**HAIRE – Guidance on Difficult Conversations (Devon Mind)**



**How to chat to someone you suspect may be experiencing suicidal feelings.**

**DOs**

* **DO** listen nonjudgmentally. Often, just having someone to talk to who is genuinely listening can have a positive and calming effect on people. This will enable them to open up to you. It’s important to be as empathetic as possible, and not sympathetic (sympathy is patronising, empathy walks alongside). It can be hard sometimes to really empathise with someone else’s problems, especially if they are very different to you, but this is key.
* **DO** ask them the question: “do you feel suicidal” (or a variation on this). You’re not going to put ideas in their head, that’s a myth. What you can do here is shift the conversational goalposts, so that if they *are* considering ending their life, you’ve essentially given permission to talk about it – this can come as a massive relief to someone who has been bottling up a very extreme emotion. So many people dance around this question because it’s still a taboo subject. The person you are talking to may struggle to overcome that initial hurdle and miss out on the opportunity of help before it’s too late. Do them a favour and broach the subject.

If they *are* feeling suicidal…

* **DO** establish the urgency of the situation. So once again, ask them. The critical thing to find out is: “do you have a plan”. Do they know how they are going to try to take their own life? Do they have the items they would need to carry out this plan? Do they know when they are going to carry this plan out? Is there a designated location?

This is hugely important to establish. If they have a plan, and are about to carry it out, you will need to contact the emergency services immediately (or if it is safe to do so, take them to the hospital yourself), and *then* contact the relevant person(s) in your organisation. Strict confidentiality no longer applies (although obviously information should only be shared with the relevant people) as there is an imminent risk to life.

If there is no plan, or they are still a few steps removed from completing their plan, it doesn’t mean they’re not in danger - it just means you have a little more time. Continue to listen, report to the relevant person in your organisation (you *must* do this), signpost to the appropriate organisations, and try to support the individual where required.

**DO NOTs**

* **DO NOT** use emotional manipulation – “think of your children/friends/partner”. If the person you’re speaking to is already experiencing suicidal feelings, they are already approaching rock bottom emotionally – compounding this by making them feel selfish for their emotional experience is only going to make them feel worse. It’s very likely that the person has already spent a lot of time thinking about the impact their actions will have, and may even have convinced themselves that their loved ones will be better off without them (this is a common theme).
* **DO NOT** make promises you can’t keep. The individual needs to know that they can trust you, so if you say you are going to do something, ensure you do it! The opposite of this also applies; don’t tell them you’ll keep secrets for them. There is a very high likelihood that you are going to have to break the usual confidentiality procedures due to the extreme risk of harm.
* **DO NOT** trivialise the emotions – “things could always be worse”, “it’s not that bad”. There could be a million other factors that are compounding an issue that may seem trivial to you, or it could just be that for that person, this *is* a catastrophic event. What’s important is that right now, that person is feeling something that is making them consider ending their life.

**How to chat to someone who is expressing that they are depressed.**

**DOs**

* **DO** just listen. Depression is hugely isolating, and simply allowing someone to speak to you about any subject at all could help to bring a bit of much-needed connection into their lives. You may well be the only person that the individual has spoken to (or felt able to speak to) in some time. It could also be that you are distanced enough from them where they feel more able to talk to you about their issues than someone closer to them, such as a family member.
* **DO** Offer support! This could be emotional support, or something practical. Often when someone is depressed even the simplest physical task may seem daunting, for example, doing the shopping or making a phone call to a utilities company. This can cause events to spiral out of control, exacerbating the situation. It might be that it is inappropriate for you to offer this help yourself due to your role – in this case, try and find out what relevant support organisations exist near the individual that you can signpost them to.
* **DO** Ask the person if they have felt like this before; if they have, what helped last time? Do they have any existing coping strategies? It might be that they don’t – so try and explore with them if there is anything that they think *might* help and try to gently encourage them to pursue these.

**DO NOTs**

* **DO NOT** Forget to set boundaries – supporting someone with depression can use up a lot of our own ‘supply’ of resilience. Ensure that you keep a close eye on your own mental health and do things to keep yourself well. With the best intentions in the world, you can’t help anyone if you end up struggling yourself.

Be mindful of creating long-term dependence. People who are struggling with depression may let many aspects of their life suffer and you may feel a (perfectly natural!) desire to help them as much as possible. However, this could be an unhelpful strategy – we all need to feel achievement and to feel that we in are control of our lives and decisions. Removing this from people, even with the best of intentions, can leave them feeling more helpless than before.

* **DO NOT** trivialise it. Depression will hit around 20% of the population per year, and it can occur even without any external reasons. This might mean that, to you, it makes no sense at all as to why this person is feeling so low – the important thing to remember is that right now, that isn’t the point, all that matters is that they need help.