

4 People in crisis

When your community knows you as an activist, health worker, community leader, or involved neighbor, people turn to you for all kinds of support. Sometimes a person may be going through something that feels beyond what you can handle. Even if you plan to connect the person to a mental health professional, you may need to respond to a crisis or emergency by actively providing some direct help right away. This chapter discusses how to prepare in advance for crisis, how to de-escalate and calm a situation, and how to communicate with someone in crisis. Whether acting to prevent a situation from getting worse or facing what is already more clearly a crisis, the priority is always your own safety.

Your safety matters

Always be aware of your surroundings and use the way you move and speak to help calm (de-escalate) the situation (see page 62):

- Stay close enough to a person so they can easily hear you, but out of their reach. There is no way to know if being close to them could make things worse for them or if they could become violent.
- If they have something that could be used as a weapon, try to move yourself and others away until help arrives. Request that they put it down. For example: “I am afraid you holding that makes all of us less safe. Would you be willing to put it down while we talk?” (See “Every crisis is different,” page 64.)
- If you are inside, position yourself so the person is not between you and the exit. Make sure exits are not blocked.
- Make sure someone knows where you are and, if necessary, will go to get help.

Consider physical health problems

When someone behaves unusually aggressively or strangely, they may be showing signs of a physical health emergency. You may not be able to get an answer from them directly, but you can ask friends or family with them if there is anything in their health history or current situation that might explain their behavior. Check if they wear a medical ID bracelet. Poisoning or medication overdose, drug use (especially methamphetamine), brain injury or stroke, a diabetic emergency, and serious blood infection (sepsis) can all cause signs that look like mental health emergencies.

Prepare for crises

Reading resources like this one, organizing or joining a training, and using role-plays with scenarios matching your setting, are all ways to gain experience and gain confidence you will know what to do. Also, anyone in a crisis situation will want a trusted person to be aware of what is happening. Plan ahead so your communication with a friend or co-worker will be efficient in a moment of crisis. If possible, coordinate with another person to address the situation together, or have one person intervene while the other goes for help.

What is a crisis? A crisis is what the person says it is.



Preparing for crises also means thinking ahead to know your limits. If you are not OK with the possibility of helping someone in crisis, or only in certain circumstances, know where to turn to for support and who can step in if there is an emergency.

Another way to be ready is to know what mental health and other related resources are available. Keep a reference sheet on hand that includes names and contact information for mental health professionals, women's centers, non-English language support, peer-support networks, suicide-prevention hotlines, and other resources. If you work with an organization, you may already have or want to create procedures to follow in case of mental health emergencies.

Find out if there are alternatives to the police. Many cities are creating non-violent, non-police emergency services to respond to mental health crises. Instead of police, trained mental health workers are sent when someone calls 911 needing this type of help. Some cities also create a different number specifically for mental health emergencies. Find out if your 911 line or other hotlines or peer support lines in your area notify the police and for what scenarios.



Once you decide which services or people are best to call during a crisis, add them to the Contacts on your phone.

Suicide prevention hotlines. A national suicide prevention line was launched in the US in 2022. You can access it by calling or texting 988. It was also designed to avoid police involvement, though incidents including threats to others might lead to the police being notified. Community-based mental health organizations are monitoring the effectiveness of this new resource. Whether 988 is the best choice for help in your area probably depends on what services are available.

Peer support lines. Peer support lines and other types of “warmlines” are a way to talk or text with a trained peer counselor or professional mental health worker, helping prevent a person’s problems from turning into a crisis. *Warmline.org* maintains a list of programs by state. Local clinics and programs may offer warmlines too, and often take calls from everyone, not just people in their region.

Hotlines or peer support lines are often established for specific situations, such as domestic violence or drug or alcohol addiction. There are also support lines for people with specific identities or experiences, so they don’t have to start from zero explaining themselves. For example, Trans Lifeline is run by and for transgender people, and the Veterans Crisis Line is for those who served in the military. **Hotlines and warmlines mentioned in this book are listed on page 155.**



Helping someone in crisis

Usually a mental health crisis occurs when something overwhelms a person’s regular ways of processing information. What you see as extreme behavior or a strange reaction may be for them a logical response to what they are experiencing. And for them, commonly used words and body language may feel like threats.

I only wanted to help...

A woman was standing on the sidewalk of a busy city street screaming, “Fire! Fire!” and pointing in front of her—where there was no fire. A well-meaning passerby approached the woman, gently touched her back, and said: “Calm down. There is no fire. You are perfectly safe.” The frightened woman bolted into traffic. Fortunately, she was not hit by a car.

