

## Tip sheet

# Navigating conversations about suicide

If someone you know is having suicidal thoughts, it's important to take this seriously, and give them the opportunity to talk about it – either with yourself or someone else they trust.

Sometimes a person will approach you directly to talk about it, but other times you might notice what you think are warning signs, and have to decide how to start the conversation. Warning signs aren't always obvious or indicators on their own, but a pattern of risk factors could mean that it's time to talk.

### It's also important to note that:

- not everyone displays any outward sign to others that they may be thinking of suicide;
- expressing what seem to be suicidal thoughts doesn't mean they'll be acted on – but it's still important to attend to how the person is feeling at that point, and what those thoughts signify for them.

## Risks and warning signs

### General risk factors

We all may be at risk at some time in our lives, especially in situations that seem insurmountable and ongoing. Some people may be more at risk than others however, including those with experience of:

- previous suicide attempts
- suicide among family or friends
- depression or other mental illness
- alcohol or drug abuse
- significant adverse life events or loss (recent or in the past)
- few or no strong family, social or community connections.

### Warning signs that someone may be considering suicide in the near future

- Threatening or talking about wanting to hurt themselves or end their life
- Looking for ways to kill themselves by trying to access firearms, medication or other means. Risk is increased for those who have easy access to lethal methods

- Talking or writing about death, dying or suicide, when these actions are out of the ordinary for them.

### Additional warning signs

- Talking about having no reason for living; no sense of purpose in life; feeling hopeless and helpless
- Feeling trapped, like there's no way out
- Hopelessness or feeling as if they are a burden on others
- Increased substance use
- Anxiety, agitation, unable to sleep or sleeping all the time
- Withdrawal from friends, family, society, or usual activities
- Acting recklessly or engaging in risky activities, seemingly without thinking
- Giving meaningful items away
- Avoiding committing to future events
- Dramatic mood and behaviour changes. To note, sometimes a sudden improvement in mood, energy and attitude after a long phase of low mood can be a warning sign.

You may not understand the significance of what you've noticed at the time (sometimes it only makes sense with hindsight), but it's important to have a conversation with the person about it. It doesn't matter if you're a friend, family member or colleague – showing that you're concerned and care about the person's welfare, and supporting them to get help is what's most important.

## How you can help at work

### Pay attention to changes in behaviour

Be extra vigilant around an at-risk colleague, keeping an eye on any further changes that may hint at a decline in their wellbeing.

### Listen nonjudgmentally

Create a safe space and actively listen without dismissing their feelings or offering immediate solutions.

### **Show empathy and concern**

Express genuine care and concern for their well-being without making them feel guilty or pressured.

### **Encourage professional help**

Gently suggest seeking professional support, such as counselling, mental health services, or seeing their GP, and offer help to connect them with resources. At work, this might include their manager.

### **Maintain confidentiality, unless...**

Respect their privacy and avoid sharing personal details with others **unless** it's important for their safety; the person doesn't have other support; or you feel as if you need to seek advice. If you feel you have to speak to someone else e.g. a workplace manager, wellbeing team, or someone close to them, tell the person and ask who would be best, and if they'd like to do this themselves or want you to go with them.

### **Follow up**

Check in on them from time to time to see how they are.

## **Talking about suicide**

Many people are uncomfortable with the topic of suicide. Often people who attempt to end their lives are blamed, and their families and friends are left feeling responsible. Some people are afraid that talking about it will make it more likely – this is untrue. As a result, people are reluctant to communicate openly about suicidal thoughts. This secrecy reduces effective prevention.

### **Starting the conversation**

If they haven't directly told you about how they're thinking or feeling, but you're worried about them, tell them what you've noticed.

Ask if they'd like to talk about what's going on for them with you or someone else (then or some other time soon if they don't have an imminent plan).

Don't be afraid to ask the person directly about their thoughts of suicide and what they are planning if you feel able to. If they have a specific plan, they need help right away. Stay with them or connect them to someone who can.

Help them find and access the support they need from people they trust.

Let the person discuss their feelings openly, while trying to stay hopeful and reassuring. Ask them if they've ever felt this way before and what their coping strategies were back then; they may already have an idea of what could help them in this moment.

Remember not to take too much on yourself. What's most important is getting the person to seek professional help if needed; and connect to other important people - you shouldn't try to support them on your own. Check in with someone you trust.

If you need to talk to someone about support, please call Vitae.

## **Resources**

- <https://mentalhealth.org.nz/conditions/condition/suicide-worried-about-someone>
- <https://www.thelowdown.co.nz/>
- <https://centreofmaorisuicideprevention.com/>

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## **Contact**

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