



The Art of Conversation:

A guide to talking, listening and
reducing stigma surrounding suicide.

talk. listen. save lives.





Suicide: The myths

People who talk about suicide never attempt or complete suicide.

People who talk about their suicidal thoughts may also attempt suicide. Many people who complete suicide have told someone about their suicidal feelings in the weeks prior to their death. Listening to and supporting a person in these circumstances can save lives.

If somebody wants to end their life, they will, and there is nothing anybody can do about it.

Most people contemplating suicide do not want to die; they want to end the pain they are suffering. Although there are some occasions when nobody could have predicted a suicide, in many cases a tragic outcome may be averted if appropriate help and support is offered to a person and they are willing to accept this help.

Talking about suicide or asking someone if they feel suicidal will encourage suicide attempts.

Serious talk about suicide does not create or increase risk; it can help to reduce it. The best way to identify the possibility of suicide is to ask directly. Openly listening to and discussing someone's thoughts of suicide can be a source of relief for them and can be key to preventing the immediate danger of suicide.

Some people are always suicidal.

Some groups, sub-cultures or ages are particularly associated with suicide. Whilst some groups, such as young men seem to be at increased risk, suicide can affect all ages, across gender and cultures. Many people think about suicide in passing at some time or another. There isn't a 'type' for suicide, and while there may be warning signs, they aren't always noticed. While those

The facts

who have made an attempt on their own life in the past can be at increased risk of completing suicide, with appropriate help and support, people can and do move on in their lives.

If a person has made previous attempts they won't do it for real.

Those who have attempted suicide once are at increased risk of attempting again. They need to be taken seriously and given support and help to find a safe resolution for their suicidal thoughts and actions.

When a person begins to feel better, the danger is over.

Often the risk of suicide can be greatest as depression lifts, or when a person appears calm after a period of turmoil. This can be because once a decision to attempt suicide is made, people may feel they have found a solution, however desperate it may be.

Suicide rates tend to fluctuate over time and even though they may have started to fall, they are still high and it is too early to tell if we are starting to see a significant downward trend.

The positive work needs to continue as:

- every day around two people die from suicide in Scotland
- around three out of four suicides are by men
- in Scotland, in 2007, there were 838 deaths that were confirmed as, or suspected to be, suicides
- suicide is the biggest killer of people under the age of 35 in Scotland.





Spotting the signs and helping

If you suspect someone may be feeling suicidal, ask them – it could save their life.

Most people thinking about suicide will try to let someone know. There are several signs to watch out for. The key to helping is watching out for the warning signs and knowing what to do to help. Everyone is different so in some cases few or none of the signs will be evident.

The following is a list of the most common signs:

If someone you know:

- talks about wanting to die, not seeing the point of living or a way out of their situation
- has been through stressful life events or experienced significant losses and doesn't seem to be coping
- gives away prized possessions
- starts putting things in order e.g. arranging wills, pet or childcare
- shows marked changes in behaviour, appearance or mood. They may seem distracted, sad, distant or lacking in concentration. Also, watch out for sudden uplift in mood or calmness as this can sometimes be because the person feels they have found a solution to their problems, no matter how drastic this may be
- has made a previous suicide attempt

They may be at risk of suicide.

You can help. Be alert:

Ask if they are thinking about suicide.

You may feel frightened to bring up the subject of suicide in case you think it will put the idea in their head. This is not true. Don't hesitate to raise the subject. Be direct in a caring and supportive way.

Listen and show you care.

Let the person talk about their feelings and listen carefully to what they have to say. Don't judge them and rather than dismissing their thoughts as 'silly', try and understand why they are feeling this way. Let them know you care.

Encourage them to get help and support them to do so.

Asking and listening are the first steps in developing a sense of hope. Now is the time to move forward with this hope and get help to keep the person safe. You may feel out of your depth to help the person, but there are people out there who can help. You can put them in touch with someone who is qualified and able to help them.

Right now.

If the person has an immediate suicide plan and means to carry it out, do not leave them alone. Get help immediately by phoning a doctor, 999, a local crisis support service (look in a phone book, Yellow Pages or Thomson Directory) or one of the helplines below.

Tell someone.

Never promise secrecy. Dealing with suicide can be difficult and you can't do it alone. Find someone to talk to about your own feelings.

Helplines:

Samaritans	08457 90 90 90
Breathing Space	0800 83 85 87
	(Mon - Thurs: 6pm - 2am)
	(Fri - Mon: 6pm - 6am)





Starting difficult conversations.

Talking with friends or loved ones about their problems is never easy.

Often they don't want to talk. Sometimes they do, and we just don't realise. And, when they do start talking, it can be difficult to know how to respond. If a problem is really bad, what can we say?

