glad they spoke to you, that help is available, and you're there for them.
- **Give them time:** Give them time, go somewhere private.
- **Take suicide seriously:** Always assume they are being honest about how they feel.
- **Take their feelings seriously:** Acknowledge what they're saying without dismissing it.
- **Don't judge:** Stay calm and supportive, even if you feel shocked or upset.
- **You don't need all the answers:** It's OK to say, "I don't know what to say, but I'm here for you."
- **Ask open questions:** Encourage them to talk, e.g., "What happened?" or "When did you start feeling like this?"
- **Use gentle prompts:** Try phrases like "Tell me more." or reflect words they've used, such as "Overwhelmed?"
- **Avoid clichés:** Don't say things like "Pull yourself together!" or "It's not that bad."
- **Be direct:** It's OK to ask about suicide and how safe they feel.

Safety check

Sometimes you may need to be more assertive in helping someone get support. This is especially important if they:

- Have started planning how, where or when they might end their life.
- Have started preparing to end their life, for example by collecting items, writing a suicide note, putting their affairs in order or saying goodbye.
- Tell you they have tried to end their life before.

You should also act more urgently if they:

- Are self-harming more often or more severely.
- Are drinking more alcohol or taking drugs.
- Are having more frequent or overwhelming thoughts of suicide.

If any of these apply, encourage them to get help as soon as possible.

Ask them to call NHS 111 option 2 and stay with them whilst they do. Make sure they explain they are having thoughts of suicide and why urgent support is needed. If they're too distressed, you can call for them or help arrange an urgent GP appointment.

NHS 111 or their GP should refer them to local mental health crisis support. You may need to advocate on their behalf by clearly explaining why you believe they are at increased risk.

It's OK to ask if they have been planning or preparing to end their life, or if they have tried before. Asking won't make things worse.

In an emergency

- **If the person has made a suicide attempt, call 999 immediately.** Tell the operator what has happened and where they are. The operator will guide you through what to do. They may need urgent physical and mental health care.

- **If someone tells you they are about to kill themselves and then goes missing or you can't contact them, call 999.** Calling the emergency services can feel daunting, but it could save a life and help someone get the support they need.

Check in

Having someone by their side and knowing people care can make a real difference. Keep checking in and keep the conversation going, including about their thoughts of suicide. Don't be afraid to ask how they're feeling.

Remember to look after yourself too. Supporting someone with thoughts of suicide can be upsetting. Take time for yourself and be honest if it feels too much. Samaritans are there for people supporting someone else. It's OK to contact them.

Build support

- **Build a support network:** Friends and family can provide valuable emotional and practical support. Help the person identify one or two people they can call or message if things get worse. **A simple cue, like sending a specific emoji or word, can make it easier to reach out.**
- **Encourage a GP appointment:** They can refer the person to mental health services. Offer to go with them and help them prepare using resources like **www.docready.org**.
- **Save helpline numbers:** Add services like Samaritans to their phone.
- **Explore support together:** Use support directories such as Every Life Matters and Hub of Hope to find local, national and online services. If it's work-related, check what support their employer offers.
- **Help tackle practical problems:** Support them to address issues contributing to their suicidal thoughts. Having someone alongside them can make it much easier to access help.
- **Create a safety plan:** Help them develop a plan for coping with suicidal thoughts. See the QR code below.

Samaritans
Call: 116 123
24/7 365 days a year

Every Life Matters Support Directory

Find out more about safety planning

Hub of Hope