Conversations Matter when someone is thinking about suicide

I’m worried that someone I know may be thinking about suicide.

What do I say? What do I do?
• Many of us will notice changes in people around us and get the feeling that “something is not right”.
• You may not want to say anything for fear of making the situation worse or because you don’t know what to say if they confirm your concerns.
• While these conversations can be very confronting, there is a lot you can do.

By talking to the person and getting further information, you can assist them to talk to others and get the professional support they may need.

You may be thinking...
“What if I am wrong?”
“What if I plant the idea in their mind?”
“What if they say ‘no, I am not OK’?”
“What if I say the wrong thing?”

They may be thinking...
“I don’t know how to explain what’s going on.”
“I don’t want to be a burden.”
“They will think I’m weak.”
“They’ll think I just want attention.”
“No one can help me”
Tip 1: Act on observations

Possible warning signs for suicidal behaviour include:

- Previous suicide attempts
- Talking or writing about suicide or death, even jokingly
- Seeking access to something lethal
- Being moody, withdrawn or sad
- Saying goodbye or giving away possessions
- Losing interest in things they previously enjoyed
- Taking less care of their appearance
- Anxiety or agitation, including difficulty concentrating or sleeping
- Engaging in self-destructive or risky behaviour
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Withdrawal from other people.

For further information, see ‘Supporting Fact Sheet: Risk factors and warning signs’.
• People may express a belief that they are a burden on others or that others will be better off without them.

  “No one would care if I was gone.”

  “If I was dead people wouldn’t have to worry about me.”

• Take any statements about death or suicide seriously.

  “I don’t want to be here anymore.”

  “I wish I could go to sleep and never wake up.”

  “I want to kill myself.”

✓ **Tip 2:**

Manage your thoughts and fears
It is generally better to ask than to say nothing at all.

- Asking someone whether they are thinking about suicide is unlikely to make the situation worse or ‘put ideas in their head’.
- Having someone to talk to may provide the person with relief at being heard and understood, and it provides an opportunity to get more information.

You can help by showing that you care.

Try to get them to talk to a professional to assist them with how they are feeling.

If the person is not thinking about suicide, it can still be an opportunity to have an important and helpful discussion.

- You may end up talking to someone you have no previous connection with.
- If this happens, help them feel at ease and keep them talking while you explore their feelings and find out who else they might be able to talk to.
Tip 3: Prepare in advance

- Have the conversation somewhere private.
- Choose a location where you both feel safe and at ease.
- It is usually best to have the conversation in person, however that may not always be possible.

If you are not with the person or find out their location and if anyone else is with them.
• It is not recommended to have the conversation in a public setting, such as in a group setting or on a social media page.
• Make time for the conversation.
• If you can’t follow through, try to find someone who can.

The person may be open to talking confidentially to someone over the telephone or an online chat service.

✓ Tip 4: Start the conversation
• You may want to start by saying that you are worried and what has made you concerned.
• For example:

  “I have been worried about you lately.”

  “I’ve noticed some differences in you lately and I’m just wondering how you are?”

• If someone posts a comment online that makes it sound like they’re thinking about suicide, encourage them to chat to you in private by contacting them directly.

  “I am completely over it. No one would miss me if I wasn’t around anymore.”

  “Hi mate, I saw your post on Facebook and I am a bit worried about you. Do you have time for a chat?”
✓ Tip 5: Listen without judgement

- Let the person express their feelings without interruption.
- Take them seriously and acknowledge the reasons the person wants to die.
- Remember, it doesn’t matter whether you think the issue is serious, it is what the person thinks that is most important.

x “Try not to worry about it”

x “It doesn’t sound so bad”

✓ “It sounds like you are really low”

✓ “I can see this is worrying for you”
✓ **Tip 6:**
*Get the person talking*

- Use **open-ended** questions so that you get a better understanding of their situation, thoughts and feelings.
- Remember that someone’s gender, age, cultural background and a range of other factors about them may influence how they talk about what they are experiencing.

**OPEN-ENDED:**
✓ “How long has this been going on?”

**CLOSED:**
× “Has this been going on for long?”
Tips for non-verbal communication:

- Make yourself comfortable but ensure you look interested in what the other person is saying.
- Maintain eye contact. Where this is not culturally appropriate or makes the person uncomfortable, sit alongside them.
- Show you are listening – e.g. by nodding.

If you are talking via telephone or sending a message you can still put the person at ease by responding in breaks, to show you are listening.

✓ Tip 7: Ask directly about suicide
• Ask directly and in a non-judgemental way whether the person is thinking about suicide.

• The rapport you have built should make it easier to ask this question. Ask without judgement and in a way that allows people to tell the truth.

**ASK questions like:**

✓ “Are you having thoughts about suicide?”

**AVOID questions like:**

x “You’re not thinking of suicide are you?”

• Let the person know that many people think about suicide and that it is OK to talk about feelings.

• Try to offer hope and suggest that people can find ways to get through tough times.

✓ “I may not know how you feel, but I do want to help you get through this.”
Tip 8: Ask about plans

- People are usually at higher risk when they have a specific plan.
- You may need to ask direct questions to find out how detailed the person’s plans are.
  - “Have you thought about how you would kill yourself?”
  - “Have you thought about when you would kill yourself?”
  - “Have you taken any steps to get the things you would need to carry out your plan?”
✓ **Tip 9:**
*Ask further questions to determine risk*

- People who have attempted suicide in the past or have been exposed to the suicide of someone close to them can be at increased risk of dying by suicide.
- Ask questions that help you get a better understanding.

✓ You may want to **ASK**:

  “When did you first have thoughts about suicide?”

  “Has anything happened recently that has made you feel worse?”
✓ **Tip 10:**

*Keep the person safe*

- If you are concerned the person might take their life soon, then contact emergency services **immediately**.
- Stay with the person or ensure someone else is with the person until support arrives.
- Talk to them about who else they could tell and involve.

Don’t keep it a secret. The number one priority is to keep the person safe, even if this means breaking confidentiality to get someone else involved.
✓ **Tip 11:**

*Encourage and support help-seeking*

- Involve the person in identifying other people that might be able to help.
- There are many options available.
- Make an appointment with a doctor, talk to a counsellor or other health professional or access a confidential telephone or online counselling service.
- They may need support to make the first appointment.

You may need to talk to a professional about what you have learned, or contact a service on the other person’s behalf.
**Tip 12:**

*Look after yourself*

- It can be emotionally draining supporting someone through a crisis.
- Make sure you check your own responses and get help if you need it.
- Talk it through with someone you trust.

*If you have had the conversation with someone you’re worried about, and later they make an attempt to end their life, seek immediate help for yourself.*
✓ Tip 13: Learn about other services and supports

Things to remember
✓ Act on observations
✓ Manage your thoughts and fears
✓ Prepare in advance
✓ Start the conversation
✓ Listen without judgement
✓ Get the person talking

✓ Ask directly
✓ Ask about plans
✓ Ask further questions to determine risk
✓ Keep the person safe
✓ Encourage and support the person to seek help
✓ Look after yourself
✓ Learn about services

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