

Help a Friend in Need

This resource provides tips for recognizing the early warning signs of a mental health crisis, steps to take to help a friend who may be in distress and ways to determine when to escalate mental health emergencies to support services.

WHAT IS A MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS?

A mental health crisis occurs when an individual is unable to manage life's stressors on their own. A crisis triggers emotional distress to a person's daily function that is not considered life-threatening but may prevent them from operating at their baseline or disrupt their ability to care for their personal well-being. Intervention is necessary to prevent escalation of emotional distress in this mental state.

WARNING SIGNS OF A MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

Identifying early indicators of a mental health crisis can help provide support to a friend in need, prevent further harm and protect those around you. Warning signs of a mental health crisis include:



- Uncontrollable negative thoughts
- Abusive habits or risk-taking behavior (substance use or self-harm)
- Isolation and avoiding social activities
- Inability to complete everyday tasks
- Rapid mood swings
- Talking about suicide or intentions to make a plan
- Skipping class/meetings/work
- Distressing social media post
- Neglecting personal hygiene (lack of sleep, loss of appetite, fatigue, increased physical illness)

During a mental health crisis, someone may make statements like: "I can't survive this," "It doesn't matter anyways," "I don't see the point anymore," "There's nothing I can do to make things better" or "Leave me alone."

A.S.K. EMOTIONAL SUPPORT TOOL

When you observe concerning mental health behavior, show your care and concern for a friend by taking action. Never assume that someone else will handle the situation. You don't have to be an expert. Just [A.S.K. – Acknowledge, Support, Keep-in-Touch](#).

ACKNOWLEDGE: Create a supportive space by letting them know you're here for them.

SUPPORT: Validate their feelings and ask what they need.

KEEP-IN-TOUCH: Check back in regularly and consistently.

If you feel uncomfortable or unable to intervene, ask another sister, peer, advisor or trusted adult to assist you. Call for assistance from your college/university counseling center or the [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#) if needed.

MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS DE-ESCALATION TECHNIQUES



The goal in a mental health crisis is to reduce the threat of danger to the individual experiencing distress. Use the 10 de-escalation techniques from the [National Alliance on Mental Illness \(NAMI\)](#) to intervene in a safe manner:

1. **Use a calm voice.** Speaking in a quiet, relaxed tone without raising your voice can help to decrease stress. Avoid arguing or attempting to reason with them in a moment of crisis.
2. **Actively listen.** Be attentive to understand, remember and respond to what you've heard. Reflect what they have said back to them and summarize their responses to better empathize with their emotions.
3. **Express support and concern.** Be direct in sharing what behavior you have noticed. Avoid judgmental comments and making assumptions about a person's mental health experience. If there are concerns about suicidal ideation, it is OK to say it. *Example ways to ask about suicide: "Are you having thoughts of suicide?" or "Do you have a plan to hurt yourself?"*
4. **Move slowly.** Quick and sudden movement can cause additional stress and panic. Remaining still and announcing actions can help someone in distress focus on regaining control of their emotions and physical response to a crisis.
5. **Offer options.** Providing choices can help a person in crisis pick how they would like to proceed at their own comfort level.
6. **Give them space.** Overcrowding someone can make them feel inferior or under attack. Honor their personal space by sitting across from them at eye level.
7. **Be patient.** Allow time for someone to process and respond before asking additional questions. Be prepared to wait if they need to reply.
8. **Ask how you can help.** Use specific questions to seek understanding. Be mindful that someone experiencing a mental health crisis may not know what they need. You may need to reframe your question or repeat it. *Example questions to ask: "What are you feeling at this moment?," "Would you like me to call someone for you?" or "Do you want me to walk with you to the counseling center?"*
9. **Avoid physical contact without consent.** Touching someone without their permission can provoke an aggressive reaction. Always ask for their consent beforehand and accept their decision.
10. **Keep stimulation low.** Loud, busy and overstimulating environments can be distracting to someone in distress. Find a quiet and private location to have a conversation.

MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS VS. MENTAL HEALTH EMERGENCY

Unlike a mental health crisis, a mental health emergency is a life-threatening situation in which an individual poses imminent harm to themselves or others. A mental health emergency requires immediate response and intervention from trained professionals to prevent further risk to the individual and those around them.

WARNING SIGNS OF A MENTAL HEALTH EMERGENCY

Knowing the signs of a mental health emergency can be a lifesaving measure in a critical moment of need. The key indicators someone may be experiencing a mental health emergency are:

- Threat or attempt of suicide
- Excessive substance use (alcohol or other drugs)
- Expressing intent to harm others
- Disorientation
- Misuse of medications

Phrases someone may say in a mental health emergency are: “I give up,” “I can’t do this anymore,” “Life isn’t worth living,” “I don’t want to be here,” “I want to never wake up” or “You’ll be better off without me around.”

MENTAL HEALTH EMERGENCY RESPONSE

If your personal safety or the well-being of another is in danger or threatened, contact 911 for immediate medical assistance. Once first responders arrive on-site, share specific and descriptive details that are relevant for the individual experiencing the mental health concern, including behaviors you witnessed or phrases that were shared.



Avoid providing information that is outside of the scope of the current incident to help them in assessing the situation at hand. You may also consider submitting a student of concern report with your campus afterward.

MENTAL HEALTH ASSISTANCE FOR THE HELPERS

Helping someone who is experiencing mental health distress can also take an emotional toll on your own well-being. It may even trigger a mental health challenge of your own. That’s why it’s essential to care for yourself just as much as you care for others’ mental health. It’s important that you take steps to prioritize your emotional wellness after offering your support and intervention.

This may look like: leaning into your support system; practicing self-care; or seeking out counseling, therapy or self-support resources.



ASKING FOR HELP IS TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF. IF YOU OR A LOVED ONE IS EXPERIENCING A MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS, CONTACT [THE 988 SUICIDE & CRISIS LIFELINE](#) FOR FREE, 24/7, CONFIDENTIAL SUPPORT FROM ITS NATIONAL NETWORK OF TRAINED MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS CENTERS.

988 SUICIDE & CRISIS LIFELINE (988) | [CALL, TEXT, CHAT](#)

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