

Supporting Someone after a Suicide Attempt

Common feelings and reactions

Finding out that someone you care about has tried to end their life can be devastating. You may have many different emotions in the moments, days, and weeks that follow. At times, you may even blame yourself. But the fact that a loved one or someone close to you has attempted suicide is not your fault.

Some common feelings and reactions to the suicide attempt of a loved one include:

- Anger: How could they do this to us?
- Shame: I have to keep this a secret.
- Guilt: Didn't I love, watch, or listen to them enough?
- Fear: Will they try it again?
- Avoidance: If we pretend this didn't happen, it will go away.
- Minimizing: They're just trying to get attention.
- Cutting off: This isn't my problem—someone else can deal with it.

It's hard to know what to do or say when someone attempts suicide. This is extra difficult when you still feel so many emotions yourself. Responses that don't help are:

- Panicking: "This can't be happening. I don't know what to do—what do we do?"
- Name calling: "You're a real psycho."

- Criticizing: "That was such a stupid thing to do."
- Teaching or lecturing: "You know you shouldn't have done that; you should've asked for help."
- Ignoring: "If I just pretend this didn't happen, it'll go away."
- Abandoning the person: "I can't take this; I have to leave."
- Punishing the person: "I'm not talking to them until they straighten themselves out."
- Dramatizing: "This is the worst possible thing you could have done!"
- Using a "quick-fix" approach: "You just need some medicine, and then you'll feel like yourself again."
- Being angry or offended: "I can't believe you'd try that!"
- Making the person feel guilty or selfish: "How did you think this would make me feel?"

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Knowing what to say

Thoughtful, kind words can be very helpful. Communicating this way creates a “safe space” where the person feels loved, cared about, accepted, supported, and understood. Let the person know that you’re there for them. Open-ended questions and statements can help open up communication. You could try saying things like:

- “I’m sorry you have been feeling so awful. I’m so glad you’re still here.”
- “I’m here for you. Remember that you can always talk to me if you need to.”
- “I want to help you. Tell me what I can do to support you.”



Giving support

Most people who attempt suicide can move through their crisis with the help of family, friends, and professional support. To maximize the chance of stopping more attempts, it is vital that lines of caring communication are kept open.

- Be available. Let the person know you will listen. Create a “safe space” for the person to talk. This will help to build or re-create trust between you.
- Try to understand the feelings and perspectives of the person before you give solutions. It’s more important that you try to listen to their problems instead of trying to solve them.
- To keep the person safe, you may want to remove things from the home that they could use to attempt suicide again, including alcohol, drugs, firearms, and weapons.
- Support the person by exploring and encouraging age-appropriate coping tools, such as playing, journaling, making art, or talking with trusted friends and family members.
- When possible, try to give them choices about their routines and activities.
- Ask others to help you. Get family and friends to help you support the person and your family.
- Remember: You aren’t expected to fill the role of counselor, psychiatrist, or doctor. Encourage your loved one to use the professional supports that are available to them. Speak with your care team about finding available resources and services.

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Telling other people

Unfortunately, there is still social stigma about suicide. This may make it hard for you to talk about your loved one's suicide attempt. You may fear that you or they will be judged or criticized.

Remember that who you tell and how much you say is up to you. You may find it helpful to have something ready to say when asked about the suicide attempt, such as a simple: "Yes, it's a hard time for us, but we're getting them the support they need." Talking with people who have also been in similar situations, such as at a support group, may give you a source of non-judgmental support and understanding.

Looking after yourself

Supporting someone who has attempted suicide can be emotionally draining, exhausting, and stressful. It's impossible to watch over someone 24/7. It's vital that you look after yourself and get the support you need.

This isn't something you need to deal with alone. Create a good support system for yourself. Identify family members and friends that you can talk to. Or join a local support group. If you're finding it hard to deal with the strain of the situation, you may also think about getting counseling or other professional support for yourself.

For help

Mobile Crisis for Children & Youth, a 24/7 Statewide Crisis Line

Call (855) 274-7471 (855-CRISIS-1)

Mental Health Cooperative

Call (615) 726-0125