

National Suicide Prevention Month | *Article*

Speaking to a Friend Who is Suicidal

Excerpted from Thriveworks



Knowing When It's Time to Speak Up

Whether or not your friend appears to be an immediate threat to him or herself, if you're worried, that's reason enough to reach out to somebody. The very fact that you're worried about your friend is reason enough. "If someone you know is openly talking about taking their own life or even showing symptoms of deep depression and hopelessness, it's time to speak up," says Dr. Sal, licensed clinical social worker. "It's a common myth that those who are suicidal don't seek help, but in fact, many people reach out in some way, and often that is to friends and family before a mental health professional. Remember, people who are suicidal are in pain, and they just want that pain to go away."

It is important you treat this situation as an emergency because it is an emergency—it's a matter of life and death. After having this important conversation with your friend, choose the appropriate intervention method:

Option 1: Ensure they see a therapist. If your friend expressed suicidal thoughts in the past but appears to be doing better, it's probably best if you simply ensure they talk to a therapist. Similarly, if your friend is majorly depressed but doesn't appear to have suicidal thoughts at this time, you should encourage them to make an appointment. "Encourage them to call their therapist if they have one—even offer to help them make that call. Ensure that they get an appointment set up as soon as possible," Patrick Schultz, MA, LPC, NCC, CFRC advises. "And if they don't have a therapist, find a crisis line so they can call to talk to someone if the thoughts strengthen or get too intense."

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-Dr. Sal, licensed clinical social worker

Option 2: Seek immediate help. If, on the other hand, “you feel unsure whether the person’s immediate safety is at risk, and you are unable to come up with a solid safety plan with them, your best bet is to get them to a hospital to be seen immediately,” Laura Chackes, PsyD says. “This doesn’t mean they will have to stay at the hospital, but if they don’t have an established therapist or psychiatrist, one can be seen right away at a hospital to get an evaluation. If the person refuses to get help and you think they are at immediate risk, call 911 and have an ambulance take them to the hospital.

If you are a child or teenager, tell an adult (parent, teacher, school counselor, therapist, doctor, church leader, family friend, etc.) about your concern to assist you in making the best decision. Even if your friend tells you not to tell anyone, if you believe that they may actually harm themselves, it is always best to err on the side of safety. Your friend will thank you later even if they are upset with you at first for telling someone.

What should I not do?

Finally, you might be wondering what not to do or say to a potentially suicidal friend. Here are a few things you should avoid saying, as these phrases will likely only harm your friend and the situation:

“Your life isn’t that bad!” It might not seem like your friend has reason to feel so unhappy, but their pain is something nobody else can understand. Know that if they are having thoughts of suicide, they are in more pain than you realize. And avoid this statement as well as similar phrases, as they only pass judgment.

“You don’t really want to die…” You may say this out of fear, but stop yourself if you can. If your friend is talking about suicide or showing signs of suicidal behavior, it is to be taken seriously. Do what you can to make them feel comfortable opening up instead, and ask if they’ll let you get them professional help.

“You have too much to live for.” This statement also undermines their feelings. If your friend is suffering with suicidal thoughts or feelings, they don’t feel like they have a lot to live for—even if you know that they do.

“Everybody’s got their problems.” Chances are, your loved one has already thought about this and attempted to use it to change their suicidal feelings... but failed. When someone is suicidal, they feel that they have no other option. So don’t make them feel more shame by using statements of the like.

#StopSuicide

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline — Dial 9-8-8 or 800-273-8255

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