

Disability Campaign.org

How to Help a Friend Who May Be Suicidal



Image: A self-portrait drawn by Joni Eareckson Tada in the depths of depression after a diving accident left her, then 17, a quadriplegic.

“When at the age of 17, I broke my neck and doctors told me that I would be in a wheelchair for the rest of my life, I didn’t want to live. There were nights I would jerk my head back and forth to try to break my neck up higher, hoping to die ... But I had wonderful friends and family who were able to notice the signs of suicide and despair, and they encouraged me to live and hold on to hope. Suicide is the tenth leading cause of death for Americans—and the stigma, financial burdens, and prolonged physical and emotional stress of a chronic condition increase the risk of suicide for those with disabilities. But suicide is preventable; if you’re a friend or relative of a person with a disability or chronic illness, you can make a difference.”

– Joni Eareckson Tada

Suicide is one of the most common causes of death of Americans. Unfortunately, mental health conditions such as depression, manic-depressive disorder, schizophrenia, and serious or chronic health conditions such as cancer, paralysis, or pain increases the risk that a person will consider and/or attempt suicide. If you have a friend whose mental or physical health puts him or her at greater risk for suicide, it’s important you develop a plan if your friend were to consider suicide. Although this may not be something you want to talk or think about, suicide is preventable and as a friend, you can be ready. Below are some ways you can create a suicide prevention plan for your friend.

1. **Talk with your friend.** If you think your friend is depressed and needs help, approach him or her with your concerns. Choose a time when she may be available to talk and a space that allows for privacy. Let her know you're available to talk whenever she's ready, maybe over a cup of coffee or on the weekend when she's not stressed with work; however, if your friend evades you, initiate a dialogue and assess the risk of self-harm. If you suspect your friend is suicidal, directly ask the person about suicidal thoughts. Ask the question without dread or expressing negative judgment. You could ask, "Are you having thoughts of suicide?" or "Do you have a plan to kill yourself?"

2. **Know the warning signs of suicide.**

- Expressing hopelessness
- Feeling trapped, like there is no way out
- Threatening to hurt or kill himself
- Looking for ways to kill herself (pills, guns, knives, etc.)
- Talking or writing about death, dying, or suicide
- Increasing alcohol or drug use
- Dramatic mood changes
- Withdrawing from friends, family, or activities
- Acting anxious or agitated
- Changes in appetite or sleep
- Expressing thoughts of death on social media
- Drawing or journaling dark thoughts



Photo: DualDiagnosis.org

3. **Listen nonjudgmentally and express your care.** Tell your friend you want to help and express empathy. Encourage your friend to seek professional help, as thoughts of suicide are often associated with a treatable mental disorder. Remind him that thoughts of suicide are relatively common and that he does not have to act upon those thoughts. Say positive things and highlight his strengths, talents, and significance to others. Allow him to openly express his feelings and reasons for wanting to die, as speaking about this may bring relief.

4. **If there is a plan, ask more questions.** Inquire when she is planning to commit suicide and what steps she will take to carry out the plan. If she has been using alcohol or drugs, or if she has already made a suicide attempt in the past, she is at high risk.
5. **Do not leave your friend alone.** If you cannot stay with him, arrange for someone else to stay. Do not use guilt or threats to prevent him from committing suicide, but encourage him to contact someone who may have helped in the past. This could be a parent, doctor, psychologists, or religious leader.
6. **Never agree to keep your friend's suicide plan a secret.** You can respect your friend's right to privacy, but if you need to talk to someone else in order to help your friend or potentially save his or her life, please do so. If possible, involve him or her in your decisions regarding who else knows about the suicidal intentions.
7. **Contact the national suicide crisis hotline at 1-800-273-TALK (8225), the hospital emergency room, psychiatric hospital walk-in clinic, urgent care center, or 911.** Do not try to help your friend on your own, especially if your friend's suicidal behaviors may endanger your life. Save these numbers on your contacts in your phone or make a speed-dial for them in case of an emergency.
8. **Continue to be there for your friend, during and after treatment.** Your friend may still be at risk. If the thoughts of suicide were due to depression, his chances of falling into depression increase with each subsequent episode. Furthermore, if alcohol or drugs played a role in his suicide attempt or plans, he will need someone to encourage his sobriety. Remember your presence, empathy, and kind actions are all ways you can continue to help.

For more information on how to prevent suicide visit

<http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/> and <http://www.afsp.org/>.

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P.O. Box 3333, Agoura Hills, CA 91376

www.joniandfriends.org