



Responding to a person in suicidal distress

A guidance document for IPAS Staff and IPAS Centre Staff

October 2021

IPAS Guidance for responding to Persons in Suicidal Distress

About this guide

This guide was developed for IPAS and IPAS Accommodation Centre staff, having regard to the documents: “Responding to a person in suicidal distress, Ireland’s National Strategy to Reduce Suicide 2015-2020 and “Responding to a person in suicidal distress- A guidance document for public facing staff or volunteers”. It aims to support staff in IPAS and IPAS Accommodation Centres who interact with people who present or contact the service in distress or at risk of suicide and self-harm. The guide should be incorporated into staff induction packs or training manuals. It will inform and promote the use of standardised approaches across different settings. It was informed by “Connecting for Life”, Ireland’s Cross-sectoral National Strategy to Reduce Suicide 2015-2020 and further useful information can be obtained at www.connectingforlifeireland.ie.

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Introduction:

IPAS residents in distress, including suicidal distress, may present or contact you in a number of ways;

- Telephone
- Face-to-face
- By email, letter, text or social media

Some signs of distress to be aware of;

- Behaviour - e.g. isolation, sudden changes in mood, dropping out of activities in the centre
- Physical - e.g. neglecting appearance, weight loss or weight gain, difficulty concentrating
- Feelings - e.g. weariness, exhaustion, agitation, helplessness, anger, feeling life is meaningless
- Thoughts - e.g. persistent negative thoughts, unable to solve problems, self-critical

Is it ok to ask clearly and directly if someone is thinking about suicide?

Yes, for example you can ask in the following ways:

- Are you thinking about harming yourself?
- Are you thinking about taking your life?
- Are you thinking about suicide?

Simply asking these questions does not give someone the idea to end their own life. Thoughts of suicide generally develop slowly over a long period of time and after a series of difficulties in life. By asking these questions, you can let someone know it is ok for them to talk openly about suicide. By asking these questions, you are acknowledging the persons distress and giving them an opportunity to talk about what is happening in their life. If the answer to these questions is 'yes' - that they are thinking about suicide - try not to panic.

You have identified warning signs and you are worried that the person may be at risk of suicide. What do you do now?

- Generally, your response should follow the same steps. The following pages outline some simple steps to take should any of the above scenarios arise.
- Stay calm and confident, follow the steps and seek support if you are in doubt.
- Most importantly, remember your main aim is to ensure the person at risk remains safe and that they get the help they need.

