

THE ART OF CONVERSATION

A guide to talking, listening
and reducing stigma
surrounding suicide.

Suicide prevention in Scotland



This resource may also be made available
on request in the following formats:



✉ Email: enquiry@unitedtopreventsuicide.org.uk

ask. tell.

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about suicide is a way to reduce the stigma
which prevents many people from seeking help
or talking about how they are feeling.

The art of conversation is one way we are able
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save lives.

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Suicide: the myths

People who talk about suicide never attempt or complete suicide.

People who talk about their suicidal thoughts may also attempt suicide. Many people who complete suicide have told someone about their suicidal feelings in the weeks prior to their death. Listening to and supporting people in these circumstances can save lives.

If somebody wants to end their life, they will, and there is nothing anybody can do about it.

Most people contemplating suicide do not want to die; they want to end the pain they are suffering. Although there are some occasions when nobody could predict a death by suicide, in many cases a tragic outcome may be averted if appropriate help and support is offered to a person and they are willing to accept this help.

Talking about suicide or asking someone if they feel suicidal will encourage suicide attempts.

Serious talk about suicide does not create or increase risk; it can help to reduce it. The best way to identify the possibility of suicide is to ask directly. Openly listening to and discussing someone's thoughts of suicide can be a source of relief for them and can be key to preventing the immediate danger of suicide.

Some people are always suicidal.

Some groups, sub-cultures or ages are particularly associated with suicide. While some groups are at increased risk, suicide can affect all ages, across gender and cultures. Many people think about suicide in passing at some time or another. There isn't a 'type' for suicide and, while there may be warning signs, they aren't always noticed. Individuals who have made an attempt to take their own life in the past can be at increased risk of completing suicide but, with appropriate help and support, people can and do move on.

If a person has made previous attempts they won't do it for real.

Those who have attempted suicide once are at much greater risk of attempting again. They need to be taken seriously and given support and help to find a safe resolution for their suicidal thoughts and actions.

When a person shows signs of feeling better, the danger is over.

Often the risk of suicide can be greatest as depression lifts, or when a person appears calm after a period of turmoil. This may be because once a decision to attempt suicide is made, people may feel they have found a solution, however desperate it may be.

The facts



Suicide rates tend to fluctuate over time and even though they have started to fall, they are still high. The positive work needs to continue as:

every day around two people die from suicide in Scotland

around three out of four suicides are by men

67% of people who died by suicide were in employment

almost half of all deaths by suicide are by people aged 35-54

those in the most deprived areas of Scotland have a suicide risk three times the risk compared to the least deprived areas of Scotland

Spotting the signs and helping

If you suspect someone may be feeling suicidal, ask them - it could save their life.

Most people thinking about suicide will try to let someone know. There are several signs to watch out for. The key to helping is watching out for the warning signs and knowing what to do to help. Everyone is different so in some cases few or none of the signs will be evident.

Common signs that someone you know may be at risk of suicide:

- They talk about wanting to die and don't see the point of living, or a way out of their situation. They may say they feel trapped.
- They have been through stressful life events or have experienced significant losses and don't seem to be coping.
- They give away prized possessions.
- They start putting things in order, like arranging wills, pet care or childcare.
- They show marked changes in behaviour, appearance or mood; they may seem distracted, sad, distant or lacking in concentration. Also, watch out for sudden uplift in mood or calmness as this can sometimes be because the person feels they have found a solution to their problems, no matter how drastic this may be.
- They have made a previous suicide attempt.

You can help. Be ALERT:



Ask if they are thinking about suicide.



Listen and show you care.



Encourage them to get help.



Right now.



Tell someone.

You may feel frightened to bring up the subject of suicide in case you think it will put the idea in their head. This is not true. Don't hesitate to raise the subject. Be direct in a caring and supportive way.

Let the person talk about their feelings and listen carefully to what they have to say. Try not to judge them. Rather than dismissing their thoughts as 'silly', try to understand why they are feeling this way. Let them know you care.

Now is the time to move forward with hope and get help to keep the person safe. You may feel out of your depth to help further, but there are people out there who can. Encourage the person to make an appointment with their GP, or to call Breathing Space or Samaritans. Breathing Space can let you know about other sources of local and national help.

If the person has an immediate suicide plan and means to carry it out, do not leave them alone. Get help immediately by phoning a doctor, 999, a local crisis support service, Samaritans or NHS 24 Mental Health Hub.

Never promise secrecy. Dealing with suicide can be difficult and you can't do it alone. Find someone to talk to about your own feelings.

Helplines

Samaritans

116 123

Calls are free.

NHS 24 Mental Health Hub

111

24 hours, every day.

