

What to do if your loved one has made a suicide attempt

Thank you for supporting your friend or family member who is in crisis. It can be frightening to learn of a loved one's suicide attempt. It can be difficult to know what to do next or how to provide support.

This booklet will give you information about suicide and resources to help support you and your loved one.

Please remember **you are not alone**. Reach out to local support services whenever you need to.

What is suicide?

Suicide is the act of intentionally causing one's own death. It is often related to complex stressors and health issues which may lead people to feel hopelessness and despair.

Suicide is a serious global issue. It impacts people of all ages and backgrounds. In Canada, suicide is the ninth leading cause of death. One in 10,000 Canadians die by suicide every year.

For every person lost to suicide, many more have thoughts of suicide or make suicide attempts.

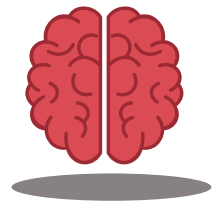
Most people who make a suicide attempt do not end up taking their lives. They can get treatment and recover to live full and meaningful lives.



Who is at higher risk of suicide?

There are many different biological, psychological and environmental risk factors for suicide. In Canada, the following groups have higher rates of suicide or suicide attempts:

- Men die by suicide at a higher rate than women. Older men are at a very high risk of dying by suicide.
- Women make suicide attempts at higher rates.
- History of psychotic or major mood disorder (e.g. schizophrenia, major depressive disorder or bipolar disorder).
- Family history of suicide.
- Individuals who have lost loved ones to suicide.
- Individuals who have made a previous suicide attempt.
- History of specific types of personality disorders (e.g. borderline personality disorder).
- Chronic illness causing severe pain or disability.
- History of trauma, abuse or neglect.





- Youth ages 15 to 24 (second-leading cause of death for youth)

- 2SLGBTQ+ youth have thoughts of suicide and suicide- related behaviours (e.g. self-harm) more often than their non-2SLGBTQ+ peers. This refers to those who identify as Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or queer/questioning youth.



- Indigenous Peoples (especially youth).
- Imprisoned individuals and/or history of aggression.



What are the immediate warning signs and risk factors for suicide?

- Preoccupation with death and suicidal thoughts.
- Engaging in activities that indicate an intent to leave life, such as saying goodbye to friends, making a will or writing a suicide note.
- Hearing voices commanding the person to take their life.
- Alcohol and substance use which can cause loss of judgement.
- Acute anxiety and insomnia which can cause agitation.
- Severe and/or unexpected loss, such as separation or job loss.

If you notice your loved one has any warning signs, please contact a crisis centre for support. To find a list of crisis centres, please visit sunnybrook.ca/gethelp. If you need help in an emergency, please contact 911 or visit your local emergency department.



Is there a risk for suicide after a suicide attempt?



Risk for suicide depends on many factors. For some people, the risk is higher right after an attempt, and others will quickly go back to their usual risk (or even a lower risk). This often depends on how that person views their life situation after their attempt.

The risk of suicide is highest in the month after psychiatric hospitalization and continues for at least three months. Close psychiatric follow-up and support can reduce this risk.

Someone who has made a suicide attempt is statistically at higher risk for making another suicide attempt over the course of their life, but this does not mean that it will happen.

For some people, the suicide attempt comes from a unique stressor and if that issue is effectively treated, the chance of further attempts is lowered. For other people, suicide attempts are a life-pattern of dealing with stress and negative emotions. Many people fall somewhere in between these two extremes.

Teaching people practical coping strategies and managing the risk factors and the stressors that resulted in the suicide attempt are key to reducing the risk of another attempt in the future.

Should I talk to the person about why they made a suicide attempt?



You do not need to avoid talking to the person about why they made the suicide attempt. Talking about a suicide attempt can help a person feel better. You can be honest and let the person know that this topic may be difficult but you want to listen without judgement.

It is important to keep in mind that this discussion may be emotional for you and your loved one. It is important for you to be in the right frame of mind and not be too emotional, especially after the person leaves the hospital.

Being compassionate is a key part of starting the conversation. You should ask permission to speak about the suicide attempt rather than force the conversation. If your loved one is open to talking about the suicide attempt and you are emotionally ready to talk about it, this can be very therapeutic for your loved one and can help support that person.

If they do not want to talk about their suicide attempt, that is also okay. They may need some time to open up. **The most important thing is to help ensure that your loved one is being regularly followed by a health professional after their suicide attempt.** You are not expected to be your loved one's mental health professional.

What if my loved one wants to be left alone? Should someone stay with them?

Each relationship is different. Respecting your loved one's individuality and independence is important, and some people are very uncomfortable around others or may be emotionally triggered by them. If possible, try to make sure that your loved one is with someone that they are emotionally comfortable with after leaving the hospital. This is especially important in the beginning since the first few weeks after they leave the hospital is considered a higher risk time period.

During that time, check in each day with your loved one, if it is welcomed by that person.



How do I manage my emotions when interacting with my loved one after an attempt?

It is very common to have changing emotions when you interact with your loved one after a suicide attempt. You may even experience conflicting feelings at the same time: e.g., relief, sadness, anger, guilt, frustration, fear, and other emotions. The first step is to be aware of these feelings and to be compassionate with yourself rather than feeling shame or trying to sweep these feelings “under the rug” and ignore them. It can be helpful to reach out for support from trusted friends or family and share these feelings in a safe environment. Sometimes personal therapy might help. When you speak with your loved one who has made a suicide attempt, it is important to convey positive emotions of caring, optimism, and concern. If you do not feel you can do this, try to create some safe distance and ask for others to support your loved one while you are working through your own complex feelings.

How can I help reduce the risk of suicide?

