**Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, Missouri Department of Mental Health (2013).** ***Mental Health First Aid USA.*** pp 106–108

# 1 First Aid for Suicidal Thoughts and Behaviors[38, 107]

### An important note

Self-injury can indicate a number of different things. Someone who is hurting himself or herself may be at risk of suicide. Others engage in a pattern of self-injury over weeks, months, or years and are not necessarily suicidal. This advice can be of use to you only if the person is suicidal. If the person you are assisting is injuring himself or herself but is not suicidal, please refer to *First Aid for Nonsuicidal Self-Injury*.

### How Can I Tell if Someone Is Feeling Suicidal?[45]

It is important that you know the warning signs of suicide.

*Signs a person may be suicidal:*

- Threatening to hurt or kill himself or herself
- Looking for ways to kill himself or herself: seeking access to pills, weapons, or other means
- Talking or writing about death, dying, or suicide
- Hopelessness
- Rage, anger, seeking revenge
- Acting recklessly or engaging in risky activities, seemingly without thinking
- Feeling trapped, like there's no way out
- Increasing alcohol or drug use
- Withdrawing from friends, family, or society
- Anxiety, agitation, unable to sleep or sleeping all the time
- Dramatic changes in mood
- No reason for living, no sense of purpose in life.

People may show one or many of these signs, and some may show signs not on this list.

If you suspect someone may be at risk for suicide, it is important to ask directly about suicidal thoughts. Do not avoid using the word "suicide." It is important to ask the question without dread and without expressing a negative judgment. The question must be direct and to the point. For example, you could ask

- *Are you having thoughts of suicide?*
- *Are you thinking about killing yourself?*

If you appear confident in the face of a suicide crisis, this can be reassuring for the suicidal person.

Although some people think talking about suicide can plant the idea in the person's mind, this is not true. Another myth is that someone who talks about suicide isn't really serious. Remember that talking about suicide may be a way to indicate just how badly the person is feeling.

## How should I talk with someone who is suicidal?

It is important to do the following:

- Tell the person that you care and that you want to help.
- Express empathy.
- Clearly state that thoughts of suicide are often associated with a treatable mental disorder, as this may instill a sense of hope.
- Tell the person that thoughts of suicide are common and do not have to be acted on.

Suicidal thoughts are often a plea for help and a desperate attempt to escape from problems and distressing feelings. Encourage the suicidal person to do most of the talking, if they are able. They need the opportunity to talk about their feelings and reasons for wanting to die, and they may feel great relief at being able to do this.

It may be helpful to talk about specific problems the person is experiencing. Discuss ways to deal with issues that seem impossible, but do not attempt to solve the problems yourself.

## How can I tell if the situation is serious?

First, you need to determine whether the person has definite intentions to take their life or if their thoughts are more vague, such as "What's the point of going on?" To do this, you need to ask the person if they have a plan for suicide. The three questions you need to ask are

1. Have you decided how you would kill yourself?
2. Have you decided when you would do it?
3. Have you taken any steps to secure the things you would need to carry out your plan?

A higher level of planning indicates a more serious risk. However, you must remember that the absence of a plan is not enough to ensure the person's safety. All thoughts of suicide must be taken seriously.

Next, you need to know about the following extra risk factors:

- Has the person been using alcohol or other drugs? Such use can make a person more susceptible to acting on impulse.
- Has the person made a suicide attempt in the past? A previous attempt makes a person more likely to try again or complete suicide. Once you have established the risk of suicide is present, you need to take action to keep the person safe.

## How can I keep the person safe?

A person who is actively suicidal should not be left alone. If you can't stay, you need to arrange for someone else to do so. In addition, give the person a safety contact that is available at all times (such as a telephone help line, a friend or family member who has agreed to help, or a mental health professional).

It is important to help the person think about people or things that have helped in the past. These might include a doctor, psychologist, or other mental health worker; family member or friend; or a community group such as a club or church.

Do not use guilt and threats to prevent suicide (e.g., "You will go to hell").

### What about professional help?

›› **During the crisis.** Mental health professionals advocate always asking for professional help when a person is suicidal, especially if the person is psychotic. If the person who is suicidal has a weapon or is behaving aggressively toward you, you must seek assistance from law enforcement to protect yourself.

However, the person may be very reluctant to involve a professional, and if the person is close to you, you may be concerned about alienating them. In fact, some people who have experienced suicidal thoughts or who have made plans for suicide feel that professional help is not always necessary.

›› **After the crisis has passed.** Ensure the person gets needed psychological and medical help. Other parts of this manual may be useful for you in achieving this.

### What if the person makes me promise not to tell anyone else?

Never agree to keep someone's plan for suicide a secret. However, respect the person's right to privacy, and involve him or her in decisions regarding who else knows about his or her suicidal intentions.

### The person I am trying to help has injured himself or herself but insists he or she is not suicidal. What should I do?

Some people injure themselves for reasons other than suicide. This may be to relieve unbearable anguish, to stop feeling numb, or other reasons. This can be distressing to see. *First Aid for Nonsuicidal Self-Injury* can help you to understand and assist if this is occurring.

### A final note

Do your best for the person, but remember that despite our best efforts, some people will still die by suicide.

## 2 First Aid for Nonsuicidal Self-Injury[108, 109]

### An important note

This first aid advice applies only if the person is injuring himself or herself for reasons other than suicide. If the person you are assisting is injuring himself or herself and is suicidal, please refer to *First Aid for Suicidal Thoughts and Behaviors*.

### Facts on Nonsuicidal Self-Injury[46]

Many terms are used to describe self-injury, such as *self-harm, self-mutilation, cutting,* and *parasuicide.* There is a great deal of debate about what self-injury is and how it is different from suicidal behavior. Here the term *nonsuicidal self-injury* is used to refer to situations where the self-injury has no suicidal intent. It is not easy to tell the difference between nonsuicidal self-injury and a suicide attempt. The only way to know is to ask the person directly if they are suicidal.

There are many different types of nonsuicidal self-injury, including

- Cutting, scratching, or pinching skin enough to cause bleeding or a mark that remains on the skin