

Identifying and Helping Someone Who Is Considering Suicide

Quick Help

If you suspect someone of wanting to commit suicide:

- Ask the person directly (and with empathy) if they have thought about killing themselves.
- If they say yes, inform the advising department immediately.
 - Ask if they have a plan. If they say yes, ask to walk with them to someone who can help immediately (advising staff, [CAPS](#), or police). Try your best to not leave them alone until help can be found or directed otherwise. *Act immediately!*
 - If the student refuses to accompany you to help, contact advising, the [Dean of Students, or Campus Police](#) immediately. Try your best to not leave them alone until help arrives or directed otherwise.
 - If advising is unavailable, contact the [Dean of Students or Campus Police](#) and follow up with advising staff when they become available.
- **If you believe someone poses a threat to themselves or others, call 911 immediately.**
- **Never put your own safety in jeopardy.**

Statistics

According to Campus Health, in 2013:

- 13% of UA students had been diagnosed with depression.
- 8% of UA students had seriously thought about suicide in the past school year.
- 1.4% of UA students had attempted suicide in the past school year.

Warning Signs of Emotional Distress and Suicide

Here are *some* of the things that someone considering suicide may exhibit:

- Talks about:
 - Expressing hopelessness and lack of a future.
 - Being a burden to others.
 - Feeling trapped.
 - Talking about not having to worry about anything anymore.
 - Statements about suicide (talking, writing, singing, drawing, etc. about death or suicide).
- Making Arrangements:
 - Saying goodbye to people.
 - Writing a will.
 - Giving away prized possessions.
- Change in Behavior:
 - Suddenly appearing calm after being in duress.
 - This can indicate that someone has made the decision to kill themselves.
 - Engaging in risky behaviors, especially if out of character.

- Increased use of drugs/alcohol.
- Suddenly quitting school/work.

What should you do?

If you believe or suspect someone may be considering suicide:

- Directly (and with empathy) ask if they are thinking about suicide.

"Are you thinking about killing yourself?" is a good example of what to ask. I know that this may seem uncomfortably blunt, but this is a question you do not want to have any ambiguity about.

A question like, "Are you thinking about hurting yourself?" can be interpreted to mean things other than suicide, and worse, it may give them the impression that suicide is not acceptable to discuss.

If someone does tell you that they are considering suicide. Ask if they have a plan. It can be just as simple and direct as, "do you have a plan for killing yourself?" If they do, as soon as you are done with your conversation ask to walk with them to someone who can help them immediately (advising, [CAPS](#), or police). If a student refuses to accompany you to help, contact advising, the [Dean of Students, or Campus Police](#) immediately. If advising is unavailable, contact the [Dean of Students, or Campus Police](#) and inform advising as soon as possible.

The idea is to try to not leave the person alone until help can be found. **If you believe that this person poses an imminent risk to themselves or others, call 911.** The point is, do not wait to take action! Try to bring that person to someone who could help them immediately.

I will add one other thing here. **NEVER put yourself in jeopardy.** For instance, if someone says they plan to use a weapon and have the means to do so, **remove yourself from the situation and call 911 immediately. You cannot help other people if you become a victim, intentionally or otherwise.**

- Report it

Regardless of if they have a plan or not, you must report that a student is considering suicide. **If you find yourself in this situation as a Section Leader, the Department would like you to immediately inform advising.** If advising is unavailable, contact the [Dean of Students, or Campus Police](#) and inform advising as soon as they become available.

Even if they aren't your student, or even a CS student, advising will either be able to handle the situation, or direct you to the appropriate authority.

Again, if you feel someone poses an imminent threat to themselves or others, *call 911*.

- (Actively) Listen

Actively listening means being “in the moment” of the discussion. It means that you are letting the other person lead the discussion (you are not a “contributor”) while being engaged by asking questions and responding with conversational cues to show that you are involved in the discussion.

Some barriers to active listening:

- Hearing what others say, but just waiting for your turn to talk.
- Hearing what others say, but not what they *mean*.
- Steering them away from areas of concern to something you are more comfortable discussing.
- Responding by dismissing their fears with platitudes or using dismissive gestures.

Some platitudes to avoid:

- “Everything will be alright.”
- “Things will work out for the best.”
- “I know just how you feel.”