Support needs will differ for each individual but the most important thing is to **tell the person that you care, that they are valued and that you are available to provide support.**

Help your loved one engage in exercise and activities that are pleasant and/or meaningful, or help their efforts in personal development.

You may also consider working together on creating and putting plans into place for how to respond effectively to emotional or suicidal crises, and encourage them to continue treatment for any underlying mental illness. Effective treatment may include lifestyle modification, talk therapy that focuses on teaching skills and enhancing coping strategies, medication, and/or brain stimulation techniques.

Try to restrict the means of the person to take their life (e.g. reducing access to medication, removing firearms etc.). Preventing access to alcohol or substances can help reduce risk, as they can cloud judgement and cause impulsive behaviour.

Remember to take care of yourself

While supporting your loved one, it is important to engage in your own self-care because caring for someone with a mental illness is often very stressful.

Self-care tips:

- Reach out to friends and family when you need support.
- Call a crisis line if you need help (see page 13).
- Participate in activities you enjoy (e.g. music, art, sports).
- Recharge by going for a walk or exercise.
- Relax with yoga and meditation.

How to use a Coping Card to create an action plan.

A Coping Card is a practical tool that can help a person make an action plan to be able to cope effectively with an emotional crisis so that they do not engage in suicidal behaviour.

It is especially useful for suicidal crises because people who are suicidal often think there are no other options, and **the Coping Card can help remind them of the many steps that can be taken to address how they're feeling. It can help them cope and be resilient when they experience distress.**

It will help to have the person fill out the Coping Card with their mental health treatment team when the individual is not in crisis or is experiencing a time of wellness.



Filling in the Coping Card during this time can help a patient provide detailed answers about their triggers, symptoms, ways to lower distress, a reminder of the meaningful aspects of their life, as well as the trusted family and friends who they can reach out to and contact for support.

The card can be printed or in a digital form so it is easy to carry around and access whenever it is needed. **The Coping Card can be downloaded from the Sunnybrook Department of Psychiatry website and is available in 10 languages.**

Learn how to create your own Coping Card:

sunnybrook.ca/copingcard

The family or the support network (e.g. friends) of the patient can ask the patient to share their personal Coping Card and learn about their loved one's strategies for coping. This can help reinforce them during an acute crisis. The patient must provide consent.

Coping Card


What are my warning signs?
(e.g. sad thoughts or feelings; behaviour – social withdrawal; physical symptoms – sleep problems)

What skills can I learn to lower my distress?
(e.g. breathing exercises, progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, create hope kit, visit: sunnybrook.ca/copingcard)

What can give my life meaning?
(e.g. people, places, activities, values, dreams)

How can I distract myself?
(e.g. listen to music, watch TV/movie, play with a pet, exercise, journaling)

Remember to check your environment and make sure it is safe. Stay away from objects or people that could put you at risk. For example if you have an alcohol problem, avoid having it in your home.



Coping Card

Who can I call for distraction?

☐ _____

☐ _____

☐ _____

Who do I trust to share my distress and ask for help?

☐ _____

☐ _____

☐ _____

Who can I contact in my expert support system?
(e.g. family doctor, therapist, psychiatrist)

☐ _____

☐ _____

☐ _____

☐ _____

☐ _____

☐ _____

Who will I share my coping card with?

☐ _____

☐ _____

Other Crisis Resources:

Crisis Response (pick your selection(s))

☐ 911 / my local emergency department

☐ **Guelph Crisis Centre** 416-829-4200

☐ Crisis Response Team – North York, Etobicoke 416-498-0003

☐ Crisis Response Team – York Region 310-2673 (no area code needed when dialling in York Region)

Distress Line (pick your selection(s))

☐ National Distress Line 1-833-456-4566

☐ Toronto Distress Centre 416-408-4357

☐ **Centre/Office Mental Health Helpline** 1-866-331-0800

☐ **Seaside Health** Ontario 1-866-787-0000

☐ Assaulted Women's helpline 416-863-0511

Distress Line (pick your selection(s))

☐ Male Survivors of Sexual Violence 1-866-887-0019

☐ Kids Help Phone 1-800-668-6868

☐ GoodTalk Ontario post-secondary student helpline 1-866-953-5454


☐ Sexual Assault/Consent Violence Crisis Centre 416-323-6040

Peer Support (pick your selection(s))

☐ Warm line (through Progress Place) 416-960-8276

☐ Krasner Centre Warm Line 1-888-777-0276

☐ Mood Disorders Association of Ontario 1-866-363-MOOD (6683)



Sunnybrook
HEALTH SCIENCES CENTRE
3975 Bayview Avenue
Toronto, Ontario M2N 6W9
Tel: 416-480-4100
1-866-953-5454

Not for sale

Only official card at University of Toronto

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Suicide prevention resources:

Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention
suicideprevention.ca

International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP)
iasp.info

Stories of hope from real people about their struggles with mental illness and addiction sunnybrook.ca/resilient

More suicide prevention resources can be found online at sunnybrook.ca/cope

This booklet is also available online at sunnybrook.ca/suicidesupportbook

If you need help in an emergency, please call 911 or visit your local emergency department.

If you're feeling like you're in crisis or need somebody to talk to, please know that help is also available through community resources:

- Find a local crisis resource at sunnybrook.ca/gethelp
- [Crisis Services Canada](http://CrisisServicesCanada.ca)
 - **Phone:** 24-hour, toll-free 1-833-456-4566
 - **Text:** 45645 (4:00 p.m. – midnight Eastern Time)
- [Kids Help Phone](http://KidsHelpPhone.ca)
 - **Phone:** 24-hour, toll-free, 1-800-668-6868
 - **Text:** 686868 (24 hours, 7 days a week)



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