

Protocol: When a Member Speaks of Suicide

One blessing of Celebrate Recovery is having the opportunity to show God's love to people who feel lost, broken, desperate, and in need. This is a beautiful thing. We are the light of Christ shining into the world's darkness. We offer the hope that comes from God.

However, hopelessness can set in when a person is struggling. Tragically, amid hopelessness, it is not uncommon for someone to consider the idea of suicide. This does not make them a bad person, but shows us that this person needs help.

Your church may already have a policy or procedures in place when someone threatens to end their life. You need to work with that plan in unity with your church leadership. If someone talks about ending their life while at Celebrate Recovery, inform the ministry leader immediately for a face-to-face meeting with that individual.

In Celebrate Recovery, we address ALL remarks of having a desire to end their life. We take this very seriously.

The 4th Guideline states, "Anonymity and confidentiality are basic requirements. What's shared in the group stays in the group. The only exception is when someone threatens to injure themselves or others."

We must implement this guideline in its entirety. We need to keep confidentiality in our meetings, but not at the expense of someone threatening to harm themselves or others. If a person talks about ending their life, they cannot have an expectation of confidentiality. This does not mean everything they said before the event should be shared outside of the group. They should expect, however, that some information would be used to help them find the support they need. That information may be shared with someone outside of the group with emergency personnel, doctors, crisis intervention professionals, etc.

How do we respond to a suicide threat?

These suggestions are generalized to make them easier to adapt into your current model, if you have one, while specific enough to make it possible to use these as a new model. Please keep in mind that these examples are not "cookie cutter, one size fits all." Every situation will be unique and require its own tailoring as you continue.

IF THE PERSON IN QUESTION IS A MINOR, NO MATTER WHAT LEVEL OF THREAT A PERSON SEEMS TO POSE TO THEMSELVES OR OTHERS, A PARENT OR GUARDIAN MUST BE CONTACTED IMMEDIATELY. CALL 911 FOR EMERGENCY PERSONNEL INTERVENTION.

Calling 911 is always a practical option if you do not know what to do. Emergency responders are trained to handle these kinds of situations. You can ask for a Crisis Intervention Team to come out and assess the individual who is struggling.

Remember, your role is to make sure the person is safe. Your role is not to save them or treat them.

A common practice in suicide prevention is to ask a series of questions. We want to determine (1) if someone is in imminent danger of taking their life, or (2) if talking about taking their life is a way they express their level of pain.

The example scenarios are based in a three-tier system. Some of the people you talk to may fit into more than one category. If, at any time, you are unsure about what to do, it is better to embarrass the person by overreacting than to lose a life because you did not take action.

Pastor John Baker says, "I would rather have a person who is threatening suicide be mad at me for taking action and alive the next morning than dead because I didn't react."

LEVEL 1: THE LOWEST LEVEL OF CONCERN

This is when a person mentions something that just does not sit right with you. If someone mentions, "Some days I just feel like saying, enough, I might as well go jump off a bridge." Or they may say something like, "I'll be glad when I am dead so I don't have to worry about this stuff anymore."

These are generalized statements that do not show any level of action. There are no set plans, no sharing of specific motives or reasons mentioned for wanting to die, and no mention of a specific means by which they would choose to end their life.

Action steps: Address the person individually. Let them know that their comments have you concerned. Ask them outright, "Are you planning on killing yourself?"

If the person says that they did not intend to come across that way, and that they have no intention of killing themselves, then no outside intervention is needed. Let the person know that you do care for them and are willing to help if something changes. Tell them that they are appreciated and loved, and you would not want to see any harm come to them. Make sure they have a leader's contact information should they ever need it.

If they answer with "yes," that they are considering killing themselves, then advance to level 2 action steps.

LEVEL 2

At this point, a person has made a statement that they are seriously considering taking their own life. You will need to take action immediately. A person needs intervention, even if they are just thinking about it. Thoughts lead to intent, which can lead to action.

Action steps:

1. Explain to the person that you want to help them, and the best way to do this is with the help of another leader.

This will help keep everyone involved safe. There is strength in numbers, and wisdom comes with counsel. If you can avoid it, don't talk to a suicidal person alone for an extended period of time. We highly recommend you work as a team until the situation becomes safe. This includes removing the risk of potential items the individual may have in their possession.

2. Assess the person's ability to remain safe.

Now try to gather as much information from the person as possible. This will help in finding them the level of help that they need.

Some of the questions to ask are:

1. **Ask them if they have a plan.** Most people who are serious about taking their lives have put much thought into the process. If they have a detailed plan, the likelihood of following through with an attempt is much greater.
2. **Do they have access to the means to carry out the threat?** Guns, knives, pills, rope, etc. If they have any of these in their possession, what would it take to remove those items?
3. **Have they ever tried to do this in the past?** A previous attempt is a high indicator of likelihood of trying again.
4. **If they went home, would they be alone or with someone else who could help them?** If they have a support system that can be utilized and brought into the situation, they are less likely to attempt.
5. **Are they under a doctor's care at this time? Who is their doctor? Are they on medications?** This is information that can be given to the emergency personnel if necessary.
6. **Have they just started or switched a medication?** The chances of someone ending their life can go up in the first two weeks of a medication change.
7. **Did any big event just happen?** Did divorce, death of a loved one, or job loss just occur? Major events can often draw all the person's focus, which allows them to lose sight of the bigger picture and long-term ramifications of choosing suicide.

8. Ask if they were recently released from an in-patient facility for a suicide attempt. When this is the case, people are 100 percent more likely than the general population to make another suicide attempt.

After asking these types of questions, assess the likelihood that the person is going to take their life.

1. If the risk seems low.
 - a. Try to get them to a location where you know they will be safe. Make sure the person you are leaving them with is aware of the situation.
 - i. Home with a family member or close friend.
 - ii. Hospital emergency room for evaluation. In calling 911 you can ask for a Crisis Intervention Team to come out and access the individual who is struggling.
 - iii. A doctor's office or therapy session.
 - b. Suggest they have some sort of follow-up plan.
 - i. Therapy
 - ii. Doctor's appointment
 - iii. Give them the National Suicide Hotline number 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
2. If the risk seems higher.
 - a. Call 911. Bring emergency personnel into the situation. This may be upsetting for some people, but it still needs to be done. In calling 911 you can ask for a Crisis Intervention Team to come out and access the individual who is struggling.
 - b. Take them to a hospital to be evaluated.
 - c. Call a family member to take them to the hospital.

When in doubt, call 911 and tell them the situation. They can advise you as to what the next course of action should be. In calling 911, you can ask for a Crisis Intervention Team to come out and access the individual who is struggling.

LEVEL 3

At this level, the chances are very high that a person is going to try to take their life. You have no choice but to call 911. For some people, it may seem over-reactive, but we are not trained crisis intervention professionals. We are not to risk the life of the person involved by doing a job that is not ours to do. The person involved needs professional help from qualified personnel. In calling 911, you can ask for a Crisis Intervention Team to come out and assess the individual who is struggling.