

Helping a Suicidal Friend or Relative

Be quiet and listen!

If someone is feeling depressed or suicidal, our first response is to try to help. We offer advice, share our own experiences, try to find solutions. Some depressed and suicidal people are actually seeking concrete information, such as how to find a therapist or where to get specific help. However, we'd do better to be quiet and listen. Before people who feel suicidal can begin to explore solutions, they need a safe place to express their fears and anxieties, to be themselves. Listening - really listening - is not easy. We must control the urge to say something - to make a comment, add to a story or offer advice. We need to listen not just to the facts that the person is telling us but to the feelings that lie behind them. We need to understand things from their perspective, not ours.

Here are some points to remember if you are helping a person who feels suicidal.

What do people who feel suicidal want?

- Someone to listen. Someone who will take time to really listen to them. Someone who won't judge, or give advice or opinions, but will give their undivided attention.
- Someone to trust. Someone who will respect them and won't try to take charge. Someone who will treat everything in complete confidence.
- Someone to care. Someone who will make themselves available, put the person at ease and speak calmly. Someone who will reassure, accept and believe. Someone who will say, "I care."
- Someone who can talk about suicide openly. Someone who can allow them to talk about their suicidal thoughts and plans without judging them.
- Someone to help them explore other ways of dealing with their problems now and in the future. Someone who encourages them to think of ways to cope better with their difficulties.

What do people who feel suicidal not want?

- To be alone. Rejection can make the problem seem ten times worse. Having someone to turn to makes all the difference.
- To be advised. Lectures don't help. Nor does a suggestion to "cheer up", or an easy assurance that "everything will be okay." Don't analyze, compare, categorize or criticize.
- To be interrogated. Don't change the subject, don't pity or patronize. Talking about feelings is difficult. People who feel suicidal don't want to be rushed or put on the defensive.
- To have their lack of hope confirmed. You should not confirm the hopelessness of the situation. Rather, you can gently steer the conversation toward exploring things that they think could help.