

FREE GUIDE

What to Do in a Mental Health Crisis

A calm, clear, step-by-step guide for when you or someone you love is in crisis. How to recognize it, what to do, who to call, and how to plan ahead.

5 pages | Printable | Shareable

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Keep this guide accessible. Read it now so you are ready if you ever need it.

How to Recognize a Mental Health Crisis

A mental health crisis is any situation where a person's behavior puts them at risk of hurting themselves or others, or where they are unable to care for themselves or function in the community. A crisis can develop gradually or come on suddenly.

Warning Signs in Adults

- Talking about wanting to die, feeling hopeless, or being a burden to others
- Giving away prized possessions or saying goodbye to people
 - Sudden calm after a period of severe depression (may indicate a decision has been made)
 - Increased use of alcohol or drugs
 - Extreme agitation, rage, or reckless behavior
 - Withdrawal from friends, family, and activities
 - Dramatic mood swings
 - Inability to perform daily tasks (getting out of bed, eating, bathing)
 - Hearing voices or experiencing delusions
 - Threatening violence toward self or others

Warning Signs in Children and Teens

- Talking or writing about death, dying, or suicide
- Self-harming behaviors (cutting, burning, head-banging)
- Giving away belongings
 - Sudden withdrawal from friends and activities
 - Dramatic changes in eating or sleeping patterns
 - Explosive anger or aggression that is out of character
 - Running away from home
 - Saying things like "I wish I was never born" or "Everyone would be better off without me"

Trust Your Instincts:

If something feels wrong, it probably is. You do not need to be a mental health professional to recognize that someone is in trouble. It is always better to overreact and be wrong than to underreact and regret it.

What to Do Right Now

If you believe someone is in a mental health crisis, here is what to do step by step:

Step 1: Stay Calm

Your calm presence is more powerful than you think. Speak slowly, use a quiet voice, and keep your body language open and non-threatening. Even if the person is agitated, your calmness helps de-escalate the situation.

Step 2: Ensure Safety

- If there is immediate danger of violence, call 911
 - Remove access to weapons, sharp objects, medications, or other means of self-harm if you can do so safely
 - Do not leave the person alone
 - Move to a quiet, safe environment if possible

Step 3: Listen Without Judgment

- Ask directly: "Are you thinking about hurting yourself?" (Asking does NOT plant the idea.)
 - Let them talk. Do not interrupt, argue, or try to fix the problem right now.
 - Validate their feelings: "I can see you are in a lot of pain right now."
 - Avoid statements like "You have so much to live for" or "Think about your family." These can make someone in crisis feel more guilty and misunderstood.
 - Instead, say: "I am here. I am listening. You are not alone."

Step 4: Get Professional Help

Call one of the following:

Emergency Numbers

988 — Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (call or text, 24/7)

911 — For immediate danger to life

741741 — Crisis Text Line (text HOME to 741741)

(859) 341-7453 — Dr. Shapiro's office (during business hours)

When to Go to the Emergency Room

Go to the ER (or call 911) if:

- The person has attempted suicide or self-harm
 - The person has a plan and access to means (e.g., has pills, a weapon)
 - The person is hearing voices telling them to harm themselves or others
 - The person is severely disoriented, confused, or out of touch with reality
 - The person is violent or threatening violence
 - You cannot keep the person safe at home

What Happens at the ER

If you go to the emergency room for a mental health crisis:

- The person will be assessed by a psychiatric professional (this may take time — be patient)
 - They may be placed on a safety hold (this is protective, not punitive)
 - Treatment options will be discussed: stabilization, medication, outpatient follow-up, or inpatient admission
 - Your job: be an advocate. Provide information about what happened, medications they are taking, and their mental health history
 - Bring their insurance card, medication list, and the name of their current doctor if possible

Creating a Personal Safety Plan

A safety plan is something you create when you are feeling stable, so it is ready when a crisis hits. Think of it as a fire escape plan for mental health. Fill this out now, or with the help of a therapist, and keep it somewhere accessible.

1. My Warning Signs

What thoughts, feelings, or situations signal that a crisis may be developing? (Example: "When I start isolating and canceling plans.")

2. Things I Can Do to Calm Down

Internal coping strategies I can use on my own. (Example: deep breathing, going for a walk, taking a shower, playing with my pet.)

3. People I Can Call for Distraction

Friends or family I can reach out to when I need to not be alone. (Not necessarily to talk about the crisis — just to connect.)

4. People I Can Call for Help

Trusted people I can tell that I am struggling. (Include phone numbers.)

5. Professionals I Can Contact

My psychiatrist, therapist, crisis line numbers. (988, 911, my doctor's number.)

6. Making My Environment Safe

Steps I can take to remove access to things I might use to hurt myself. (Store medications with someone else, lock up firearms, etc.)

7. My Reason to Keep Going

What matters most to me. The person, place, dream, or thing that I hold onto in the darkest moments.

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This guide is for informational purposes only and does not constitute medical advice. In a crisis, call 988, 911, or go to your nearest emergency room.