Things don't always work out for the best, and even if we have been through it ourselves, these situations are rarely identical. Someone who is considering suicide may take a response like this to mean that you probably can't appreciate or relate to their situation.

- Be sympathetic, non-judgmental, patient, calm, accepting.

There are no “magic words” for talking with people. That is because they don't exist. The best thing that you can do is to be yourself and use your own personal experience to connect with others and to show that you care.

Silence is worth its weight in gold. It is normal to want to fill uncomfortable periods of silence with something, but I would encourage you to resist that urge. By being a presence for someone, you show them that they are worth *your* time and that someone (who isn't paid to listen) cares. People respond positively when others show a genuine concern for their well-being.

Humor can be common in uncomfortable situations as well. You may find that people will use dark humor when talking about pain or suicide. This is because laughter is therapeutic and can help people cope with difficult situations. I am not saying you should reciprocate with these jokes, as that could make things worse, but just be accepting when it happens. You aren't a terrible person if you find it funny either!

If you ever find yourself in a situation where you are unsure what you should do, contact advising. Always. They will be your best resource on guiding you through this process. This is an issue that they will not mind being asked about.

What are some things you should avoid?

- Avoid assuming that just because someone is joking about suicide that it is only a joke.

People who kill themselves typically tell someone of their intentions. Never assume it is a joke.

- Avoid challenging someone about suicide.

"I doubt you could really do it." This is not a time you want to hear someone say, "challenge accepted", so don't offer them the opportunity.

- Avoid asking closed-ended questions about suicide.

"You're not thinking about doing something crazy, right?" This question can be interpreted to mean that you are looking for a specific answer ("no"), and that it is not acceptable to speak about this issue (with you or anyone). It also dismisses their problems as "crazy".

- Avoid trying to help them on your own.

We are not social workers. We are not trained to help people in these situations. We often do not see where the biggest issues are hidden, and most importantly, it is not our job or responsibility to help others through these difficult times. We can't do it for them. However, by recognizing that this is beyond us, we do one of the best things we can for others in this situation: getting them the help they need.

- Avoid promising confidentiality.

Even if you end up promising confidentiality, report it anyway. They can have a long, wonderful life hating you for it.

- Avoid waiting to see if they get better.

There are often factors we don't know about. Never assume you can see the whole-picture. Always report it immediately.

Common Misconceptions about Suicide

- Talking about suicide will put the idea in their head.

You won't suddenly give someone the idea about suicide by discussing it. In fact, it is one of the most helpful things any of us can do because it lets others know that someone cares enough about them to ask.

- Only crazy and depressed people kill themselves.

People don't usually want to kill themselves, they just want the pain to end. These are simply people in heartbreaking situations. Each and every one of us can also end up in tragic situations as well. That is why we should always treat other people with dignity and respect and why we should never assume anything about others.

- People who talk about suicide won't really do it.

Maybe. Maybe not. Are you willing to bet someone's life on it? Never assume you know the whole situation. *Always* report it.

Resources

University of Arizona Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)

Campus Health, 3rd floor
(520) 621-3334

University of Arizona Dean of Students, Need Help Now

Nugent Building
520-621-7057

University of Arizona Police Department, non-emergencies

1852 E First St.
520-621-8273

Tucson Crisis Center

2802 E District St.
520-622-6000

Note: The Tucson Crisis center provides 24/7/365 on-site assistance requiring immediate help. They are also able to dispatch mobile teams to address issues when necessary. They are located at the University of Arizona Medical Center, South Campus.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

1-800-273-8255

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

Other useful numbers to have in your phone:

Poison Control

1-800-222-1222

Child Protective Services (Arizona):

1-800-SOS-CHILD

Adult Protective Services (Arizona):

1-800-SOS-ADULT

The two best things we can do for another person in duress is to report it to someone who can help them and to listen! **You** could save a life.

This information was adapted from my experience and training as an EMT and hospice volunteer. It has also been reviewed by a former crisis hotline worker. I am also not affiliated with any of these organizations and do not necessarily endorse them over any other authority on this subject.

Michael Collins

University of Arizona

B.S. Computer Science, 2014

Section Leader, Fall 2013 – Fall 2014