

# Supporting a Friend in Crisis

When you or someone close to experiences crisis, it can be so scary. You may not know what to do, but you know that someone needs help.

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As a helping friend, it's important to know that the other person's crisis is not your fault, and that you may not be able to provide them with everything they need. You can only help with the knowledge and energy you currently have, and that's enough. Being present and listening to your friend is often the best help you can give. This guide offers suggestions and strategies for supporting a friend in crisis.

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## Crisis Response Suggestions

### 1. Work in teams.

If you're trying to help someone in crisis, coordinate with other friends and trusted family to share responsibility and stress. Reach out to trusted RA's, student support staff, advisors, or counselors. Even if the person you're helping wants their situation confidential, you can still get additional help and resources without speaking their name.

### 2. Try not to panic.

Crisis can be made a lot worse if people start reacting with fear, control, and anger. If you react to someone in crisis with caring, openness, patience, and a relaxed and unhurried attitude, it can really help settle things down. Keep breathing and take time to do things that help you stay calm; be sure to eat, drink water, and get sleep. Self care is crucial.

### 3. Listen to the person without judgement.

What do they need? What are their feelings? What's going on? What can help? Be patient with long silences; let the person speak in their time. Beware of arguing with someone in crisis: their point of view might be off, but their feelings are real and need to be listened to (Once they're out of crisis, they'll be able to hear you better).

### 4. People need to hear things that might seem obvious:

Here are a few examples:

- I care about you.
- So many people care about you.
- I am here for you.
- Your friendship has helped me.
- You're not alone in this.
- I was just talking with someone the other day about how much you mean to me.
- You may not believe it now, but the way you're feeling will change.

### 5. Offer concrete and specific forms of help.

Sometimes people have difficulty saying what they need or how they're feeling. Start by asking if they'd like to be held or if they'd like you to sit by them. Many times, sitting in silence with the person is exactly the support they need; it lets them know that they are still worthy of attention and care while in crisis. Offer to help with basic tasks. Would it help to bring them dinner? Print out their reading assignments for the week? Do their laundry? Change their bedsheets? Tidy their room?



Questions about this resource?  
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## 6. Know the signs of suicidality and take them seriously.

Know the signs and risk factors of suicidality. If you think the person you're supporting may be thinking about suicide, ask them about it and be direct. "Are you thinking about suicide?" Asking about suicide will not make somebody suicidal who isn't already; it shows that you take their pain seriously and are not afraid to talk about it with them. Be curious and ask for details if they are feeling suicidal. "Do you have a suicide plan? Do you have what you need to carry out your plan (pills, gun, etc.)? Do you know when you would do it?"

If they have a plan for suicide, **you must bring in professional help**. Even if they don't want anybody else to know, you need help because their life is at risk. This cannot be a secret. Emphasize that you need to bring in more help because you care about them. Talk with them about who you might reach out to—maybe they've had a bad experience with a specific counselor and would prefer you reached out to someone else. Offer to call on their behalf or walk with them to a counselor's office. **Directly connect them with professional help before you leave them and remove any potentially lethal objects from their vicinity.**

### Common Signs and Risk Factors of Feeling Suicidal

This list will not tell you who is or who isn't feeling suicidal. You can only know for sure how someone is feeling by asking directly about it. However, if you notice a friend doing some or many of these things, you should strongly consider pulling in a team of supports and offering the friend some help.

#### Warning Signs

Preoccupation with death or suicide

No hope for the future: feeling trapped, helpless

Self-hatred: guilt, shame, feeling like a burden

Reckless or self-destructive behavior

Increasing use of alcohol or drugs

Sleeping a lot or not very much

Withdrawing or isolating themselves

Sudden sense of calm

Saying goodbye

Giving away possessions

Changes in appearance, behavior, thoughts, or feelings

#### Risk Factors

Previous suicide attempt(s)

Drug and/or alcohol use

Family or friend history of suicide

History of trauma or abuse

Anniversary of a suicide or death

Terminal illness or chronic pain

Loss of relationship(s)

Job or financial loss

#### Helplines | In an emergency, call 911 for immediate help.

Iowa Victim Service Call Center (24hrs)  
800-770-1650 or text 'IOWAHELP' to 20121

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (24hrs)  
800-273-8255 or online chat available  
800-799-4889 for deaf and low-hearing



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