



Canadian Mental
Health Association
Mental health for all

Association canadienne
pour la santé mentale
La santé mentale pour tous

Lean In and Listen

A guide to help prevent suicide

September 2025

THE TOPIC OF SUICIDE CAN BE COMPLEX, UPSETTING AND PUZZLING. WE MIGHT NOT WANT TO THINK OR TALK ABOUT IT, BUT WE REALLY NEED TO.

THERE ARE ABOUT 4,500 SUICIDES EACH YEAR IN CANADA. THAT MEANS 12 LIVES ARE LOST EVERY DAY—DEATHS THAT CAN BE PREVENTED.

WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?

This guide is for anyone who's thinking about suicide, or who wants to help someone who is. It is best explored before a crisis.

This morning, I had to go to work, but I couldn't stop crying. Life feels so hard right now, with no joy in it. I've lost my appetite, and I have no interest in anything—except ending this suffering. I don't want to die; I just want the pain to stop.

- Pascale from Québec

Like Pascale, an overwhelming majority of people who think of suicide don't want to die. They're in extreme pain and want that pain to end. The pain often narrows their ability to see any other ways to feel better.

IF YOU'RE THINKING ABOUT SUICIDE, PLEASE REACH OUT TO SOMEONE.

Reaching out, whether to a crisis line, a mental health professional or a trusted person, is the first step.

Call 9-8-8: Canada now has a suicide crisis helpline that you can call or text any time, in English or French.

Call someone you trust: If you're reaching out to a trusted person, you may want to ask them to read and use this guide. It includes information about how to listen when someone wants to talk and how to create a safety plan for when your feelings reach a crisis point.

IF YOU'RE A TRUSTED PERSON

This guide will help prepare you to be a trusted person to someone who is thinking about suicide. You might be a friend or loved one, or even a colleague. Keep in mind: you're not expected to be a therapist or a mental health professional. Our natural ability to empathize and listen can go a long way towards helping someone who is thinking about suicide.

When someone reaches out to you, it means they trust you. Take a deep breath and stay present. You can help by being there and listening.

If you're concerned about someone, you might want to reach out first. Don't avoid someone in distress. You may be anxious, but even simply asking, "Do you want to talk?" could be the lifeline someone needs.

When someone shares their pain, the most important thing you can do is listen without judgment. Take their words seriously. Your presence and compassion can be the first step in getting them the help that may save their life.

SHOULD I REALLY ASK DIRECTLY?

Direct questions can help prevent suicide so don't shy away from asking: "Are you thinking about suicide?" By asking, you're not planting the idea. In fact, the person may be relieved to talk about it. Please ask if they have a suicide plan and the means to carry it out.

BE READY

It's better to be prepared if someone comes to you with suicidal thoughts or feelings. Here are some simple tips:

- Breathe deeply. Stay calm.
- Listen.
- Show empathy and kindness.
- Ask if the risk is immediate. If they say yes, call 911 or 988 with them.
- Ask if they have a plan and a means to end their life. If they say yes, call 988 together.
- Ask how you can best help and support them.
- Don't panic.
- Don't jump in with solutions or advice.
- Don't judge.
- Don't interrupt.
- Know the number for **Canada's Suicide Crisis Helpline: 988**
- Memorize the number for **Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868.**

IF THE PERSON IS IN IMMEDIATE DANGER, HELP THEM TAKE IMMEDIATE ACTION.

9-8-8: Canada's Suicide Crisis

Helpline. Call or text **9-8-8**. 988 offers free, confidential support in English and French 24/7 Canada-wide.

Kids Help Phone. Call **1-800-668-6868**, text **CONNECT to 686868**, or chat online at kidshelpphone.ca for free, 24/7 support for children, teens, and young adults in English and French.

Hope for Wellness. For Indigenous communities, call the Hope for Wellness Help Line at **1-855-242-3310** or chat online at hopeforwellness.ca. Support is available 24/7 in English, French, Cree, Ojibwe, and Inuktitut.

