



What Not to Say to a Suicidal Person

Discovering that someone you know and care about wants to end their life is an unusual and uncomfortable situation. Whether this news comes as a shock or is something the person has said before, it is a pivotal moment in your relationship. What you say next can make a big difference. By letting you know that they want to die, your loved one is offering you an opportunity to help. Depending on how you respond, the person may let you in even more or shut down entirely.

Understandably, situations like this can bring on a flood of thoughts and emotions, making it hard to know what to say or do. Here are some common responses that aren't helpful and suggestions for what to say instead.

What Not to Say: “You don’t mean that. You don’t really want to die.”

This comes across as dismissive and says you don't want to hear about it. It shuts the door on communication. The person might very well mean it.

What to Say Instead: “Thank you for trusting me. I want to help.”

What Not to Say: “Your life’s not that bad.”

Perhaps it doesn't seem that bad to you, but for the suicidal person life does seem that bad. Underlying the desire to die is a lot of pain. By saying life isn't that bad, you are invalidating their feelings and sending a message that you don't understand.

What to Say Instead: “It must be awful for you right now. Tell me about it.”

What Not to Say: “Other people have problems worse than you and they don’t want to die.”

It may be true that there are people who have worse problems who are not suicidal but this offers no comfort. People who are considering suicide have often already compared themselves to others and found themselves to be lacking. They often feel defective, broken, inadequate. Adding shame or guilt onto their burden only reinforces their negative self-image.

What to Say Instead: “You’re not in this alone. I’m here for you.”

What Not to Say: “You have so much to live for.”

For people who genuinely think they have nothing to live for, this statement shows a profound lack of understanding. Each person has to decide for him or herself what gives life meaning and quality. The suicidal person may be experiencing pain so intense that it eclipses what others might perceive as the positive aspects of life.

What to Say Instead: “You mean so much to me.”

What Not to Say: “Suicide is cowardly.”

A person who wants to end their life is already feeling weak and deficient. Adding cowardice to their list of flaws only confirms their perception that they don't deserve to live. We don't want to make the person feel ashamed of their thoughts and feelings. Instead it is important to help them feel heard and accepted, even in their darkest hour.

What to Say Instead: “Thank you for telling me about this.”

What Not to Say: “What about the people you'll leave behind? How could you think of hurting them?”

Many people who seriously consider suicide see themselves as a burden to their friends and family. In their distressed state of mind, they may see suicide as a way to help their loved ones by freeing them of this unwanted burden. They probably already think of themselves as a terrible, selfish, worthless person. Knowing that they are thinking about doing something that will cause pain to the people they love only confirms how terrible, selfish and worthless they really are.

What to Say Instead: “It may not seem like it right now, but you have people who care about you and we are going to help you get through this.”

What Not to Say: “You just want attention.”

First, you're implying that the person's pain isn't real. Even if their desire to die is exaggerated, their pain is real and needs to be acknowledged. Second, what's wrong with wanting attention? We all want to be seen and understood. Getting someone's attention is the first step in getting help. Criticizing them for seeking attention discourages the suicidal person from reaching out for help.

What to Say Instead: “Talk to me. I will listen. I will try to understand.”

What Not to Say: “You're young. You have your whole life ahead of you.”

Great – they can look forward to decades more of suffering! For a person to be considering suicide, they must be in considerable pain and seeing no other way for that pain to end. Telling them that they should look forward to years and years of the same doesn't make sense.

What to Say Instead: “It can get better. I'll help you find a way.”

What Not to Say: “Don’t do anything stupid.”

When has calling anyone stupid ever helped? A suicidal person is going to hear this as “you think I’m stupid.” That person already sees themselves as terrible and worthless and likely believes they’ve let down the important people in their life. This comment will reinforce their negative self-image and leave them feeling like they have failed one more time.

What to Say Instead: “I’m worried about you. Let’s talk about it.”

What Not to Say: “Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem.”

By the time a person is seriously considering ending their life, it is likely that they have already endured pain for some time. They may have been thinking about it, planning and preparing for days or weeks. This statement implies that the person’s problems are temporary, which may not be the case. It trivializes their suffering as something that will pass if they just wait long enough. What if it doesn’t end? Also, the statement labels suicide as a solution. Suicide doesn’t solve problems.

What to Say Instead: “There isn’t an easy solution, but I will be here for as long as you need while you deal with your problems.”

What Not to Say: “Be positive!”

If only it were that simple! Most likely the person has already tried and been unable to find something truly worth living for. The bright side of life for this person has been overshadowed by pain, failure, and shame. Inability to find the positive is part of the mental illness that underlies suicidal thinking.

What to Say Instead: Remind the person of a happy memory. Without invalidating the person’s pain, let the person know that they were capable of feeling happiness once, and will be capable of feeling happy again in the future.

What if you’ve already said the wrong thing?

Don’t give up! Try again. Let the person know that you realize you said something that wasn’t helpful and might even have been hurtful. Tell them that you care enough to want to understand and to help.

What to Say: “I care. How can I help?”

