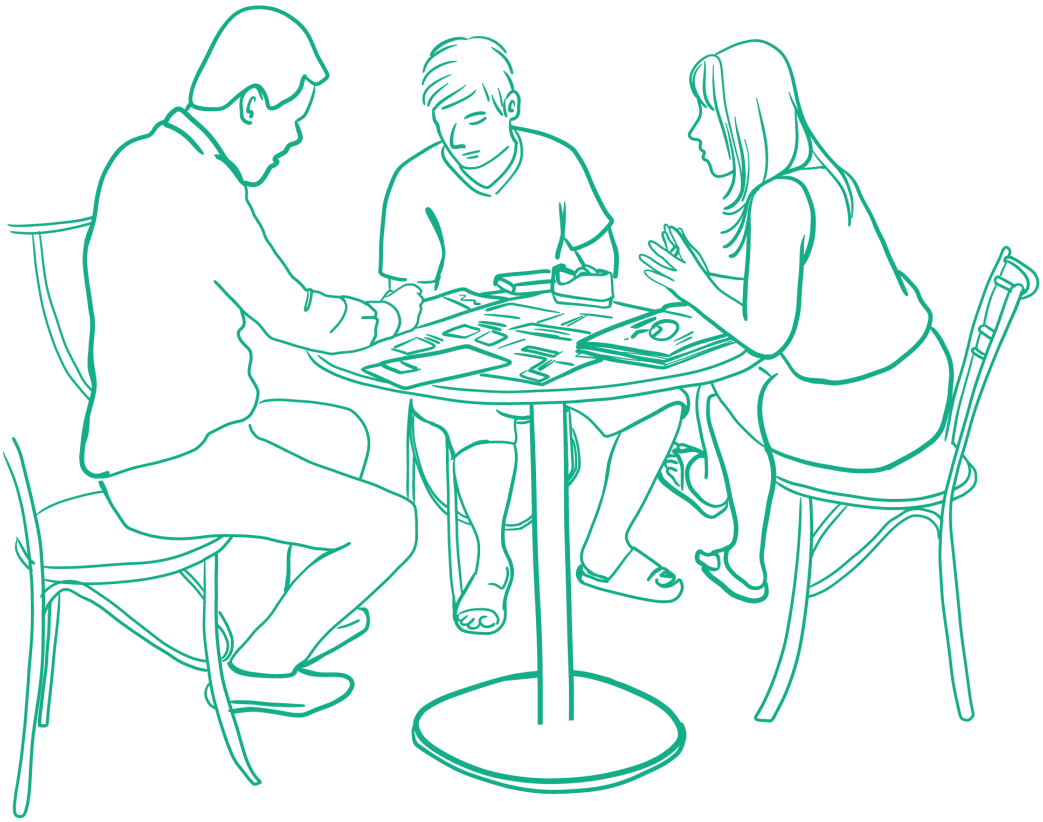
Responding to a person in suicidal distress

A guidance document for public-facing staff or volunteers



Connecting for Life

Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Seirbhís Sláinte Níos Fearr á Forbairt | Building a Better Health Service

About this guide

Connecting for Life (CfL), Ireland's National Strategy to Reduce Suicide 2015-2020 is a cross-sectoral strategy that sets out a vision of an Ireland where fewer lives are lost through suicide.

This guide was developed by the Connecting for Life Policy and Protocols Cross Sectoral Working Group. It aims to support staff and volunteers working in public facing roles to interact with people who present or contact the service in distress or at risk of suicide and self-harm.

The guide can be incorporated into staff induction packs or training manuals. It will inform and promote the use of standardised approaches across different settings. You are welcome to adapt the examples to suit your own organisation.

- For information on Connecting for Life, Ireland's National Strategy to Reduce Suicide, 2015-2020 visit **www.connectingforlifeireland.ie**.

Members of the CfL Policy and Protocols Cross Sectoral Working Group, who contributed to this guide, included representatives from;

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine; Department of Health; The Probation Service;

Irish Prison Service; Tusla; Department of Children and Youth Affairs; Department of Social Protection;

Irish Defence Forces; Department of Rural and Community Development; An Garda Síochána;

HSE (National Office for Suicide Prevention, Mental Health Operations and Acute Operations);

Mental Health Ireland; and the Irish Local Development Network.

This content in this guide was informed by the Suicide Prevention Code of Practice from the National Family Resource Centre (FRC) Mental Health Promotion Project. It was also reviewed by Samaritans Ireland.

LivingWorks START safeTALK ASIST

It is recommended that staff have also completed NOSP's suicide prevention training, such as Start (online) or safeTALK.

- For further information on training for your organisation, visit **www.nosp.ie/training** or email **info@nosp.ie**

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Introduction

People 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
- **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 is ok to ask clearly and directly if someone is thinking about suicide?

- *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.

Introduction

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
2. 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*".
3. Take any reference to suicidal feelings seriously
4. Ask for their name
5. Ask for their location e.g. *"Where are you calling from right now (insert name)?"*
6. Ask if someone is with them e.g. *"Is there anyone with you at (insert place) today?"*
7. Ask for a contact number
8. 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 on page 3
9. 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"*
10. Encourage them to seek support and follow up with a contact if you have promised to do so

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 members.

If at any stage you are concerned and feel you need assistance, let the caller know you need to ask a senior colleague to step in who can be of more assistance.

Crisis phone lines and support

Who to contact if someone needs urgent help

- Contact their GP, or an "out of hours" GP - see **www.hse.ie**
- Contact Samaritans 24/7 on Freephone **116 123** or email **jo@samaritans.ie**
- Contact Pieta House 24/7 on Freephone **1800 247 247** or text HELP to **51444** (standard message rates apply)
- Contact Text50808 by texting HELLO to **50808**, free of charge, anytime day or night

If you, or someone you know, is at immediate risk of harm, go to or call the emergency department of your local general hospital. You can also contact emergency services on **112** or **999** anytime, day or night.

For general information on mental health and services in your area, visit **www.yourmentalhealth.ie** or call the Your Mental Health Information Line on **1800 111 888**, anytime day or night.

Follow your organisational policy and procedure and record information as required.

It is a good idea to ensure you take time and check in on your own wellbeing. Self-care is important at *all* times. Some self-care tips include talking to a colleague, taking a walk or a short break from your desk.

Responding to a person on the telephone

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 your 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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Responding to a person face-to-face

Responding to an email, letter, text or social media communciation

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. *"Things must be 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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Responding to an email, letter, text or social media communication

Oifig Náisiúnta um Fhéinmharú a Chosc
HSE Straitéis agus Pleanáil Phobail
Ospidéal Stewart, Baile Phámar, Baile Átha Cliath 20

The National Office for Suicide Prevention
HSE Community Strategy and Planning
Stewarts Hospital, Palmerstown, Dublin 20

E: **info@nosp.ie**
W: **www.connectingforlifeireland.ie**

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