

Supporting a Friend who Expresses Suicidal Thoughts

Gustavus Adolphus College Counseling Center

When someone says he or she is thinking about suicide, or says things that sound as if the person is considering suicide, it can be very upsetting. You may not be sure what to do to help, whether you should take talk of suicide seriously, or if your intervention might make the situation worse. Taking action is always the best choice. Here's what to do.

Start by Asking Questions and Expressing Support

The first step is to find out whether the person is in danger of acting on suicidal feelings. Be sensitive, but ask direct questions, such as:

- How are you coping with what's been happening in your life?
- Do you ever feel like just giving up?
- Are you thinking about dying?
- Are you thinking about hurting yourself?
- Are you thinking about suicide?
- Have you thought about how you would do it?
- Do you know when you would do it?
- Do you have the means to do it?

Asking about suicidal thoughts or feelings won't push someone into doing something self-destructive. You will not plant the "idea" of suicide into your friend's mind. Rather, offering an opportunity to talk about feelings may reduce the risk of acting on suicidal feelings and open up lines of communication.

Look for warning signs

You can't always tell when a loved one or friend is considering suicide. But here are some common signs:

- Talking about suicide — for example, making statements such as "I'm going to kill myself," "I wish I were dead" or "I wish I hadn't been born"
- Obtaining the means to commit suicide, such as buying a gun or stockpiling pills
- Withdrawing from social contact and wanting to be left alone
- Having mood swings, such as being emotionally high one day and deeply discouraged the next
- Being preoccupied with death, dying or violence
- Feeling trapped or hopeless about a situation
- Increasing use of alcohol or drugs
- Changing normal routine, including eating or sleeping patterns
- Engaging in risky or self-destructive behavior, such as using drugs or driving recklessly
- Giving away belongings or getting affairs in order when there is no other logical explanation for why this is being done
- Saying goodbye to people as if they won't be seen again
- Developing personality changes or being severely anxious or agitated, particularly when experiencing some of the warning signs listed above

Get emergency help, if needed

If you believe someone is in danger of committing suicide or has made a suicide attempt:

- Don't leave the person alone.
- Call 911, Campus Safety, or your local emergency number right away (see the emergency contact List at the end of this handout)
- Inform others in order to develop a support network for you and your friend. Contacting the Dean of Students, Counseling Center, Residence Life Staff, and/or other friends may be beneficial in obtaining the support your friend and you need and deserve.

Never worry alone! If a friend or family member talks or behaves in a way that makes you believe he or she might commit suicide, don't try to handle the situation without help — get help as quickly as possible. The person may need to be hospitalized until the suicidal crisis has passed.

Offer support

If a friend or loved one is thinking about suicide, he or she needs professional help, even if suicide isn't an immediate danger. Here's what you can do.

- **Encourage the person to seek treatment.** Someone who is suicidal or has severe depression may not have the energy or motivation to find help. If your friend or loved one doesn't want to consult a doctor or mental health provider, suggest finding help from a support group, crisis center, faith community, teacher or other trusted person. You can help by offering support and advice — but remember that it's not your job to become a substitute for a mental health provider.
- **Offer to help the person take steps to get assistance and support.** You can offer to go with the person to an appointment with a counselor or medical provider.
- **Encourage the person to communicate with you.** Someone who's suicidal may be tempted to bottle up feelings because he or she feels ashamed, guilty or embarrassed. Be supportive and understanding, and express your opinions without placing blame. Listen attentively and avoid interrupting.
- **Be respectful and acknowledge the person's feelings.** Don't try to talk the person out of his or her feelings or express shock. Remember, even though someone who's suicidal may not be thinking logically, their emotions are real. Not respecting how the person feels can shut down communication. Use "I" statements. For example, "I'm worried about your safety," or, "It makes me afraid to hear you talk about suicide."
- **Don't be patronizing or judgmental.** For example, don't tell someone, "things could be worse" or "you have everything to live for." Instead, ask questions such as, "What's causing you to feel so bad?" "What would make you feel better?" or "How can I help?"
- **Never promise to keep someone's suicidal feelings a secret.** Be understanding, but explain that you may not be able to keep such a promise if you think the person's life is in danger. At that point, you have to get help. Tell them that, because you care about them, you can't keep this a secret.
- **Encourage the person to avoid alcohol and drug use.** Using drugs or alcohol may seem to ease the painful feelings, but ultimately it makes things worse — it can lead to reckless behavior or feeling more depressed.

Take all Signs of Suicidal Behavior Seriously!

If someone you know says he or she is thinking of suicide or is behaving in a way that makes you think the person may be suicidal, don't play it down or ignore the situation. Many people who commit suicide have expressed the intention at some point. You may worry that you're overreacting, but the safety of your friend or loved one is most important. Don't worry about straining your relationship when someone's life is at stake.

Take Care of Yourself

Be sure to take time for yourself. It is important to pay attention to your own health while helping a friend. Know your limits, and don't overextend yourself. Lastly, remember that you're not responsible for preventing someone from taking his or her own life, and that your intervention may help the person see that other options are available to stay safe and get treatment.

Emergency Contact Resources

On Campus Resources

❖ Campus Safety	(507)933-8888
❖ Counseling Center	(507)933-7027
❖ Health Services	(507)933-7630
❖ Dean of Students	(507)933-7526
❖ Residential Life	(507)933-7529
❖ Chaplain Office	(507)933-7446
❖ Sexual Assault (SART)	(507)933-6868

Off Campus Resources

❖ Emergency	911
❖ Crisis Center (Mankato)	(507)344-0621
❖ Rivers Edge Hospital	(507)931-2220
❖ ISJ Hospital (Mankato)	(507)625-4031

24-Hour Confidential Lines

❖ Crisis Connection	(612)379-6363
❖ Suicide Prevention Line	1-800-273-TALK (8255)
❖ First Call for Help	211
❖ Crisis/Warm Line	1-877-399-3040