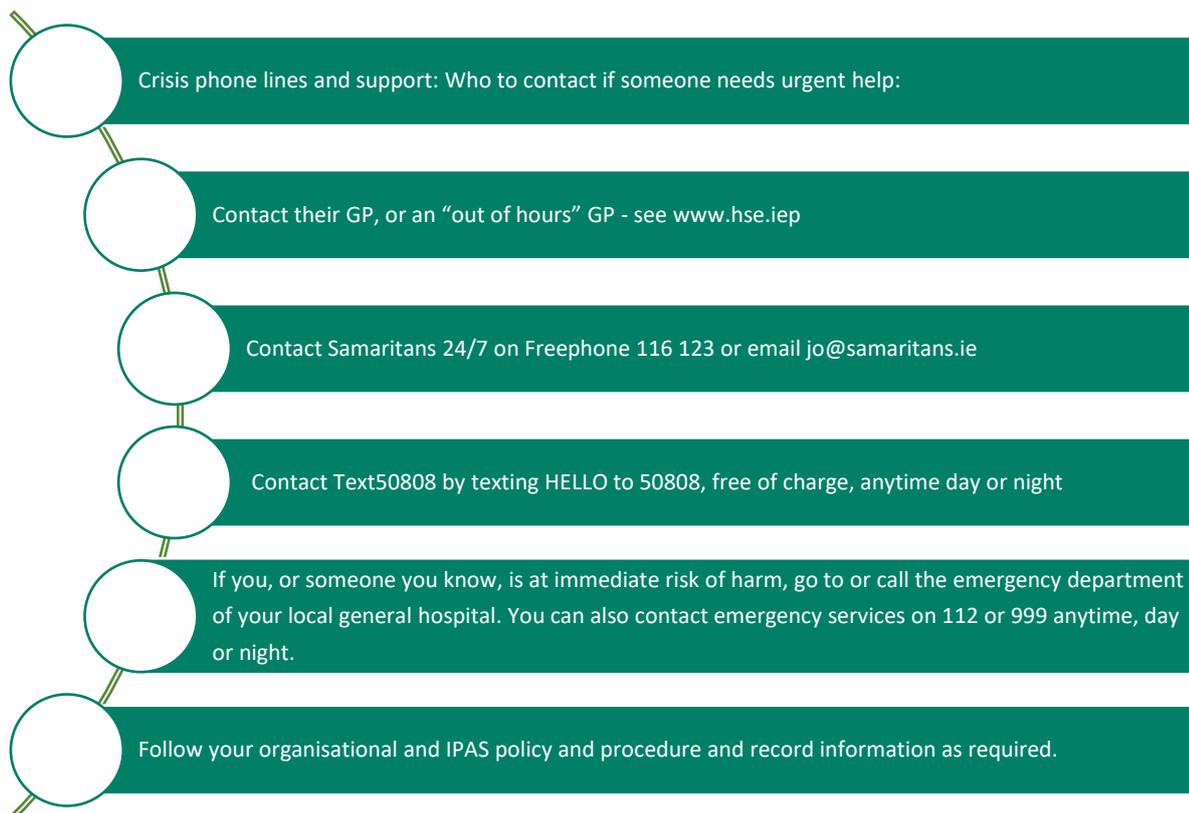
Responding to a person on the telephone

10 steps to handling the call

1. If you listen and can remain calm in the situation, you are more likely to provide the assurance necessary to support the individual
 - Speak clearly and be aware of your tone of voice - try to remain gentle but confident
 - e.g. "I am sorry to hear you are feeling like this. It appears to be a difficult time for you. I know it is very important to talk with people who can help. Is there anyone with you right now that can help you?"
 - If any of what you hear or sense on the call suggests the possibility of suicide or has you wondering if the person is thinking about suicide, ask them clearly and directly "are you thinking about suicide"
2. Take any reference to suicidal feelings seriously
3. If you know the person's name, ensure you use it to personalise the conversation. Ask for their name, if you are not sure.
4. Ask for their location e.g. "Where are you calling from right now (insert name)?"
5. Ask if someone is with them e.g. "Is there anyone with you at (insert place) today?"
6. Ask for a contact number
7. Explain this is not a crisis service, but you are going to give them time and provide contact details to them for supports e.g. "(Insert name) what you have told me is very serious. I can hear your distress, and I want to help you. The best way I can do that is to put you in touch with people that can help you immediately. Would that be ok with you?" - see contact numbers below.
8. Ask them to confirm they have the information they need to contact support services e.g. "It sounds like you have been through a tough time lately (insert name). If you stay on the line, I can give you information on someone who can help"
9. Encourage them to seek support and follow up with a contact if you have promised to do so.
10. Inform IPAS and relevant health care professionals as soon as possible

It's important that you do not promise full confidentiality, particularly in regard to the person's safety, and especially if there is an imminent threat of suicide.

All of these situations should be brought to the attention of senior staff member in your centre and IPAS. If at any stage you are concerned and feel you need assistance, let the person know you need to ask a senior colleague to step in who can be of more assistance.



