

WELL BALANCED

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Suicide Prevention

SPEAKING WITH CARE: THE ROLE OF *Language* IN SUICIDE *Prevention*



In 2023, over 49,000 people in the United States died by suicide, making it the 11th leading cause of death in the country. The good news is that preventing suicide is possible, but it requires a multitude of strategies at all levels. One of the most powerful tools in managing mental health and preventing suicide is language—How we use it can help break stigma and build connection.

If you or someone you know is facing a mental health crisis or experiencing suicidal thoughts, talking about it can make a difference. When helping someone navigate a crisis, knowing what to say and how to best say it can offer life-saving support.

That said, while some readers may have professional training, others may not. The tips below are meant to serve as a general guide and share best practices for using inclusive, empathetic, and nonjudgmental language when offering support. Most importantly, individuals in crisis should be connected with a trained professional as quickly as possible.

Use Respectful, Nonstigmatizing Language

Words matter, and being thoughtful with word choices can encourage people to seek help. In addition to mindful communication, it's equally important to stay open to changes in language as recommendations evolve

over time. Here are a few guidelines from the International Association for Suicide Prevention.

- Use neutral language, such as *died by suicide*, *died of suicide*, *suicide death*, or *fatal suicide behavior*, to promote sensitivity. These phrases can imply criminality or previous attempts when neither may be true.
- Use neutral language, such as *died by suicide*, *died of suicide*, *suicide death*, or *fatal suicide behavior*, to promote sensitivity.
- Refrain from using labels, such as *suicide victim* or *suicidal person*, as they can contribute to stigma and shame as well as place blame.

Know What Warning Signs to Look For

Co-workers, neighbors, close family, and friends are often the people you spend enough time with to notice changes in their behavior. If someone is considering suicide, they may be showing one or more of the following warning signs.

- Mood changes: increased irritability; anger; or feelings of depression, anxiety or shame
- Expressing hopelessness, talking about wanting to die, or making jokes about suicide
- Withdrawal from activities, social situations, or relationships with friends or family members
- Changes in behavior related to sleep, appetite, or substance use
- Increased risk taking
- Making statements about giving away important belongings



Want More Resources?

The [Crisis Text Line](#) offers free, 24/7 mental health and crisis support. Text "HOME" to 741741.



Did You Know?

91% of adults in the U.S. believe suicide can be prevented at least some of the time, and the vast majority believe there are warning signs and actions that can be taken to help.

Start the Conversation, Even If It Feels Uncomfortable

Talking to someone who may be thinking about suicide can feel heavy, and if you're struggling yourself, opening up can feel even scarier. What's important to remember is that if you or someone you know is struggling, you're not alone. Starting the conversation is one of the first—and most important—steps toward healing.

- **Approach the conversation with empathy.** Consider letting them know you care by saying something similar to, *"I've noticed you've been missing work lately. I'm worried about you because . . ."*
- **Be direct.** Don't avoid the topic of suicide. If the warning signs are there, ask, *"Are you thinking about self-harm or suicide?"*
- **Provide a judgment-free space.** Listen, acknowledge their pain, validate their feelings, and resist the urge to rush toward solutions.

Offer Support and Connect Them to Help

If someone is showing signs of self-harm or contemplating suicide, let them know that you're concerned for their safety and that you're going to get help. Call or text 988, the [Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#), or contact local emergency services for immediate care. Reassure them that you will stay

with them until help arrives. While you wait, remove any objects that could be used in a suicide attempt, continue to validate their feelings, remain empathetic, and remind them that they are not alone.

Take Care of Yourself, Too

Helping someone through a crisis is an emotional experience that often requires self-care both during and after the experience. Look after your own well-being—Reach out for support through your employee assistance program (EAP), other available benefits, or trusted friends and family. It's also important to acknowledge that, while using supportive and inclusive language can make a meaningful difference, it is not solely the responsibility of one person to prevent a crisis or stop someone from dying by suicide. Even when all the right things are said, there are many factors outside of your control. Offering support matters, but so does recognizing your limits.

Resources

- » [988 Lifeline \(988lifeline.org\)](#)
- » [Crisis Text Line \(crisistextline.org\)](#)
- » [SAMHSA Suicide Prevention \(samhsa.gov\)](#)

Sources

- » [afsp.org/suicide-statistics/](#)
- » [cdc.gov/suicide/prevention/index.html](#)
- » [iasp.info/languageguidelines/](#)
- » [988.ca/get-help/talk-to-someone-you-are-worried-about](#)

