

Supporting a Loved One in Crisis

Supporting someone during a mental health crisis can be frightening and overwhelming. This leaflet provides guidance on how to respond, how to prioritise safety, and how to look after yourself while supporting a loved one.

What Is a Mental Health Crisis?

A crisis may involve:

- Escalating emotional distress
- Suicidal thoughts or behaviour
- Severe anxiety, panic, or agitation
- Psychosis or loss of contact with reality
- Inability to cope or keep safe

Crises can occur even when someone is receiving treatment.

Take the Situation Seriously

If someone expresses:

- Suicidal thoughts
- Intent to harm themselves or others
- Feeling unable to cope or stay safe

It is important to take this seriously, even if they have said similar things before.

Stay Calm and Present

Your calm presence can help reduce distress.

Helpful approaches include:

- Speaking slowly and calmly
- Listening without judgement or interruption
- Acknowledging distress (“I can see how much you’re struggling”)
- Avoiding arguments, lectures, or ultimatums

You do not need to have the right words—being present matters.

Focus on Safety First

During a crisis:

- Stay with the person if possible
- Move to a safer, quieter environment
- Reduce access to items that could be used for harm, if safe to do so

Safety takes priority over problem-solving.

Encourage Professional Help

If risk is high, encourage urgent support:

- Emergency services
- Emergency department
- Crisis support lines

You can say:

“I’m really worried about your safety, and I think we need extra help right now.”

When to Seek Urgent Help

Seek urgent help if:

- The person says they cannot keep themselves safe
- Suicidal thoughts are intense or escalating
- There is planning or preparation for self-harm
- The person is severely confused, psychotic, or intoxicated
- You feel unable to keep them safe

If in doubt, it is safer to seek help.

Emergency and Crisis Support (Australia)

If there is **immediate danger**:

- **Call emergency services (000)**
- **Attend the nearest emergency department**

Crisis support services (24/7):

- **Lifeline – 13 11 14**
- **Beyond Blue – 1300 22 4636**
- **Suicide Call Back Service – 1300 659 467**

You can call these services yourself for guidance on what to do.

If the Person Is Already in Treatment

If your loved one is under psychiatric care:

- Encourage them to follow their safety plan
- Seek urgent help if safety cannot be maintained
- Do not wait for the next scheduled appointment if risk is increasing

Crisis support complements ongoing care.

What Not to Do

During a crisis, try to avoid:

- Minimising or dismissing distress
- Arguing about facts or logic
- Making threats or ultimatums
- Taking sole responsibility for keeping the person safe

You are a support, not a substitute for professional care.

After the Immediate Crisis

Once safety is restored:

- Encourage follow-up with treating clinicians
- Help with practical supports if appropriate
- Recognise that recovery after a crisis takes time

A crisis does not erase progress made before it.

Looking After Yourself

Supporting someone in crisis is emotionally demanding.

It is important to:

- Seek support for yourself
- Take breaks when possible
- Set boundaries
- Recognise your limits

You cannot support someone effectively if you are completely depleted.

If You Are Worried About Yourself

If supporting someone else is affecting your own mental health:

- Reach out for professional support
- Use crisis or counselling services
- Speak with your GP or a mental health professional

Your wellbeing matters too.

Summary

Supporting a loved one in crisis involves staying calm, prioritising safety, and seeking urgent help when needed.

You do not have to manage a crisis alone—professional support is essential and appropriate.
