

Help with mental health problems of relatives, friends, students,...

During a difficult mental phase, we can be plagued by feelings of overwhelm, extreme despair and suicidal thoughts.

You can support loved ones during such a phase.

It is perfectly normal to feel worried or afraid when a loved one is going through a difficult mental phase in life. A mental health crisis can severely influence daily life. The stress can sometimes become so extreme that self-harm or suicidal thoughts can be triggered. However, this does not have to apply to everyone.

The first step to being there for someone is to always remember that this person did not choose these circumstances. So: a mental health crisis is never the person's fault. Another important point is to recognise when you should offer help and to know how to recognise such a crisis.

The following points can be signs that someone is going through a mental health crisis:

- Abrupt mood swings and increased agitation
- Self-harm
- Increased abuse of various substances
- Withdrawal and isolation
- Psychosis or distancing from reality, such as hallucinations and delusions
- Paranoia/persecutory thoughts
- Inability to do everyday tasks or perform basic care, such as eating, showering or getting enough sleep
- ...

Here are tips from experts on how you can support those around you when they are going through a difficult phase.

1. Help them turn to the right people for help

If a person in your life is thinking about hurting themselves or others, or if you are seriously concerned about their health and wellbeing, you can help by turning to a crisis counsellor.

It can be a great help as they are trained in this:

- Listening empathically
- Talking about strategies to relieve stress
- Advising people about other places to go
- Helping people learn simple, relieving techniques

You can reach other contact points by telephone at the following numbers:

- You can reach the Deutsche Depressionshilfe (German Depression Help) under the number:
0800 / 33 44 533.
- The social psychiatric service in your district, e.g.:
- <https://buerger.thueringen.de/detail?areald=351669&pstId=648157>
- The women's crisis hotline on 08000 116 016
- And if a relative is in crisis, you can get help at
<https://www.psychenet.de/de/hilfe-finden/schnelle-hilfe/soforthilfe.html>
- **+ The contact points and addresses communicated by the HSA**

2. Offer distractions

It is advisable to help the suffering person find a distracting activity that creates some mental distance from the source of the suffering and helps them stay in the present.

You can try the following simple ideas:

- Watch a feel-good film
- Paint, draw or work on another creative project
- Going out for a leisurely meal, or cooking together
- Take a walk outdoors together
- ...

However, there is no universal solution, so it is advisable to ask the people themselves what would do them good at that moment. If they say they don't know, it is okay to make suggestions - or ask them if it might be better to just sit and talk.

3. Ask for what they need

Instead of assuming that you know what they need or feel, you should ask. The following questions might help:

- What can I do to make your life easier right now?
- Is there anything I can take away from you to make you feel less overwhelmed?
- I would love to spend time with you. Is there anything you feel like doing - something that would give you pleasure?
- Maybe you need someone to take some steps for you on the road to recovery?
For example, making an appointment for therapy/counselling....
- Would you find it helpful to go shopping or cook together once a week?
- ...

Note: Remember that sometimes it is difficult to know what might help at that moment because of the intense stress, so you may not get an answer right away.

4. keep your ears open for suicidal thoughts

It may feel scary to bring up the subject of suicide, but you should ask yourself if the loved one has ever thought about ending their life. The idea that talking about suicide can increase the risk of a suicide attempt is just a myth. In fact, experts have found that talking about suicide can both reduce suicidal thoughts and improve mental well-being.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) recommends saying something along the lines of, "When people go through what you're going through and struggle with such intense emotional pain, sometimes they think about suicide. Has that ever crossed your mind?"

If you ask this question, they will know that they can talk to you about their suicidal thoughts without worry.

Important: If you are having suicidal thoughts yourself, you can get help immediately and at any time. Free of charge and anonymously, you can call the pastoral care hotline on 0800 1110111.

5. Listen and give confirmation

Just listening to a loved one talk about their experience without judgement is supportive. You might start a conversation by saying, **"I've noticed [some behaviour from XYZ] lately, and I just want to make sure you're okay because I know you've been through a lot lately. How are you feeling?"**

Then give undivided attention and leave space for the uncomfortable emotions they are struggling with (e.g. "crying is okay").

Even if your gut instinct is to try to solve the problem or cheer your counterpart up, this may result in unintentionally invalidating the person's feelings. However, you can help normalise the person's experience by offering affirming statements such as **'It makes sense that you feel overwhelmed' or 'That sounds really stressful'**.

6. Support them in looking for a therapist.

If your loved one already has a therapist, you can encourage them to go to them in a crisis. If they do not yet have a therapist, help them find one. You can do this by searching the internet for counselling or therapy.

You can also help drive the patient to the appointment or take care of childcare if this is a barrier.

You can also help find support groups. These can also be found online.

7. Stay in touch

It is important to stay in touch with someone who is going through a mental health crisis - not only to watch for signs of suicidal or self-harm thoughts, but also to remind him/her that he/she is important. Even a quick phone call or message saying **"Hey, I was thinking about you today, how are you?"** can go a long way.

You can build a network of support for the person affected by encouraging other friends and family members to reach out - especially on days when you know you won't have the chance.

When is it necessary to seek medical help?

If the loved one is having suicidal thoughts, if the person consents, a visit to hospital and clinic emergency departments is fine. But also in special cases, without consent and clear signs, it is okay to alert the police or ambulance. However, calling the police during a mental health crisis can be traumatic in some cases (especially for people belonging to disadvantaged groups).

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