

Navigating a Mental Health Crisis

It can be frightening when you or a loved one is experiencing a mental health crisis. You may not know what to do. Below are some ideas for navigating a crisis that you or someone you support is experiencing.

If You Are Experiencing A Mental Health Crisis

Plan Ahead, When Possible

If you have experienced a mental health crisis in the past, you may want to plan ahead in case a crisis happens again. Planning ahead helps ensure that your preferences are honored during the crisis, and can sometimes help interrupt things before they get to a crisis level.

Resources for Crisis Planning

Wellness Recovery Action Plan

<https://mentalhealthrecovery.com/>

Madness & Oppression: Paths to Personal Transformation & Collective Liberation

<https://fireweedcollective.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/MadnessAndOppressionGuide.pdf>

Psychiatric Advance Directives: Forms to Prepare

<http://www.bazelon.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/PAD-Template.pdf>

Know When It's a Crisis

A mental health crisis is when someone is experiencing symptoms that make them feel out of control or prevent them from being able to care for themselves. It can look very different for different people. For example thinking about suicide, hearing voices, or having unusual thoughts can be part of a mental health crisis for some people, but other people are able to well manage these experiences. **You get to decide when what you're experiencing has reached a crisis level for you.**

Do a Self Check In

Ask yourself what you need (or don't need) right now. Is there something you can do to make yourself feel better or distract yourself? Do you need the company of someone else, or would time alone be helpful? Also ask yourself when the last time you ate or slept was. Sometimes we neglect basic needs when we are not doing well, and that can worsen what we are experiencing. **The focus is on you. Your number one priority right now is taking care of yourself.**

Engage in Self Care

You can try doing something that makes you feel good or that distracts you from what you're experiencing. Know that self care looks different for different people, and your self care needs can change moment to moment. Do what works for you right now.

Need self care ideas? Check out this list:

<https://namimass.org/wp-content/uploads/selfcare-ideas.pdf>

Get Support From Someone You Trust

If you think that you can't manage this alone, reach out to a friend, family member, peer supporter, or other person you trust for support.

Not sure what to say when you reach out? Read *10 Ways To "Reach Out" When You're Struggling With Your Mental Health* for ideas: <https://letsqueerthingsup.com/2018/03/03/10-ways-to-reach-out-when-youre-struggling-with-your-mental-health/>

Use a Crisis Call, Text, and Chat Service

If you don't have someone to reach out to - or think that talking with someone anonymously would be helpful - you could try a crisis call, text, and chat service. Their operators are trained to provide support, resources, and referrals to people who are experiencing a crisis.

List of crisis call, text, and chat services:

<https://namimass.org/wp-content/uploads/crisisservices.pdf>

Talk to Your Mental Health Provider

If you're already getting care from a mental health provider, like a therapist or psychiatrist, you may want to reach out to them for support. Many mental health practices offer urgent care for their patients, either with the patient's provider or an on-call provider.

Use a Peer-Based Crisis Alternative

Peer-based crisis alternative programs are a support option for people dealing with a crisis, or to help prevent times of crisis.

Peer-based crisis alternative programs

Afiya in Northampton

<http://www.westernmassrlc.org/afiya>

Peer to Peer Program in Quincy

<https://www.aspirehealthalliance.org/our-programs/for-adults/peer-to-peer-program/>

The Living Room in Framingham

<https://www.advocates.org/services/livingroom>

The Living Room in Springfield

<https://www.bhninc.org/services-and-programs/emergency-services/living-room>

The Living Room in Greenfield

<https://www.csoinc.org/community-based-programs>

Call your Local Emergency Services Program or Get Urgent Care

If you need to speak with a mental health provider urgently about what you are experiencing, you can call your local Emergency Services Program (ESP). ESPs - often called crisis teams - are staffed by mental health clinicians. They can talk to people who feel they are in or near crisis, and try to help them find the supports they need to manage the crisis.

ESP services are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. You can find the ESP serving your area, by calling 1-877-382-1609 and entering your zip code.

Note that ESPs may not support people who have recently used substances. If you need urgent substance-related care and cannot get support through your local ESP, you can try the following:

Boston Medical Center's Faster Paths to Treatment in Boston

<https://www.bmc.org/programs/faster-paths-to-treatment>

Community Healthlink's Behavioral Health and Addiction Urgent Care in Worcester

<http://www.communityhealthlink.com/chl/substance-abuse-treatment-and-recovery-programs/behavioral-health-and-addiction-urgent-care>

SSTAR's Open Access Center in Fall River

<https://www.sstar.org/open-access-center/>

Mass Substance Use Helpline for help finding other substance use related treatment and resources

<https://helplinema.org/>

Go to Your Local Emergency Room

If you need to speak with someone urgently about what you are experiencing and other options are not available (or your crisis involves a medical emergency) you can go to your local hospital emergency room. Like Emergency Service Programs (ESPs), emergency room providers will give you an assessment to help determine next steps. Know that the care options that can be offered in the emergency room are often more limited than what an ESP can offer, and your ability to choose the care that you think will work best may be limited.

If Someone You Support Is Experiencing A Mental Health Crisis

Help the Person Plan Ahead, When Possible

If the person you are supporting has experienced a mental health crisis in the past, you can encourage them to plan ahead in case a crisis happens again. Planning ahead helps ensure that their preferences are honored during the crisis, and can sometimes help interrupt things before they get to a crisis level.

