

TWU Counseling Center

How you can help a suicidal friend

Listen

The first thing a person in a mental crisis is someone who will listen and really hear what he or she is saying. Every effort should be made to understand the feelings behind the words.

Evaluate the seriousness of the individual's thoughts and feelings

If the person has made clear self-destructive plans, the problem is apt to be more accurate than when his or her thinking is less definite.

Evaluate the intensity or severity of the emotional disturbances

It is possible that the person may be extremely upset but not suicidal. If a person has been depressed and then becomes agitated and moves about restlessly, it is usually a cause of alarm.

Take every complaint and feeling the person expresses seriously

Do not dismiss or undervalue what the person is saying. In some instances, the person may express his or her difficulty in a low key, but beneath his or her seeming calm may be profoundly distressed feelings. All suicidal talk should be taken seriously.

Do not be afraid to ask directly if the individual has entertained thoughts of suicide.

Suicide may be suggested but not openly mentioned in the crisis period. Experience shows that inquiring directly into such thoughts at an appropriate time rarely does harm. As a matter of fact, the individual frequently welcomes the query and is glad to have the opportunity to open up and bring it out.

Evaluate the resources available

Does the individual have others you can contact? If so, contact family and close friends to help.

Help the person to increase his perception of alternatives to suicide

Look at the individual's hopes to accomplish by suicide and generate alternative ways of reaching the same goals. Suicidal persons have often prematurely ruled out perfectly viable options or have generated only one or two solutions to a problem before giving up hope.

Act specifically

Do something tangible; that is, give the person something definite to hang onto, such as arranging to see him or her later or subsequently contacting another person. Nothing is more frustrating to the person than to feel as though nothing has happened as a result of talking.

Ask for assistance or consultation

Call upon whoever is needed. Do not try to handle everything alone. Convey an attitude of firmness and composure to the person, and call for help or encourage the person to seek help.

Additional preventive techniques

- Arrange for a receptive individual to stay with the person during the acute crisis.
- Do not treat the individual with horror or deny his or her thinking.
- Make the environment as safe and provocation-free as possible.
- Never challenge the individual in an attempt to shock him out of his or her ideas.
- Do not try to win arguments about suicide. They cannot be won.
- Offer and supply emotional support.
- Give reassurance that depressed feelings are temporary and will pass.
- Point out that, while life exists, there is always a chance for help and resolution of the problems, but that death is final.
- Focus upon survivors by reminding the person about the rights of others. He or she will leave family members and friends with the emotional aftermath of suicide.
- Do not leave the person isolated or unobserved for any appreciable time if he or she is acutely distressed.