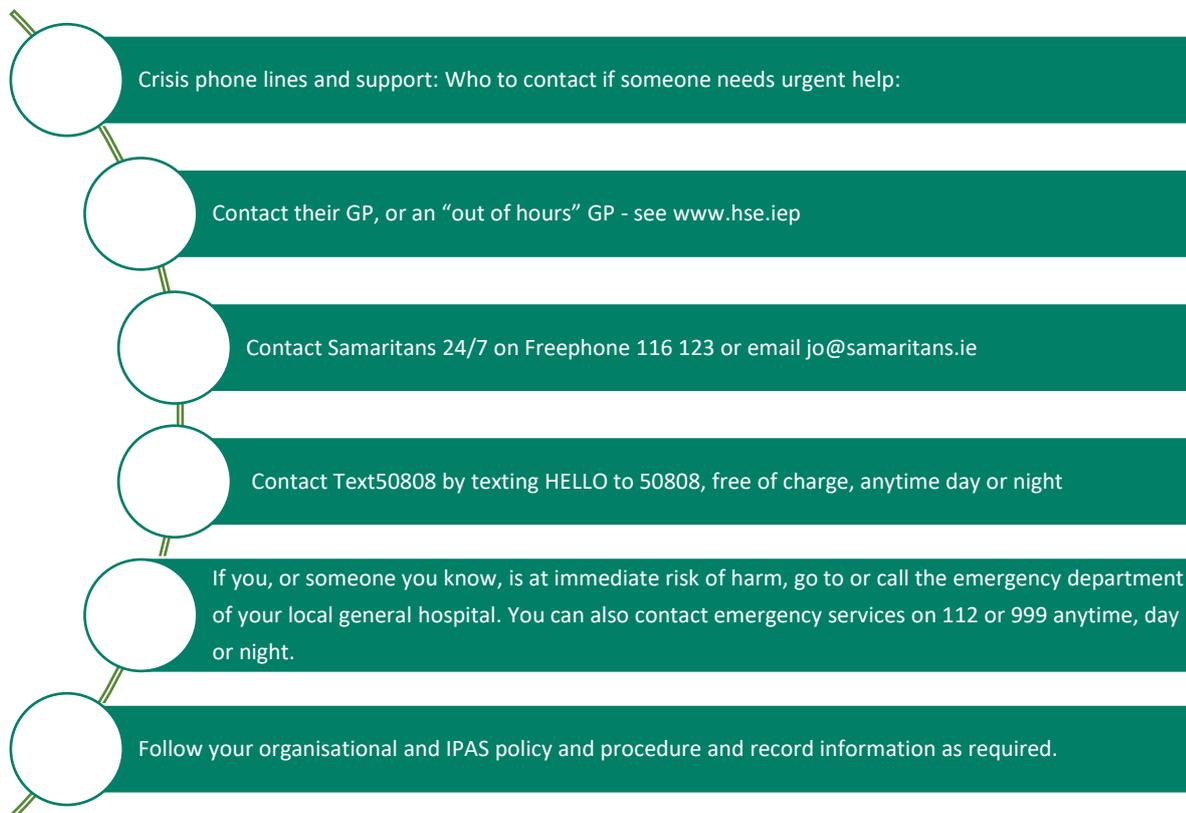
Responding to a person face-to-face

10 steps to take in a face-to-face situation

1. Listen and remain calm - if you can remain calm in the situation, you are more likely to provide the assurance necessary to support the individual e.g. "I'm so sorry to hear that you feel that way. Why don't we find a quieter place to talk properly?"
2. Bring the person somewhere quiet and safe, if possible
3. Immediately alert a colleague to the situation and ask them to remain close, if possible
4. Offer support, listen and empathise - encourage the person to take their time
5. Speak clearly and let the person know you hear their distress e.g. "I'm worried about you and I want to help" If any of what you see or hear from the person suggests the possibility of suicide or has you wondering if the person is thinking about suicide, ask them clearly and directly "are you thinking about suicide?".
6. When they are ready ask them for permission to make contact with a family member or a friend e.g. "You need all the support possible right now. Is there a family member or a friend we can call and ask to come be here with you?"
7. If permission is not granted, explain you will need to make contact with their doctor or get medical advice as an alternative, given the seriousness of the situation e.g. "Ok, I understand you do not want to call family/friends. However, what you have told me is of concern and it is important you get the support you need. I will need to contact your doctor, with your permission, or the emergency services if not"
8. Follow up with contacts provided
9. Wait with the person until support has arrived to care for them
10. Debrief with a colleague or your line manager immediately afterwards and ensure you take the time you require to process the situation.

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8 steps to handling written correspondence

1. Take your time and ensure you have considered the communication in full
2. In responding, keep a calm and professional tone
3. Empathise, it can be difficult to convey empathy in written form, so be aware of the language you use and aim for an empathetic, compassionate response e.g. “I understand from your correspondence that things are very difficult for you right now’
4. Acknowledge any distress e.g. “From what you have told me you must be going through a tough time and I can tell that you are struggling” If anything you have read or sensed in their communication suggests the possibility of suicide or has you wondering if the person is thinking about suicide, ask them clearly and directly “are you thinking about suicide”
5. Provide contacts for the appropriate crisis services and supports
6. Encourage the individual in distress to seek help from the appropriate crisis service or organisation and offer to contact services on their behalf if appropriate
7. If needed, ask a colleague to read and review the content before you respond, but be mindful of respecting the individual’s confidentiality in this instance
8. Re-read your correspondence before you send it, looking out for an empathetic tone

Examples:

Dear... I have received your letter/email/text. I am sorry to hear you are feeling like this. I know it is very important to talk with people who can help. At the end of this email you’ll find a list of support services that can assist you. We would encourage you to take that step.

