

Living with a suicidal person

Some pointers

1) Work to spoil the suicide

To people who want to kill themselves, suicide is an attractive option. It's a way out of almost unbearable pain. It's an appealing solution to a problem. Although they won't necessarily listen to you or want to hear what you have to say, one thing that you can go on doing in the background is gently work to "spoil the suicide", to make it less attractive and appealing.

Remind them:

- They may not be successful and may end up with horrible long-term physical and mental damage to live with.
- A suicide can leave others with incredible emotional pain for years. Loved ones left behind feel deserted and abandoned. It is the ultimate rejection and they cannot understand why.
- Innocent others often suffer. People who have been randomly involved (train and bus drivers, for example) or people who discover the body are often traumatised by the experience. They often suffer for a while and some have to leave their jobs.

Suicide is NOT the attractive option that some people believe it to be, and they need to be reminded of that on occasions.

2) Help suicidal people have a suicide escape plan

Think ahead with the people and get them to go through an alternative to suicide so that they have an alternative plan in place for when they feel bad. When they feel like killing themselves, they won't be able to be too logical, so having a pre-prepared alternative option in place might be helpful. Get them to write it down. Make several copies if necessary. Have it easily accessible.

The plan can include *anything* that the people find helpful and feel able to do, but it must be specific. So for example:

When I feel that I want to kill myself I promise that ...

- I will immediately speak to XYZ and have their number on my speed dial on my phone.
- I will go for a 10 minute walk around the block.
- I will call the Samaritans and have their number on speed dial on my phone.
- I will bake a cake and give it to my children/grandchildren.

3) Do a risk assessment and carry out a strategy

When a toddler comes to stay you think ahead to eliminate danger. You cover plugs, hide knives, remove medicines, and always follow them into the kitchen. You need to do exactly the same with suicidal people. Do as much as you can to remove the possibility of those people wilfully harming themselves. It may be too much for one person to monitor, so you may need to get other family members involved.

Of course, you cannot eliminate all risk, and as an adults, suicidal people are capable of being more devious and determined than the average toddler.

Only relax the safety monitoring when you are really convinced that it is appropriate to do so. The formerly suicidal people may need to accept that it may take a while for trust to be rebuilt.

4) Accept that mental illness is an illness and doesn't necessarily have a quick fix

If a footballer breaks a leg you don't keep telling him to pull himself together and expect him to be back playing matches within a few weeks. You accept that damage has occurred and that healing will take time. Something has happened to the suicidal people to overwhelm them emotionally and this has led to chemical changes in their bodies and brains affecting their ability to cope and to think rationally. Although they are choosing to kill themselves, that choice is only a symptom of an underlying illness reflecting acute distress. They are not deliberately making themselves ill.

Try to understand that they are ill and that they may take time to heal. And healing is not linear or straightforward. Sometimes there are setbacks. But that's normal.

5) Activity

Activity can be important. Although the suicidal people will need time to be alone and to rest, activity will be important. First, people who are depressed tend to ruminate on their problems. Activity is a distraction that will disrupt the rumination. Secondly, although it is important to keep talking rationally to depressed people, they can't always respond to reason, so doing something practical is an alternative strategy that can sometimes help change their thinking. Thirdly, some activity, such as exercise, produces helpful chemicals that lift mood.

Remember:

- A little activity is better than none. A ten minute walk around the block is better than nothing.
- Depressed people sometimes find being in public threatening, so a ten minute walk around the block at night, when fewer people are around, is better than nothing.
- Sometimes people need company to be encouraged to do it. Baking a cake with X, or a ten minute walk around the block with Y is better than nothing.
- Routines help regular activity take place.

6) The Two E's – Empathy, Empowerment

If someone says that they want to kill themselves or tries to do it, it is natural to not understand their position and to want to take away their power to do that. However, although it is a difficult thing to achieve, it is important to try to show empathy for the person's position (even if you don't understand it, or agree with it) - "I don't understand what you are feeling, but I can see that it is really distressing and frightening for you, and I want you to know that I want to be here for you while you are going through this difficult time."

It is also important to give the person power and choices within safe boundaries – while at the same time doing the difficult job of encouraging them to be active if possible. It's about respecting and acknowledging their present reality and trying to enable them to have as much agency and control as is safe and good for them.

7) Good Story, Bad Story

The person is likely to be spending a lot of time focusing on and ruminating the "bad story" - what is wrong with the past, the present, and the future. They are very familiar with the bad story. They keep repeating it over and over again. It crushes out all glimmer of the "good story". The thing about suicide is that it is done by people who have lost all hope. So, people living with them have to work slowly and patiently to help the suicidal person develop a good story and begin to rebuild a sense of hope.

Initially the suicidal person will not want to know and will reject every tiny piece of evidence that there is change happening, or that there is a different way of interpreting the past and the present, let alone the future. However, despite the wall of denial or hostility, the family's job is to keep on slowly and patiently pointing to evidence that shows that hope is real. Changes, however small, *are* happening. There *is* a different way of looking at things.