

Supporting young men at risk of suicide

If you are dealing with a young male at risk of suicide, it can be difficult to know how to act. Male youths at risk often exhibit challenging behaviour that can make it difficult to communicate with them. Below are some suggestions on how to offer support.

Warning signs – what to look out for

When people are feeling distressed or overwhelmed, they often give clues or signs in the way they appear, behave or speak. Sometimes these signs may indicate that they are considering self-harm or suicide. Recognising these signs in others can give you valuable indications that they are struggling, and prompt you to take action. Males may be less likely to talk about the way they're feeling or express their emotions, so it's particularly important to be aware of non-verbal signs.

The following are a list of signs that may indicate that a young male may be considering suicide. It is important to note that having one or two of the signs does not necessarily mean that the person is suicidal – they will generally display a combination.

Physical changes

- Fatigue, tiredness or loss of energy
- Disrupted sleep patterns (too much or too little)
- Disrupted appetite, eating habits (too much or too little) or changes in weight
- Lack of attention to appearance or personal hygiene
- Evidence of self-harm

Behaviours

- Quitting or losing interest in things that were previously enjoyable or important, including hobbies, food or sex
- Emotional outbursts or unexplained crying

- Uncharacteristic recklessness or dangerous behaviour (for example, driving recklessly)
- Uncharacteristic aggression or fighting
- Social withdrawal
- Abuse or misuse of alcohol or drugs
- History of suicidal behaviour or self-harm
- Putting affairs in order or giving away possessions

Conversational themes

- Hopelessness/bleak future – *“Things will never improve – there’s just no point.”*
- Feeling alone – *“No one understands.”*
- Seeking escape – *“I need to get out; I can’t deal with this any more.”*
- Guilt – *“It’s all my fault.”*
- Helplessness – *“It doesn’t matter what I do, bad things just happen to me.”*
- Diminished self worth – *“I’m useless.”*

Sometimes people will make explicit reference to suicide or self-harm, such as writing suicide notes, planning or talking about suicide, or threatening to kill or hurt themselves.

Any suicide threat should be taken seriously. If you are concerned about the safety of a young person, take immediate action. Stay with them if they are at risk and seek professional help.

Being proactive

Young males may find it especially difficult to approach their parents, teachers or other adults when they're feeling overwhelmed, and are less likely to ask for help.

1300 78 99 78
mensline.org.au

MensLine Australia is a professional telephone and online support, and referral service for men, specialising in family and relationship concerns.

If you notice any of the above signs or are concerned in any way that a young male may be distressed or thinking about suicide, it's critical that you are proactive and talk to him about it. It's a myth that talking to someone about suicide or asking if they're suicidal will 'put the idea in his head' or make him more likely to go through with it. In fact, having an open conversation with him about suicide can encourage him to talk about his feelings and situation. Your priority should be supporting him to get the help he needs.

- Act quickly. If you are concerned about your son, student, employee or friend, don't put off talking to him.
- If you're not sure how to begin, try gently explaining your concerns. *"I've noticed you haven't been yourself lately. You've seemed really down, you've been missing footy training, and I know you haven't been sleeping well."*
- Ask open-ended questions to encourage him to open up. *"What's going on for you?"*
- Listen to him calmly and acknowledge his feelings without judgement.
- Reassure him, but don't dismiss or try to minimise his problems.
- Let him know that you care about him and are there to support him.
- Don't be afraid to ask him directly about suicide. This can encourage him to talk to you honestly about his feelings, and shows you're listening and taking him seriously. If he is feeling suicidal, he may feel grateful or relieved that he can discuss this openly. *"It sounds like you're feeling really overwhelmed. Have you ever thought about suicide?"*
- If he does reveal that he's had suicidal thoughts, ask him if he has a plan or access to the means to harm himself. If the answer is yes to either of these, the risk may be greater.
- Remember that his safety is your immediate priority. Avoid secrecy pacts; if he's at risk of suicide, be clear that you need to involve others.

- If you're worried he's at immediate risk, don't leave him alone. Remove any means of suicide available, including drugs and alcohol, medication, weapons etc.
- Ask him to promise that if he has suicidal thoughts, he will reach out and tell someone.

If he doesn't want to talk, don't give up. Talking about personal or painful issues can be tough, and young men might be reluctant to talk to an adult at first. Express your concern and let him know you're there for him. Continue to be observant and look out for any warning signs.

Seeking help

If you're concerned about someone, supporting him to get professional help is a critical step. Encourage him to speak to a doctor, counsellor, psychologist or mental health services. If he's uneasy about the idea of speaking to a professional, offer to go with him for support. His GP is a good place to start, as they will have a good knowledge of local services and be able to refer him on if appropriate. Young men may find telephone counselling particularly helpful, as it can be an immediate, anonymous and less threatening source of support. Provide him with the numbers of the following services (all 24/7) and encourage him to contact them if he feels distressed or suicidal:

MensLine Australia (1300 78 99 78) – Professional telephone and online counselling, support, information and referral service for all men.

Suicide Call Back Service (1300 659 467) – Telephone support service staffed by professional counsellors.

Looking after yourself

Learning that someone you care about is distressed or suicidal can be incredibly upsetting and emotionally draining. Looking after your general wellbeing, such as making sure you are sleeping and eating properly, managing your stress levels and taking time out, is critical during this difficult time. Ensure you have your own support systems in place – this could include family, friends or your partner, or a professional like a counsellor. This will allow you to talk about how the situation is affecting you and how you can cope.

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