

Suicide Care: What do I say?

Content warning: These topics may be uncomfortable for some readers. For help with a mental health crisis or concerns about suicide, call Canada Suicide Prevention Service: 1-833-456-4566. Talk Suicide Canada website: <https://talksuicide.ca/>

Audience: This resource was developed for health and social service providers.

Stigma can make talking to people about suicidal thoughts and actions uncomfortable. Thoughts of suicide are not uncommon in people seeking help for health care services as suicidality is related to many illnesses and social inequities. Communicating in open and non-judgmental ways is an important step in helping people with suicidal thoughts to be safe.



Question: How should I ask them if they are suicidal? I don't want to give them the idea.

Answer: Try, "People often think about killing themselves in these kinds of situations. Is that something you are thinking about? (if so) Tell me more about that."

Reason: *Talking to people about suicide in a supportive manner will not make them want to kill themselves. Rather, they will feel cared for.*



Question: What do I say when a person tells me they are suicidal?

Answer: Try, "You must be feeling overwhelmed and hopeless" or "You must be in so much pain that you feel you need to end your life. What do you need at this time?"

Reason: *Validating their feelings will help them to feel connected to life.*



Question: How can I convince them that they have a lot to live for?

Answer: It is better to validate rather than try to "convince". Try: "Things in your life feel so bad that you can't bear it."

Reason: *The person might feel guilty that they can't see the good in life. Accepting their pain creates less pressure for you and the person than trying to change their minds.*



Question: What should I say if they are being manipulative? They didn't really want to kill themselves, or they wouldn't have called the ambulance.

Answer: Shift your understanding from "manipulative" to "help-seeking". Try "Trying to kill yourself can be very frightening. We are glad you reached out. How can we help?"

Reason: *Wanting to live and die can co-exist, so they may reach out for help with their suicidal thoughts. A non-judgmental attitude will help them feel better about themselves.*



Question: Should I ask about suicide if they seemed to have overdosed accidentally on something?

Answer: Yes. Try: "Did part of you wish to die when you took the [pills/drugs/substance]? (if so) Tell me more about that."

Reason: *A willingness to die occurs in up to 50% of opiate overdoses, an indicator of suicidality; this may apply in overdoses of other substances.*

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