

Caring for someone you love through suicidal crisis, and caring for you.

The reflections shared in this piece are those of people who have cared for, loved and supported people through suicidal crisis *and* the people that have been cared for, during a time of immense 'psychache', when suicide seemed like a very viable option to them to escape their emotional pain.

Everything within this resource is a direct quote from someone who has walked in the shoes of suicide . . . we have a lived experience and we hope our experience can provide some insights, helpful suggestions and comfort to you.

A different perspective on suicide

Many people who have been suicidal have expressed a very different perspective to suicide than most people ever consider. It can be challenging to hear it if you have not experienced suicidal crisis personally. We believe it is an incredibly important insight though and one that may take quite some time to come to terms with . . .

“Suicide will always be an option, even a comforting one at times & that is something that carers (family & friends too) and health care professionals have difficulty in getting their heads around, but it has certainly helped me through many a dark night.”

Someone who is experiencing a suicidal crisis needs to be empowered to help them find themselves and solutions that are appropriate for them (I am still not sure how you do that as we are all individuals with differing resolutions.) Remember that suicide is, at its core, a crisis of self. It may have been triggered by a recent event but more than likely has a history where one more grain of sand has been added to the pile and it begins to collapse.

It's the little signs that carers need to be aware of. Human beings are very good at putting up facades - I know I am. Simply be there for them and listen without judgement.”

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Looking after you.

Supporting someone who is suicidal is very exhausting. It can be more than exhausting - it can be debilitating.

Get support.

The constant worrying and panic at leaving your loved one alone wears you out. Talking to others about what is going on not only feels good, but you will start to build up a group around you who can be trusted to be there for you. Not all people you talk to will be supportive. Suicide is a hard topic for some to talk about or listen to but talking to multiple people around you will mean that you can find those who are confident to sit with you during the caring period.

Support can come informally, through friends and family, supportive work colleagues and also come formally through medical professionals, a counsellor or psychologist, suicide support services (like Standby Response, Lifeline) and your work may have an Employee Assistance Program that you can access.

However ... you need to find the right support and be prepared to say - No this is not working for me/us - this is not in the best interests of myself or the person that I am caring for.

Carers need to be gentle on themselves - knowing that you do not have the answers to help a loved one through a crisis is difficult to accept (if not almost impossible). It can be an extremely lonely and isolating experience for some (depending on cultural or social cultural attitudes) so relevant and appropriate community support should be encouraged.

Permission granted to take care of YOU.

Give yourself permission to take care of yourself – a moment of respite, an hour when you do something just for you, an afternoon where you decide to think about something else. Easier said than done, but it helps.

Eat well – you probably won't feel like eating, so choose what you eat carefully. Nutrient rich, small portions.

Stay hydrated – our bodies, our brains, need water to function well.

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Sleep - try to get sleep when you can. If you can't sleep, rest. It is absolutely exhausting caring for someone who is suicidal – you are living a nightmare rollercoaster, with adrenalin and cortisol flooding your system, and you are 'on' 24/7.

Change triggers regularly.

It is amazing how quickly our bodies can become sensitive to the sound of a text message alert, the ringtone on your phone . . . when it is often associated with bad news, stressful conversations. We can begin to experience physical reactions to these sounds – tensing muscles, a drop in your stomach, sweating, nausea. Changing these triggering sounds can give you respite from these symptoms. Be prepared to have to change them more than once depending on how extended the period of time is that you are on high alert.

No room for blame.

Don't blame yourself for the way your loved one is feeling. Feelings are personal states of being and although others have sway over the way we feel, it is not your fault that your loved one is suicidal. We all play a role in the way others feel and we can help to alter their feelings but we are not 100% responsible. The old saying "you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink" is very apt here. You can do all the right things and try very hard to make your loved one feel better but they have to work towards it too.

Caring for someone you love through suicidal crisis.

Just be there.

Don't underestimate the power of just being there. Sometimes we get so uncomfortable when there is silence in a group. Your loved one is experiencing a painful internal battle and may struggle to think of anything else. Sometimes silence and company is just what they need.

Hold on to them with everything you've got – dig your fingernails in, and just never give up.

Encourage a way for your loved one to express themselves.

If they can't talk about "what's wrong", don't push it. Thoughts and feelings of suicide can be really hard to talk about. Finding the right word to explain why you want to die is often impossible. That being said, encourage your loved one to find ways of expressing their pain. These could be art, diary writing, singing, anything that provides an outlet to get the hard feelings out. By encouraging them to express themselves, they also begin to

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understand what it is that they are feeling and can learn how to overcome it. Everyone is different. I personally found that diary writing helps to get the thoughts out but in caring for my partner, he would write pros and cons of different challenges that he faced in order to reduce how overwhelming they felt to him.

Be patient.

Don't expect the feelings to go away overnight. Recovery can be a long and arduous process and it is different for everyone.

Sometimes you will fight with them. They may make poor decisions that make them slide backwards and it is so painful to watch a backwards slide. Try to stay with them through these times. Give them the dignity of choice but encourage them to choose better options.

Jumping to solutions is not the answer they need. They just need to be allowed to 'be' and accept that they are feeling these things. Solutions dismiss the pain and sadness they are feeling, suggesting that it can be easily fixed. They can't see the fix just at that moment.

Celebrate recovery wins.

Note the progress they have made and genuinely congratulate them. Small wins are just as important as big ones. Things like going to work despite depression, choosing not to drink alcohol because of the way it changes their mood, getting in touch with old friends and avoiding friends who are a trigger might seem small but they are huge to someone who is suicidal.

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