



# How to help someone at risk

“He used to be pretty relaxed, but he started getting angry a lot of the time. It was a bit awkward at first to know what to say, but I’m glad I tried. We talked about a crisis plan in case he ever had suicidal thoughts again.”

For someone experiencing a mental health issue like anxiety or depression, a support system is vital. As a colleague, friend or family member, you might be the first to notice changes in someone’s mood or behaviours. You can also become a strong motivator for someone to seek help.

Your support could be crucial to your friend or loved one’s recovery; showing that you care and that they’re not alone. It may also help them to confront the issue and provide a source of strength to assist in their recovery.

## What are the signs that someone is struggling?

Some people will show warning signs before acting on suicidal thoughts. Some things to look out for are:

- Mentioning death, dying, suicide or showing a particular interest in these topics.
- Talking about not seeing a reason for living, feeling helpless, or that things feel pointless.
- Being more moody or sad than usual.
- Withdrawing from others.
- Putting their affairs in order (i.e. packing away their desk, finishing paperwork, finalising a will, returning things they have borrowed).
- Risky behaviours (excessive drinking, reckless driving or behaving in ways that show little regard for their safety or wellbeing).
- A sudden shift to being very positive after a long period of seeming down.

Other warning signs can be found at The Black Dog Institute website.

Certain life stressors or circumstances may also increase a person’s risk of suicide. These include

- Recent loss including the death of a loved one, relationship breakdown, estrangement from children, losing a job, a significant financial loss or financial strain, or the death of a pet.
- Major disappointment like a missed job promotion or failed exam.
- Major change in circumstances, for example a separation or divorce, retirement, redundancy or children leaving home.
- Mental or physical illness in the family.
- Suicide of a family member, friend or public figure.
- Financial, legal problems, disciplinary sanction or investigations.

## How do I start a conversation?

Asking someone how they are feeling, or if they are coping, can be hard. If you don't know how to start a conversation, try these tips:

- Mention that you've noticed changes in their mood or behaviour, for example, "you've been looking stressed lately" or, "I've noticed you seem more tired than usual". Comments like this are likely to be better received than direct references to depression or anxiety.
- Try to avoid empty clichés and phrases like 'Cheer up', 'I'm sure it'll pass' and 'It could be worse'. These can make the person feel more isolated. Instead, be empathic, open minded and non-judgemental.
- Think of some new ways to keep in touch. Some people might prefer a text message or email, while others like talking on the phone or catching up for a face-to-face chat.
- Encourage the person to do something that might help. Try not to suggest anything unrealistic or demanding here. Suggest something small, like having coffee or going for a walk together.
- Encourage them to get professional support from Police Wellbeing Services (1300 090 995), Employee Assistance Program (Link to get help) or their General Practitioner.

## How to talk about suicide

People experiencing a mental health issue, or those experiencing a range of personal stressors can sometimes think about suicide. Often, people who are considering suicide don't necessarily want to die, they just want to stop having painful thoughts and feelings.

When asking someone about suicide you can make a big difference by staying calm, letting them know you are there to help, and by acting quickly.

## When in doubt, just ask

Don't be afraid to tell the person that you've noticed a change in their behaviour and want to know how things are going. Be kind, but direct.

Ask them, "Are you thinking about suicide?"

Assess the person's safety by asking if they've thought about how, when and where they are considering suicide. Asking about suicide in detail can decrease risk because it helps the person feel heard and less alone.

Give them space to talk about what is happening before moving onto the topic of what to do next.

Conversations Matter is a great online resource that talks you through how to ask about suicide.

## What do I do in a crisis?

### Have a plan

If someone you care about is struggling with suicidal thoughts, a crisis plan can be a helpful tool, giving you a plan to follow if symptoms get worse.

A crisis plan might involve strategies to manage mood, as well as a list of contact details of friends, family and health professionals who can help.

It's a good idea to discuss with the person how you can support them to use the crisis plan and store the plan in a place that's easy to access. Beyond Now, developed by Beyond Blue, is an app that can help you step-by-step.

## Act immediately

If you believe the person is at immediate risk of harming themselves:

- Stay with them and listen.
- Check their safety – are they physically safe where they are re surroundings (balconies, train tracks, cars).
- Make sure they don't have access to methods of harming themselves, such as poison or a weapon.
- If you have a crisis plan in place, follow it.

## Seek additional support

You don't have to handle this on your own.

- Take the person to the emergency department of your local hospital, where health professionals will be able to assess the situation and decide on the best course of action.
- Call the local Crisis Assessment and Treatment Team (CATT). The CAT Team are staffed by psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers and nurses and are available 24 hours a day. They offer an initial phone assessment and will get in touch with other treating professionals if required. They may offer to visit the person at home or organise hospital treatment. Phone your local hospital to contact them.
- Contact their health professional if they are currently seeking treatment from a psychologist, social worker or counsellor.
- Contact the Victoria Police Wellbeing Services for assessment and support on 1300 090 995.
- Call a free 24-hour telephone support service such as:  
Lifeline Telephone Counselling 13 11 14.  
Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467.

## Check in

Check back in with the person once the crisis has passed and encourage them to get ongoing professional help. Let them know you care about them and that you're happy they took steps to keep themselves safe.

Make sure you access counselling or other support for yourself if you need it. It can be difficult to see someone you care about in pain, and you don't have to go through it alone.



**Alcohol and Drug  
Information Services VIC**  
1800 888 236



**Turning Point**  
[www.turningpoint.org.au](http://www.turningpoint.org.au)



**Police Wellbeing Services**  
1300 090 995