Black Youth Helpline: A national helpline for Canadian youth: **Toll Free 1-833-294-8650** or Call **416-285-9944** (9:00 a.m.–10:00 p.m. ET). Email: info@blackyouth.ca

Trans Lifeline: Call: **1-877-330-6366** (Monday to Friday, 1:00 pm to 9:00 pm ET). www.translifeline.org

LGBT National Help Centre: Call: **1-888-843-4564** (Monday through Friday, 2:00 pm to 11:00 pm ET. Saturday 12:00 pm to 5:00 pm ET). www.lgbthotline.org

SHOULD I CALL 911?

If the person has immediate plans to die, call 911. Some people may not want a police response. Know your local options. 211.ca may be able to help. Does your community have a mobile crisis team? If so, keep the number on hand. If the person wants to go to the emergency department, you could offer to go with them.

If the risk is NOT immediate, there are other ways you can help. A good way to support someone is to create a safety plan together. This plan can give the person concrete steps to follow if their thoughts of suicide get stronger. These steps are specific and relevant to the person who's thinking about dying by suicide. You can prepare yourself even more by taking the Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST).

CREATING A SAFETY PLAN

A safety plan is a tool that helps guide and support someone when suicidal thoughts arise, helping to prevent a crisis. Safety plans can only be developed when a person is able to think clearly, not when they are in crisis.

WHEN TO CREATE A SAFETY PLAN

A safety plan is created when a person is NOT in crisis (i.e., not experiencing intense suicidal thoughts). It may be written after a suicidal crisis, but not during, as a person in crisis can become overwhelmed with suicidal thoughts and confusion. Write a safety plan when a person can identify what keeps them going and what actions can help when thoughts become too much.

DO SAFETY PLANS WORK?

Yes, safety plans have been proven to work. A safety plan focuses on a person's strengths and identifies and emphasizes their unique abilities, interests and preferences so they can draw on them when suicidal thoughts become intense. For people who face repeated suicidal thoughts or crises, remembering that they've made it through a crisis before can be a source of strength.

IF YOU'RE HELPING SOMEONE CREATE A SAFETY PLAN:

Listen without judgment.

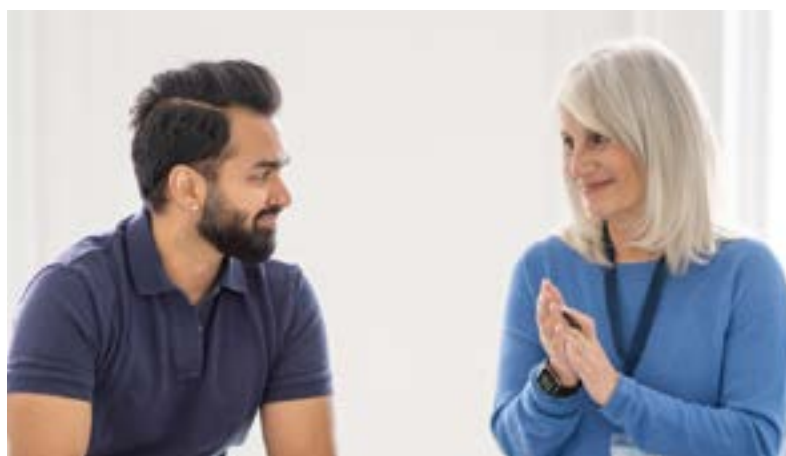
Encourage them to choose strategies and supports that feel safe to them.

Help them identify warning signs of a crisis.

Assist with practical steps (making their environment safe, noting emergency contacts).

Assure them that the plan you make together is private and that you won't share anything they tell you.

Remind them they can update the plan any time.



HOW TO CREATE A SAFETY PLAN

1

LIST WARNING SIGNS THAT YOU MIGHT BE HEADING TOWARD A SUICIDAL CRISIS.

Guiding question:

What warning signs might suggest that you're having suicidal thoughts?

These signs can show up in many ways—through situations, thoughts, feelings, body sensations, or behaviours. Pay attention to both obvious and more subtle cues that something isn't right for you.

