
Suicide and mental illness

Summary

- Some mental illnesses are associated with an increased risk of suicide.
 - Experiencing risk factors doesn't necessarily mean a person will think about or attempt to take their own life.
 - Thoughts about suicide or self-harm are just thoughts and do not mean you need to act on them.
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Over 3,000 Australians die from suicide each year, with depression being a significant risk factor. Statistics show that in 2017, 65,000 people attempted suicide, with the suicide rate being more than twice the road toll.

This equates to an average of 8.57 deaths by suicide in Australia each day.

Research indicates that mental illnesses such as depression, psychosis and substance use are associated with an increased risk of suicide. Experiencing risk factors doesn't necessarily mean a person will think about or attempt to take their own life.

Protective factors can reduce suicide risk, particularly effective mental health care, counselling, social support and connectedness.

Risk factors for suicide

Researchers believe that some people who end their own lives do not actually want to die, but feel there is no other option to relieve them of their pain. Those who do take their own life may feel overwhelmed, seeking release from their distress.

It is important to understand that suicide is the result of many factors in a person's life and not one particular event or discussion. Suicide is complex: there is no single explanation.

Contributing factors to being at risk of suicide may include:

- mental health conditions
- substance abuse
- chronic pain or physical disability
- feelings of isolation or helplessness
- loss
- negative life events (abuse, significant loss, financial crisis)
- previous suicide attempt or exposure to suicide behaviour in others.

People living in rural and remote regions, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people also have a higher rate of suicide.

Suicide warning signs

People who take their own life sometimes display warning signs beforehand. Some warning signs include:

- expressions of hopelessness or helplessness
 - an overwhelming sense of shame or guilt
 - a dramatic change in personality or appearance, or irrational or bizarre behaviour
 - changed eating or sleeping habits
 - a drop in school or work performance
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- a lack of interest in things previously important, and the future
- writing, speaking or joking about suicide, death or dying or intention
- giving away possessions and putting affairs in order
- increasing alcohol and drug use
- withdrawing from friends, family or society.

What to do if a relative or friend lets you know they are suicidal

If you think a friend or relative is at risk, discuss your concerns with them openly and non-judgmentally. Rather than putting the idea of suicide into someone's head, a supportive conversation gives them the opportunity to talk about their distress.

Encourage or help the person to access professional help, such as their mental health professional or a support helpline, such as:

- **Lifeline** Tel. **13 11 14** (24 hours)
- **Kids Help Line** Tel. **1800 551 800** (24 hours)
- **Suicide Call Back Service** Tel. 1300 659 467 (24 hours)
- **SuicideLine** Tel. **1300 651 251** (24 hours)

If the person is at serious risk of suicide, stay with them if possible and contact the psychiatric emergency team at your **local hospital**. Or call 000, explaining the person is suicidal, has made a plan, and you have concerns for their safety. Keep these numbers readily available in case you need urgent help.

After a suicide attempt

For family and friends, a suicide attempt can bring a range of intense and unexpected emotions that can change quickly and unpredictably. There is no right or wrong way to react.

Supporting a person who has attempted suicide can be stressful and overwhelming. It is important to look after yourself. Catch up regularly with friends, family members and significant others, and make time for yourself. Access support services, groups or health professionals to talk about how you feel.

Learn about suicide risk factors and behaviour to look out for. It is important to not blame yourself for the suicide attempt. If someone is determined to end their life, it can be very difficult to stop them.

If you have suicidal thoughts

Feeling suicidal means feeling more pain than you can cope with at the time. Thoughts of suicide are only thoughts. Having them does not mean you need to act on them. Try to remember that with help, you can feel better and keep yourself safe. People get through this. You can too.

Some ways to stay safe when experiencing suicidal thoughts include:

- Tell someone how you feel – a family member, trusted friend or teacher.
- Ask them to stay with you until you get help.
- Call your local hospital and ask for the Mental Health Team.
- Go to your GP, psychologist, psychiatrist or other mental health professional.
- Call a crisis helpline – they're listed at the end of this article.
- Call 000.

Think about another time in your life when you might have faced similarly stressful circumstances. What did you do to cope? Can you do the same things now?

- Stay focused on the present – worrying about whether things will improve often just leads to feeling more overwhelmed. Try breaking up your day and planning a short activity that will distract you. Then plan your next activity once you've finished that one.
- Create a safety plan or draw upon one you have already developed. Try using BeyondNow – a free safety planning app created by Beyond Blue. It can help you if you're having suicidal thoughts and distress.

- Try relaxation techniques.
- Follow up with your health professionals. A change in any medication and treatment may help reduce any suicidal thoughts.
- Remember you do not have to act on suicidal thoughts. They will pass in time, despite how overwhelming they may feel.

Where to get help

- **SANE Help Centre** Tel. **1800 18 SANE (7263)** (Monday – Friday, 10 am–10 pm AEST)
- Chat live with a **SANE Help Centre** counsellor (Monday – Friday, 10 am – 10 pm AEST)
- **SANE Forums** are full of people who want to talk to you and offer support.
- Your **GP (Doctor)**
- **Lifeline** Tel. **13 11 14** (24 hours)
- **Kids Help Line** Tel. **1800 551 800** (24 hours)
- **Suicide Call Back Service** Tel. 1300 659 467 (24 hours)
- **SuicideLine** Tel. **1300 651 251** (24 hours)
- **GriefLine** Tel. **1300 845 745** (midday to 3 am AEST, 7 days)
- **Beyond Blue** Tel. **1300 22 4636** (24 hours)

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SANE Australia

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