Every situation is different, and there are no definitive answers. But here are some suggestions to help you start talking in difficult, challenging situations. Starting a conversation is half the battle. Once someone knows they can speak freely, chances are that they will talk.

Here are some of the ways you can approach difficult conversations.

How do you know there's a problem?

A lot of us prefer not to talk about our problems. Needing help can be seen as weak. But if friends or loved ones don't tell us something's bothering them, how are we supposed to know?

Sometimes people do put out signals tentatively. The signs are often there if we know what to look for. Here are some of the ways that people signal that they may need help.

- Putting themselves down in a serious or jokey way, like 'Oh, no one loves me', or 'I'm a waste of space'.
- Losing interest in their appearance.
- Using drugs and/or alcohol as a comfort.
- Changes in sleeping and/or eating habits.
- Being uncharacteristically clumsy or accident prone.
- Making leading statements, like 'You wouldn't believe what I've been through'.
- or 'Someone up there's got it in for me'.

By being understanding, tactful and gentle, there's a better chance someone will want to talk. Some useful phrases are 'Is there anything I can do?', 'Why don't we have a coffee and talk about it?', 'I've been a bit worried about you', 'Are you ok?', 'I'd like to help.'

Don't tell – ask.

You might feel that you don't know how to help someone, because you don't know what to tell them. But you don't have to tell them anything. Telling someone what they should do doesn't help.

The best way to help is to ask questions. That way you leave the other person in control. By asking questions, the person you are talking with finds his or her own answers.

Here are some questions which can lead conversations into useful areas:

- When** 'When did you realise?'
- Where** 'Where did that happen?'
- What** 'What else happened?'
- How** 'How did that feel?'

All of these questions effectively ask the person you're talking with to examine, honestly, the problems they're experiencing. The only question to try and avoid is 'why?' – it can sound challenging, and put the other person on the defensive.

All you need to do is start the conversation, so that these questions are raised. Nobody expects you to know the answers. But that doesn't mean you're not helping.

Getting help.

Have a look at our 'Spotting the signs' and 'Available resources' fact sheet for more information about available help and support.





How to be a good listener

We can all think of situations where we found it hard to talk about something that was troubling us. Difficult, painful or just embarrassing situations, which we found almost impossible to speak to someone about.

Imagine you've got a close friend who needs to get something difficult off their chest. How do you get them to open up?

Active listening is a way of listening which helps people talk through their problems, no matter how difficult they find it to put into words. It sounds a strange idea. We assume that when we listen, we don't actually do anything. Well, not necessarily.

With active listening, although you do some talking, you're really just acting as a sounding board. What you say doesn't influence what the other person has to say. It just helps them to talk.

All too often, we say things which lead conversations to a halt. 'I know just how you feel', 'Try not to worry about it'. Although they're meant well, they don't encourage the person you're speaking with to continue talking. They tend to wrap up what the other person was just saying instead. With active listening, you can avoid this.

5 steps to active listening

Open questions

Rather than asking questions which only require a yes or no answer, try and ask open questions. For example, instead of saying 'Has this been going on a long time?', ask 'How long has this been going on?'. That way, instead of closing the conversation down into a yes or no response, you open it out and encourage the other person to keep talking.

Summarising

It helps to show that you've listened to, and understood, what's been said. You can do this by summarizing. For example, 'So you're being treated terribly by your partner, but you still love them?'

Reflecting

Repeating back a word or phrase can encourage people to go on. If someone says 'So it's been really difficult recently' you can keep the conversation going simply by repeating 'Difficult...'

Clarifying

We all skirt around or gloss over the most difficult things. If we can avoid saying them, we will. If the person you're speaking with glosses over an important point, try saying 'Tell me more about...' or '...sounds a difficult area for you'. This can help them clarify the points, not only for you, but for themselves.

Reacting

You don't have to be completely neutral. If whoever you're talking with has been having an absolutely dreadful time, some sympathy and understanding is vital. 'That must have been difficult', 'You've had an awful time' - this really helps.

All of this sounds quite simple. And it is. All you're doing is listening, and from time to time giving responses which encourage the other person to keep talking. That's the key - get them to keep talking.





Suicide prevention training



ASIST

Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training

ASIST is a 2-day workshop for anyone who wants to feel more confident in helping to prevent the immediate risk of suicide.

Training for Trainers (T4T)

T4T is a 5-day course that prepares participants to become ASIST trainers.



SuicideTALK

An exploration in suicide awareness

SuicideTALK is a 1-to-3-hour exploration and awareness raising session.



safeTALK

suicide alertness for everyone

SafeTALK is a half-day session aimed at giving participants the skills to recognise that someone may be suicidal and to connect the person to someone with suicide intervention skills.