Examples:

Situation: Argument with a loved one

Thoughts: “I can't take this anymore.”

Body sensations: Heaviness or tightness in the chest or body. “I can't breathe from the weight of it.”

Behaviours: Withdrawal from social interaction; irregular eating behaviours, urge to drink alcohol or use other substances.



2

LIST THE COPING STRATEGIES THAT CAN BE USED TO REDIRECT YOUR THOUGHTS.

Guiding question:

What helps you calm your overwhelming thoughts, including thoughts of suicide?

This could be something that distracts you, relaxes or soothes you, or gets your body moving. Try to think of activities that help you feel safer and more grounded.

Examples:

- Watch something you enjoy: a favourite show or movie.
- Listen or create sound: music, podcasts, chanting, or rhythmic drumming.
- Read or tell stories: books, journaling, or sharing stories with someone you trust.
- Express yourself: drawing, painting, crafts, or calligraphy.
- Move your body: walking, stretching, yoga, Tai Chi, or traditional dance.
- Spend time in nature: a park, garden, forest, or near water.
- Cook or prepare food: a favourite meal or something meaningful from your culture.
- Breathe and meditate, practice mindfulness, deep breathing, or quiet reflection.
- Connect with others: friends, family, elders, or community groups.
- Join community activities: drum circles, storytelling sessions, or cultural gatherings.
- Care for animals or pets; gentle interaction with animals.
- Do any of the above with a friend or in a group.



3

LIST THE PLACES AND PEOPLE THAT CAN HELP LIFT YOU OUT OF OVERWHELMING THOUGHTS OF SUICIDE. CHOOSE THINGS THAT ARE EASY TO DO.

Guiding questions:

Where can you go or what can you do to feel grounded and take a break from suicidal thoughts?

Who can help you shift your focus and make you feel more supported? Who's there for you and is a great listener? Who do you trust most? Who's easy to talk to?

Places that help ground you

- Visit a park, garden, forest, or near a river or lake.
- Spend time in a community, cultural, or friendship centre.
- Go to a safe social space, like a café, library, or gathering place.
- Attend cultural or spiritual gatherings – drum circles, storytelling sessions, or prayer/meditation spaces.

People who can support you

- Text or call a friend, family member, community member, or Elder.
- Ask someone to join you for a visit, a meal, or a shared activity.
- Reach out to a peer support worker, counselor, cultural mentor, or Elder in your community.

Physical or mindful activities to shift focus

- Watch a favourite show, movie, or performance that uplifts you.
- Walk, run, bike, or do gentle movement—Tai Chi, yoga, or traditional dance.
- Stretch, do a short workout, or practice mindful breathing.
- Spend time observing nature, meditating, or quietly reflecting.

4

MAKE A LIST OF THE PEOPLE YOU CAN CONTACT IN A CRISIS, ALONG WITH THEIR PHONE NUMBERS. THESE ARE YOUR TRUSTED PEOPLE. IF YOU DON'T HAVE SOMEONE YOU FEEL COMFORTABLE CALLING RIGHT NOW, YOU CAN INCLUDE LOCAL RESOURCES OR SERVICES THAT ARE AVAILABLE TO YOU.

Guiding questions:

Who among your friends, family, community, or colleagues can you call when you really need to talk? Who listens to you without judgment?

5

MAKE A LIST OF WELLNESS SUPPORTS THAT YOU CAN CONTACT (PERHAPS A DOCTOR, THERAPIST, PEER SUPPORTER, OR ELDER) YOU CAN CONTACT, INCLUDING THEIR HOURS OF AVAILABILITY, AND 24/7 EMERGENCY NUMBERS YOU CAN REACH OUT TO DURING A CRISIS.

Guiding questions:

What services can you access when you're having overwhelming suicidal thoughts or feelings, or you are in crisis?

Who are the professionals who can be helpful in a crisis? Keep their names and phone numbers on hand.

Do you need to call a crisis line (988 or Kids Help Phone)? If you're in immediate danger, should you call 911 or a mobile crisis team? Should you go to the Emergency Department?

