

## **How to handle a phone call from a suicidal person**

Be yourself. The right words are unimportant. If you are concerned, your voice and manner will show it.

**Listen.** Let the person unload despair, ventilate anger. If given an opportunity to do this, he or she will feel better by the end of the call. No matter how negative the call seems, the fact that it exists is a positive sign, a cry for help.

Be sympathetic, non-judgmental, patient, calm, accepting. The caller has done the right thing by getting in touch with another person.

If the caller is saying 'I'm so depressed, I can't go on', ask The Question: Are you having thoughts of suicide? You are not putting ideas in their head, you are doing a good thing for him. You are showing that that you are concerned, that you take them seriously, that it is OK for them to share their pain with you.

If the answer is yes, you can begin asking a series of further questions: Have you thought about how you would do it (CURRENT PLAN); Have you got what you need (RESOURCES); Have you attempted or thought about suicide before? (PRIOR BEHAVIOUR). CPR

95% of all suicidal callers will answer no at some point in this series or indicate that the time is set for some date in the future. This will be a relief for both of you.

Simply talking about their problems for a length of time will give suicidal people relief from loneliness and pent up feelings, awareness that another person cares, and a feeling of being understood. They also get tired -- their body chemistry changes. These things take the edge off their agitated state and help them get through a bad night.

Avoid arguments, problem solving, advice giving, quick referrals, belittling and making the caller feel that has to justify his suicidal feelings. It is not how bad the problem is, but how badly it's hurting the person who has it.

If the person is ingesting drugs, get the details (what, how much, alcohol, other medications, last meal, general health) and dial 999. A shift partner can call while you continue to talk to the person, or you can get the callers permission and do it yourself on another phone while the

caller listens to your side of the conversation. If 999 recommends immediate medical assistance, ask if the caller has a nearby relative, friend, or neighbour who can assist with transportation or the ambulance. In a few cases the person will initially refuse needed medical assistance. Remember that the call is still a cry for help and stay with him in a sympathetic and non-judgmental way. Ask for his address and phone number in case he changes his mind. (Call the number to make sure its busy.) If your organization does not trace calls, be sure to tell him that.

Do not go it alone. Get help during the call and debrief afterwards.

Your caller may be concerned about someone else who is suicidal. Just listen, reassure them that they are doing the right thing by taking the situation seriously, and sympathize with his stressful situation. With some support, many third parties will work out reasonable courses of action on their own. In the rare case where the third party is really a first party, just listening will enable you to move toward their problems. You can ask, 'have you ever been in a situation where you had thoughts of suicide?'

The most important pain-coping resource is the help of a trained mental health professional. A person who feels suicidal should get help and get it sooner rather than later.