STORM is a suicide prevention training package for frontline workers in health, social and criminal justice services.

For more information about suicide prevention training opportunities, visit www.chooselife.net/training or contact the training team on **0141 242 0376**.

Available resources

Here is a selection of just some of the resources that are available in Scotland. This is by no means a fully comprehensive list but it is a useful starting point for anyone looking for additional information or support.

Helplines

Breathing Space is a free and confidential phone line service for any individual, who is experiencing low mood or depression, or who is unusually worried and in need of someone to talk to.

www.breathingspacescotland.co.uk

Telephone: 0800 83 85 87

ChildLine is the free helpline for children and young people in the UK.

www.childline.org.uk

Telephone: 0800 1111

Samaritans provides confidential non-judgemental support, 24 hours a day for people experiencing feelings of distress or despair.

www.samaritans.org.uk

Telephone: 08457 90 90 90

Email: jo@samaritans.org

Saneline offers emotional crisis and support to people experiencing mental health problems, their families, carers and friends.

www.sane.org.uk

Telephone: 0845 767 8000





Available resources

Resource guides

Health Guide provides links to health resources.

www.healthguide.co.uk/mentalhealth.html

The BBC provides access to useful mental health resources.

www.bbc.co.uk/health/mental

Suicide

Choose Life is Scotland's suicide prevention strategy. The website contains information on training, resources, research and local suicide prevention plans.

www.chooselife.net

CRUSE offers bereavement care and support to people who have lost someone close to them.

www.crusescotland.org.uk
Telephone: 01738 444 178

HopeLine UK is a telephone helpline staffed by advisors who can give support, practical advice and information to anyone who is concerned that a young person they know might be suicidal.

Telephone: 0870 170 4000

PAPYRUS is a voluntary UK organisation committed to the prevention of suicide amongst young people and the promotion of mental health and emotional wellbeing.

www.papyrus-uk.org

Telephone: 01282 432555

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SOBS) attempts to meet the needs and break the isolation of those bereaved by the suicide. They have a National helpline which is open from 9am to 9pm daily.

www.sobs.admin.care4free.net

Telephone: 0870 241 3337

Courses/Training

Choose Life offers many courses in suicide prevention training.

www.chooselife.net/training

Living Life to The Full is a free, online, life skills course.

www.livinglifetothefull.com/elearning

Working to Recovery offers many mental health training courses.

www.workingto_recovery.co.uk

Telephone: 01382 542517

Email: info@workingto_recovery.co.uk

Scottish Mental Health First Aid

trains members of the public to respond effectively in a mental health crisis situation.

www.healthscotland.org.uk/smhfa

Mental Health

All About Depression provides information about clinical depression to the general public.

www.allaboutdepression.com

Depression Alliance Scotland

offers many self-help services and a telephone helpline.

www.dascot.org

Telephone: 0845 123 23 20

Mental Health in the UK showcases artwork and provides support through a strong online community.

www.zoo.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk

MoodJuice contains a range of self-help resources and advice for anyone worried about mental health.

www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk





Available resources

Mental Health (cont)

SAMH provides access to resources and details of services for people who use mental health services, people who deliver these services and society as a whole.

www.samh.org.uk

Telephone: 0141 568 7000

Email: info@samh.org.uk

see me is a campaign to challenge stigma and discrimination around mental ill-health in Scotland.

www.seemescotland.org.uk

The Mental Health Foundation provides information, carries out research and campaigns for anyone affected by mental health problems.

www.mhf.org.uk

Telephone: 0141 572 0125

Email: Scotland@mhf.org.uk

The Scottish Development Centre for Mental Health provides services that offer training, information sharing and learning.

www.sdcmh.org.uk

Telephone: 0131 555 5959

Email: sdcmh@sdcmh.org.uk

General advice

Citizens Advice Bureau provides advice, information and representation to the public.

www.cas.org.uk

Telephone: 0844 848 96000

Money Advice Scotland is the national charity promoting high quality free, confidential, independent and impartial money (debt) advice.

www.moneyadvicescotland.org.uk

Telephone: 0141 572 0237

Email: info@moneyadvicescotland.org.uk

Post: Money Advice Scotland, Suite 306, Pentagon Centre, 36 Washington Street, Glasgow, G3 8AZ

Relate offers relationship counselling.

www.relate.org.uk

Telephone: 08451 30 40 16

The Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland works to safeguard the rights of everyone with a mental illness to help make sure people get effective care and treatment.

www.mwcscot.org.uk/home/home.asp

Telephone: 0131 222 6111

Post: The Mental Welfare Commission, Floor K, Argyle House, 3 Lady Lawson Street, Edinburgh, EH3 9SH



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