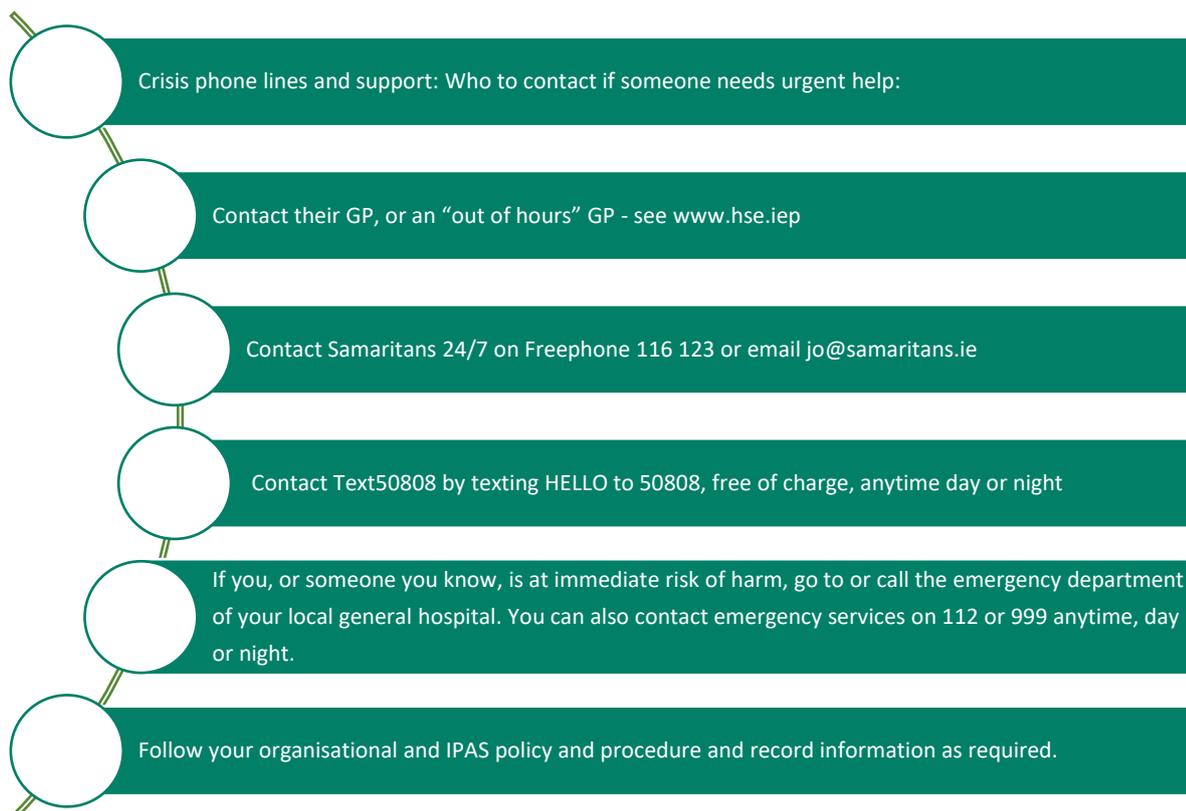
Hi... Thank you for reaching out to us. I can see from your message that you’re going through a challenging time right now. We’d really like to connect you with some helpful services and supports, with which you could talk right away, privately.

If the letter/email/text includes reference to the business of the department or agency, you’ll need to acknowledge that and ensure you let the person know that you’ll be following up on the particular aspect of their correspondence.

Dear... I note from your communication that you also have some queries. We will follow up on the business element of your correspondence and be back in touch.

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**Plaza Miesach, 50-58 Sráid Bhagóid Íochtarach,
Baile Átha Cliath 2. D02 XW14**

Miesian Plaza, 50-58 Baggot Street Lower,
Dublin 2. D02 XW14

T +353 1 647 3000

www.gov.ie