

Caregiver Reactions to Suicide

Much of the time, our own personal beliefs and feelings about suicide can influence our ability to help someone who is reaching out for help. It is important to recognize the attitudes and assumptions we all carry, because they impact on our readiness to provide support in a difficult situation.

PANIC: I feel helpless in this situation. I'm not a trained crisis worker.

Suicide can feel frightening, but you can help. People having suicidal thoughts reach out to people they trust or feel connected to in some way. Often suicidal feelings are short-lived. If you can offer support you are creating an opportunity for that person to consider other options. You are also creating a relatively safe period of time when other forms of help can be brought together for that person.

FEAR: What if I try to help, and they attempt suicide anyway?

You can't avoid this possibility. Every person is ultimately responsible for his or her own behaviour. Be aware you may need to deal with feelings of shock, guilt, and anger if a suicide is completed. It is important to recognize that these are normal emotions of grief and loss experienced by anyone near to a suicide. Always talk to someone you can trust. Don't let the stigma of suicide affect you too.

ANGER: How much more am I expected to do? How could they do this to me?

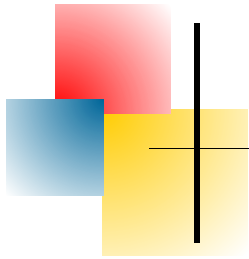
Feelings of intense anger in a situation like this may be covering up other emotions like fear or frustration about your ability to deal with the issue of suicide. Honest self-talk can help you identify what your feelings are, and will allow you to be more helpful.

RESENTMENT: They are just trying to get attention, and they're using me.

The act of suicide is generally an act of desperation. Don't minimize the importance of suicidal feelings, even if you are feeling frustrated and resentful. Communicating suicidal thoughts is a cry for help, and must be taken seriously.

The Suicide Resource Group, Wellington-Dufferin is dedicated to the reduction of suicide and suicidal behaviour and its impact on individuals, families, and communities.

If you find this fact sheet useful, please feel free to make copies and pass it along to others.
For more information about the Suicide Resource Group, please call 519-766-4450 x231



Caregiver Reactions Continued. . .

HELPLESS: This situation is hopeless. How will I ever change their mind?

Keep the focus on finding possible resources and supports that might help the person see another way out. Don't allow yourself to get lost in all the issues that brought the person to the point of thinking about suicide. Take one step at a time. Being with and listening to someone for even a short period of time can make a significant difference. The person no longer feels alone with their thoughts of suicide.

HOPELESS: If I were in that situation I would probably think about suicide too. I don't see any other choice available to them.

It is important to realize what your own attitudes are about suicide, and to understand that your beliefs about a situation may not be the same as those of the person at risk. Remember, if the person is talking to you about feeling suicidal, they have not fully decided to die. Your own feelings in a similar situation will likely not be helpful to the person at risk.

CONFLICTED: If they have decided to kill themselves, nobody really has the right to stop them.

This reaction can happen when you are trying to decide whether or not to get involved. Remember that your own beliefs about individual rights might make you forget that the person is undecided about dying. Telling a person they have a right to do what they want, may dismiss the invitation they have extended to talk about how they feel.

DISTRESSED: My personal beliefs make it impossible for me to help.

If you feel unable to help because of personal beliefs, workplace or institutional policies, or ethical guidelines, make sure that you find someone else who could help the person. You don't need to make the decision of whether or not to help by yourself. Talk it over with someone, and don't offer support if you are not prepared to follow through.