Breathing Space

0800 83 85 87

(Mon–Thurs: 6 pm–2 am;
Fri 6 pm–Mon 6 am)

Calls are free.

Starting difficult conversations

Talking with friends or loved ones about their problems is never easy.

Often they don't want to talk. Sometimes they do, and we just don't realise it. When they do start talking, it can be difficult to know how to respond. If a problem is really bad, what can we say?

Every situation is different, and there are no definitive answers. But here are some suggestions to help you start talking in difficult, challenging situations. Starting a conversation is half the battle. Once someone knows they can speak freely, the chances are that they will talk.

How do you know there's a problem?

A lot of us prefer not to talk about our problems. Needing help can be seen as weak or shameful. But if friends or loved ones don't tell us something's bothering them, how are we supposed to know?



Sometimes people do put out signals tentatively. The signs are often there if we know what to look for. Here are some of the ways that people signal that they may need help:

Putting themselves down in a serious or jokey way, like 'Oh, no one loves me' or 'I'm a waste of space'.

Losing interest in their appearance.

Using drugs and/or alcohol as a comfort.

Changes in sleeping and/or eating habits.

Being uncharacteristically clumsy or accident prone.

Making leading statements, like 'You wouldn't believe what I've been through' or 'Someone up there's got it in for me'.

Some of the ways you can approach difficult conversations:

By being understanding, tactful and gentle, there's a better chance that someone will want to talk. Some useful phrases are 'Is there anything I can do?', 'Why don't we have a coffee and talk about it?', 'I've been a bit worried about you', 'Are you OK?' and 'I'd like to help'.

Don't tell - ask

You might feel that you don't know how to help someone, because you don't know what to tell them. But you don't have to tell them anything.

The best way to help is to ask questions. That way you leave the other person in control. By asking questions, the person you are talking with finds their own answers.

All of these questions effectively ask the person you're talking with to examine, honestly, the problems they're experiencing. The only question to try to avoid is 'why?' – it can sound challenging, and put the other person on the defensive.

All you need to do is start the conversation, so that these questions are raised. Nobody expects you to know the answers. Not knowing the answers doesn't mean you're not helping.

Getting help: go to unitedtopreventsuicide.org.uk for useful contacts and support”

WHEN

'When did you realise?'

HOW

'How did that feel?'

Here are some questions which can lead conversations into useful areas:

WHERE

'Where did that happen?'

WHAT

'What else happened?'

How to be a good listener

We can all think of situations where we found it hard to talk about something that was troubling us. Difficult, painful or just embarrassing situations, which we found almost impossible to speak to someone about.

Imagine you've got a close friend who needs to get something difficult off their chest. How do you get them to open up?

Active listening is a way of listening which helps people talk through their problems, no matter how difficult they find it to put into words. It sounds a strange idea. We assume that when we listen, we don't actually do anything. Well, not necessarily.

With active listening, although you do some talking, you're really just acting as a sounding board. What you say doesn't influence what the other person has to say. It just helps them to talk.

All too often, we say things which bring conversations to a halt, like 'I know just how you feel' or 'Try not to worry about it'. Although they're meant well, they don't encourage the person you're speaking with to continue talking. They tend to wrap up what the other person was just saying instead. With active listening, you can avoid this.



Five steps to active listening

Open questions	Rather than asking questions which only require a yes or no answer, try to ask open questions. For example, instead of saying 'Has this been going on for a long time?' ask 'How long has this been going on?'. That way, instead of closing the conversation down into a yes or no response, you open it out and encourage the other person to keep talking.
Summarising	It helps to show that you've listened to, and understood, what's been said. You can do this by summarising. For example, 'So you're being treated terribly by your partner, but you still love them?'.
Reflecting	Repeating back a word or phrase can encourage people to go on. If someone says 'So it's been really difficult recently', you can keep the conversation going simply by reflecting on this and saying, 'It sounds like it's been really difficult for you'.
Clarifying	We all skirt around or gloss over the most difficult things. If we can avoid saying them, we will. If the person you're speaking with glosses over an important point, try saying 'Tell me more about...' or '...sounds a difficult area for you'. This can help them clarify the points, not only for you, but for themselves.
Reacting	You don't have to be completely neutral. If whoever you're talking with has been having an absolutely dreadful time, some sympathy and understanding is vital. 'That must have been difficult' or 'You've had an awful time' can be helpful things to say.



All of this sounds quite simple. And it is. All you're doing is listening, and from time to time giving responses which encourage the other person to keep talking. That's the key – get them to keep talking.

We have given you guidance throughout this booklet to help you in starting difficult conversations. For more information, go to www.unitedtopreventsuicide.org.uk

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