

Groundswell

Out of homelessness

Supporting someone with suicidal thoughts



This guide is for those supporting people experiencing homelessness who may have suicidal thoughts. Please be aware this leaflet discusses suicide and suicidal thoughts in detail, consider this before reading further.

Suicidal ideation, or suicidal thoughts, is the process of contemplating the possibility of ending your own life. There are differences between feeling desperate, unable to go on, wishing to be dead and having a specific plan to end your life. However, it is important to address any of these situations as soon as possible and to look after the person immediately after they have talked to you about their feelings. This leaflet provides top tips to support people experiencing suicidal thoughts.

If you are concerned about someone's immediate safety (i.e. they are actively suicidal), dial 999 for an ambulance or go directly to the nearest A&E department.

Steps to support someone with suicidal feelings

1. Notice the warning signs and reach out to the person

Try not to place responsibility to seek help on the individual. It can be very difficult for someone to ask for support, so if you notice any changes in someone's behaviour don't wait, instead ask the person how they are feeling.

Warning signs will vary from one person to another but could include:

- Talking about wanting to die or killing oneself.
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live.
- Talking about feeling trapped or experiencing unbearable pain.
- Talking about feelings of guilt or being a burden to others.
- Using more substances than usual.
- Sudden lifting of mood in someone who was previously suicidal, which could indicate the person has planned to end their life.
Please investigate further as a sudden lifting of mood doesn't always mean someone is intending to end their life.
- Finalising affairs – e.g. giving prized items away, visiting or calling people to say goodbye.

You don't need a reason to make a phone call or pop in to ask about how someone is doing but it could make a huge difference. They may not want to speak with you, in which case you should still talk about your concerns to someone else in your team such as your manager/volunteer supervisor.

2. Actively listen to the person and explore how they are feeling

If someone shares with you their suicidal thoughts and feelings, it's important not to respond excessively as that might deter them from seeking support again in the future.

Allow the person to talk freely about their thoughts, listen actively to what they are telling you and ask open-ended questions to better understand their situation. For example, you could ask them:

- When did you start having these thoughts or feelings?
- What happened before you started having these thoughts or feelings?
- Can you tell me more about what's been going on for you recently?
- How often are you having these thoughts or feelings?

Encourage them to talk about their fears and what could have led to suicidal thoughts (for example, if they are worried about being evicted, you may need to support them to access housing support).

Be mindful of language barriers: it can be difficult to communicate suicidal thoughts and feelings if English isn't your first language. Do not hesitate to ask clarification from the person if needed.

3. Validate their emotions

Don't dismiss people's distress and always validate their feelings. Take all disclosures and attempts seriously, regardless of whether the person has physically hurt themselves or how many times they've come to talk to you about this in the past.

Be mindful of medical vocabulary which tends to undermine someone's distress, i.e. 'superficial wounds', 'they have only taken 12 tablets', etc.

4. Reassure them that they remain in control of their life

Be mindful that the person may be afraid that their freedom and options will be removed by disclosing suicidal thoughts – they may fear of being sectioned, of the police showing up, of losing independence, etc. This may deter them from seeking further support.

Take time to reassure them that it is okay to talk about their feelings, that you're here to talk and that you're not going to do anything without their knowledge.

Refrain from giving people advice and instead, adopt an approach which will ensure they remain in charge of the decisions impacting them:

- Ask them what has helped them in the past and what they need right now.
- If they want, make a plan with the person on what would help them the most. What works for one person might not work for another. An example of a safety plan can be found here:

<https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/docs/SafetyPlan.pdf>

Show gratitude to the person and acknowledge the courage it has taken to talk. Let the person know who you will need to share this information with a manager so that they can follow up when you're not around.



5. Signpost them to services and provide information

Call 999 if the person is in immediate danger.

For non-life threatening emergencies, there are a number of options available to support the person, or for the person to seek the support themselves. This includes (but not limited to):

- Calling the Samaritans on 116 123 (free helpline open 24 hours a day)
- Call 111 (free service open 24 hours a day)
- Use the following link to find a local NHS urgent mental health helpline in England:
<https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-an-urgent-mental-health-helpline>
- Contacting their GP – book an emergency appointment to be referred to mental health services

Bear in mind that encouraging someone to seek professional help can be difficult and ultimately, the person will need to make this decision themselves.

It's OK if you don't think you're the best person to support them, signposting them to the right services is a valuable thing to do. Be honest with the person and ensure that someone else is aware of the situation and can take over. Only offer your support if you have capacity or feel able to and do not make promises you can't keep.

6. Follow-up with them

It's everyone's responsibility to act when you've been made aware of someone's suicidal feelings. Even if you have referred them to further support, it's always a good idea to check on how they are doing and helps maintain a level of trust.

7. Be human

If you are working or volunteering for an organisation, chances are there will be protocols for you to follow if someone discloses suicidal feelings. You can still follow them whilst being sensitive and caring. For example, if the person needs to fill in documents related to their disclosure, ensure they do this in a comfortable room, offer them a cup of tea, etc.

If the person feels able to, talk with them about normal stuff too (TV programs, books, etc.). It can help them feel 'normal' again and 'more than a problem'. This is helpful as long as it's not a way to avoid talking about suicide.

8. Looking after yourself

Hearing about someone's suicidal thoughts and feelings is never easy, no matter how many times you've heard it in the past. Make sure you look after yourself too and seek support if you need it.



Further resources

Groundswell's Working with suicidal clients toolkit:

<https://groundswell.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Working-with-suicidal-clients-Toolkit-1.pdf>

Mind's Suicidal feelings guide (including useful contacts):

<https://www.mind.org.uk/media-a/6164/suicidal-feelings-2020.pdf>

NHS guidance on where to get urgent help for mental health:

<https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/mental-health-services/where-to-get-urgent-help-for-mental-health/>

Groundswell and Mind's Mental health & homelessness guide:

<https://groundswell.org.uk/wpdm-package/mental-health-homelessness-guide-2/>

Wellness and Recovery Actions Plans (some workplaces use them to support employees' and volunteers' wellbeing): https://www.mind.org.uk/media-a/5760/mind-guide-for-employees-wellness-action-plans_final.pdf



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Everyone has the right to good health and to access healthcare. People experiencing homelessness face health inequalities, they are often excluded from information and services. That's why Groundswell produces accessible health guidance for people experiencing homelessness, so they can make informed decisions about their health.

All our health guides are created alongside people with experience of homelessness and reviewed by relevant professionals.

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<https://www.england.nhs.uk/hwalliance>