6

LIST WAYS TO MAKE YOUR ENVIRONMENT SAFER BY REDUCING ACCESS TO POTENTIAL MEANS OF SUICIDE.

Guiding questions:

Are there things readily available that could cause you harm?

If something in your surroundings could put you at risk, think about how you can make it harder to access them or safer to avoid them.

Examples:

- Give pills to a pharmacist or a trusted person for disposal
- Remove or safely lock away anything in your home that you could use to harm yourself.
- Ask a trusted person to help remove or secure anything that feels risky

7

LIST REASONS YOU WANT TO LIVE OR STAY ALIVE.

Guiding questions:

When do you feel most at ease during the day? Who do you love?

Are there things you enjoy doing or still want to do? Are there things you used to enjoy doing?

What's important to you, or used to be important to you? What keeps you going?

Examples:

- Loved ones (family, friends, community members, pets) who rely on you or care about you
- Things that are important to you or give you a sense of purpose.
- Hopes, dreams, or goals for the future
- Personal passions, hobbies, or activities you enjoy
- Moments of joy or beauty in your everyday life
- Opportunities to help others or make a difference
- Your own growth, learning, or self-discovery
- The possibility that things can get better

HOW TO PUT YOUR SAFETY PLAN INTO ACTION

Keep copies of your completed safety plan where you can easily access it. It needs to be handy so you can always find it when you're experiencing thoughts of suicide.

If you are co-creating a safety plan with someone, ask them to keep copies on hand too.

Some people choose to always keep their plan with them. Keep it in your wallet or take a picture and keep it in your cell phone, if you have one.

Remember: A safety plan isn't set in stone. You can review and update it anytime, especially if something isn't working for you. For example, if a trusted contact is difficult to reach you can remove or replace them, or if a coping strategy no longer works for you or isn't available you can change it.

BE PREPARED BEFORE A CRISIS

Build your skills and confidence to support others by taking a suicide prevention workshop.

Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) is a two-day, interactive workshop designed to help people recognize when someone may be at risk of suicide and respond effectively. Participants learn practical, hands-on skills to intervene safely from having life-saving conversations to connecting people to appropriate support. ASIST empowers anyone—friends, family, coworkers, or professionals—to act when someone’s life is at stake.

Contact your [local CMHA](#) to find an ASIST workshop near you.

A FINAL WORD ON PREVENTING SUICIDE

The key to helping someone in crisis is to be ready. Use this guide and skill up with extra training so you’re confident and prepared to help if someone needs it. Your preparation can help save the life of someone you care about.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

CMHA Alberta and the Centre for Suicide Prevention: [safety plan template for Indigenous young people and their caregivers.](#)

Wise Practices: [Life Promotion toolkit for Indigenous youth.](#)

CMHA National: [By their Side: A step-by-step guide for adults helping youth with their mental health](#) includes a chapter for helping youth who are thinking about suicide.

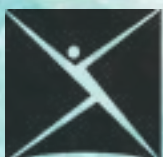
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Some material in this toolkit was adapted from CMHA's [By their Side: A step-by-step guide for adults helping youth with their mental health.](#)

The safety plan outlined in this brochure was adapted from CMHA Alberta's and the [Centre for Suicide Prevention's safety plan template.](#) You can find a shorter version of a safety plan template [on their website.](#) CMHA Alberta and the Centre for Suicide Prevention have been equipping people with the skills and knowledge to respond to people considering suicide for over 40 years. Visit [suicideinfo.ca](#) for more information.

ABOUT THE CANADIAN MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION

Founded in 1918, the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) is the most established, most extensive community mental health network of not-for-profit organizations in Canada. Through a presence in more than 330 communities across every province and the Yukon, CMHA employs 7,000 staff and engages 11,000 volunteers, to provide advocacy, programs and resources that help to prevent mental health problems and illnesses, support recovery and resilience, and enable all Canadians to flourish and thrive. Learn more: [www.cmha.ca.](#)



**Canadian Mental
Health Association**
Mental health for all