Know When It's a Crisis

A mental health crisis is when someone is experiencing symptoms that make them feel out of control or prevent them from being able to care for themselves. It can look very different for different people. For example thinking about suicide, hearing voices, or having unusual thoughts can be part of a mental health crisis for some people, but other people are able to well manage these experiences. **Try to rely on the wisdom of the person you are supporting and how they interpret what they are experiencing.**

Offer Support

It's natural to feel scared or overwhelmed when someone you love is experiencing a mental health crisis. It can be hard to know what to do. Here are some general things to keep in mind:

- Try to keep calm and avoid over-reacting!
- Offer to listen to the person, then listen without judgment. Try to avoid making assumptions about their experience. If you don't understand something they said, gently ask for clarification. For example, you can say, what does it mean when you say...
- Offer the person validation with what they're feeling, and try not to minimize it. If they perceive things that you do not or believe things that are not likely, it's not helpful to say that they're wrong. Understand that the experience is real for them and validate the pain, anger, fear, etc. that they are feeling.
- Understand that your role is to support the person and not to "fix" them. Try to avoid deciding what's best and making decisions for them. Instead ask the person what would be helpful, then do that.
- Some people will find talking to someone will help them move through the crisis. Other people may need more support. You can offer to help them find support that will work for them.

Supporting Someone who is Thinking about Suicide

Having thoughts about suicide is common. When someone is thinking about ending their life, they may be:

- dealing with a tough situation
- coping with an uncomfortable feeling
- experiencing an intense pain
- feeling stuck, overwhelmed, disconnected, desperate, or rejected

Getting Support

Many people with thoughts about suicide don't have someone they can talk to about the thoughts. This can include people getting ongoing mental health treatment. When people ask for help with thoughts about suicide, involuntary hospitalization is often the response. Being in the hospital is not always helpful to people who are thinking about suicide, and can even be damaging. This response can also make it harder for people to reach out again in the future. Yet for many people, talking about it can help them move past the thoughts.

When someone tells you they are thinking about suicide, they almost always are looking for your support to deal with and get past those thoughts. By being willing to listen to them, you can help them with their healing.

What You Can Say and Do

It can be hard to know what to say or do when someone tells you they are thinking about suicide. Here are some ideas...

Some things you can say when someone tells you they are thinking about suicide:

- Do you want to talk more about it?
- Did something happen that made you feel this way?
- Have you felt this way before?
- What has worked in the past?

- Have you been able to share this with anyone else?
- What do you need to get through this?
- What would be helpful right now?
- I'm not sure what to say, but I can sit and listen.

Some things you can offer when someone tells you they are thinking about suicide:

- to sit and listen
- to help the person explore what would be helpful
- to honor their preferences about what is and is not helpful
- being clear about your own limits and needs

Some things you should try not to do when someone tells you they are thinking about suicide:

- take charge
- assess or "fix" the person
- tell the person they have a lot to live for (well meaning but can feel invalidating)
- say the person should feel guilt or shame about their feelings
- make promises that you cannot keep
- make decisions for them or go behind their back

Supporting Someone who Uses Self Harm

Self harm means hurting yourself in an intentional way. Self harm is common. It can include things like cutting, burning, or hitting oneself, driving in a way that is intentionally reckless, and ingesting harmful substances. People use self harm to for many reasons:

- to manage difficult emotions
- to relieve intense emotional pain
- to feel a sense of control
- to express emotional pain in a visible way
- to punish themselves

Responding to Self Harm

It can be scary when someone you know uses self harm. People often have a strong negative reaction to someone else's self harm. They may think that it is something that needs to be stopped right away. But responding to someone who self harms in a shame-based way can be damaging. Self harm can be an effective coping technique, and simply stopping it can make the feelings the person is dealing with more intense. Instead try responding to the person with compassion. Know that the pain they are experiencing is intense.

Here are some ideas for how to respond:

- You can acknowledge the self harm in a direct but gentle way. For example, you could say... I noticed your [bandage, scar, wound]. I'm here to talk, if that would be helpful.
- If they don't want to talk, leave it at that. Self harm is a very personal experience, and some people will not feel comfortable talking about it. Respect that.

- If they do want to talk, try to listen without judgment of what they are feeling or how they are coping with it. You could ask... did something happen? have you done this before? is there anything that I can do?

Harm Reduction

Self harm can be an effective coping tool, so someone may not want to simply stop. Harm reduction techniques may be more useful. Harm reduction is finding ways to reduce the risk and make the self harm safer. A harm reduction approach for people who cut themselves could include having bandages and ointment at hand when the self harm happens.

When talking to someone about self harm, you can say something like... I get that this may be helpful to you. Are you being careful when you do it? Deciding to reduce harm, and how to do so, should always be the decision of the person who is using self harm unless they ask for your help.

Help The Person Get More Support, If They Want It

Sometimes the person you are supporting will want other kinds of support. You can help them figure out what would be helpful. Here are some potential support options:

- Using a crisis call/text/chat service - these are available to provide support, resources, and referrals to people who are experiencing a crisis.
- Talking to their mental health provider, if they are already getting care from someone - many mental health practices offer urgent care for their patients, either with the patient's provider or an on-call provider.
- Use a peer-based crisis alternative - these are a support option for people dealing with a crisis, or to help prevent times of crisis.
- Calling the local Emergency Services Program - a good option if the person wants to speak with a mental health provider urgently about what you are experiencing.
- Going to the local Emergency Room - when other options are not available or the crisis involves a medical emergency

Engage in Self Care

Supporting someone who is experiencing a crisis can take a lot of energy. It's important to also think about your own needs. Make sure you're taking care of your basic needs, like eating and sleeping. You may also want to try doing something that is positive or relaxing. You can find other ideas for self care here: <https://namimass.org/wp-content/uploads/selfcare-ideas.pdf>.

You can also try family support, if you think that would be helpful. Know that most family support options also welcome partners, friends, and other supporters. You can find support options here: <https://namimass.org/family-support/>.



This information is for educational purposes only. Contact the COMPASS Helpline for additional information and resources about this topic.

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email COMPASS at compass@namimass.org