The woman was having a psychotic experience. The danger she felt was real, although the fire was not. Without meaning to, the passerby who wanted to calm her instead increased her feelings of danger. This was made worse by:

- touching her without permission.
- contradicting her version of reality.

It might have been more helpful to ask the woman calmly, from a distance, if there was a way to help. Also, it may have been possible to make the area around her safer, perhaps by directing people walking nearby to give her plenty of room. *The rest of this chapter has suggestions for communicating with someone in a mental health crisis and other ways to help calm a situation.*

Calming and de-escalating a situation

A difficult situation can quickly change for the worse, but skillful and compassionate support can avoid a crisis.

Careful interaction can calm a tense situation. While remaining conscious of your own safety (see “Your safety matters,” page 59):

Note what is happening with the other person, especially if there are signs of serious stress like a raised voice, clenched fist, or confusion. This may be when you realize a calm situation could get worse, leading you to take more safety measures or deciding to involve someone with more experience.

Do your best to control your own physical responses:

- Concentrate on sounding calm and not raising your voice.
- Do not touch the person without their permission and avoid towering over them.
- Keep space between you. If you move, do so slowly.
- Keep your stance relaxed and your expressions as neutral as possible.

Listen carefully, show concern, and offer options as you communicate with someone in crisis (see page 63).



I work in a drop-in site offering different support services to people who use drugs. It helps to pace the interaction and cue what comes next: “We’re about to wrap up,” “Now that we’re done, I’ll walk you to the door,” “Let me offer you some snacks on the way out.” The key is to read people’s body language, listen carefully, and be prepared if someone acts unpredictably.



Be calm and patient, and most importantly, open and honest. The person in crisis needs to be able to rely on someone who is not going to be unpredictable or devious. Make them feel safe and supported by you.

HOW TO Communicate with someone in crisis

Your interactions with a person experiencing a mental health crisis can calm the emergency or make it more intense. A central goal of crisis communication is to be as natural and present as possible for the person in crisis. People often respond positively to confidence, calmness, and comfort. Stay aware of your safety (see page 59) and control your body language and tone of voice (page 62).

1. Accept what the person says about their feelings or what they see. Do not downplay or deny what is real for them. For example, do not say: “It isn’t so bad,” or insist: “You are safe,” to someone yelling they are in danger from something you can’t see (see the example on page 61).
2. Point out things they are doing in their body to show you are paying attention to them and their feelings: “I notice you are breathing hard.” “Your hands are shaking.” “You seem to be sweating a lot.”
3. Affirm the person by showing your concern. Recognize what they are feeling: “I hear you—you feel very afraid.”
4. Ask if there is something or someone that could help them now or has helped in the past. Affirm any practical ideas they mention and help them achieve them if you can (give food or water, call someone they want to talk to, or get other things they may want).
5. Helping people in crisis feel a sense of power and be able to make choices is important. Even small decisions can feel like reclaiming a bit of control over their lives: ask if they would like water or tea, or if they want to sit or stand.
6. If they identify specific things contributing to the crisis, offer concrete actions that might help. For example, if they say: “I am going to lose custody of my child,” you might say, “There are resources to help parents and children stay together. We can make a phone call together now if you are OK with that.”
7. Do not try to control them unnecessarily. Do not make them sit down if they want to pace, do not make them talk if they want to stay silent.
8. Encourage conversation and communication, but do not force any topics. Say: “We can talk about that later, if you want.”
9. Do not use guilt or threats.
10. Do not make promises you cannot keep, such as you will keep secret any ideas they express about hurting themselves or others.

These skills can be practiced in advance by using role plays to imagine and act out different situations.

Every crisis is different

The way you respond to and support someone experiencing a mental health crisis depends on the circumstances. But in every case, stay aware of your safety (see page 59) and consider getting help, especially from those skilled in de-escalating crises (see page 62) and avoiding the police (see page 60) .

If someone is putting themselves or others in danger with their actions, for example: driving while intoxicated, acting violently at a peaceful protest, or throwing objects where there are other people:

- Ask them to slow down or suggest a different course.
- Act to prevent the danger, for example: find an alternate driver who is sober, help other protesters re-route around them, move others out of the room.

If someone seems out of touch with reality and physically unsafe:

- Ask if there is any way you can help them.
- Act to make the environment around them safer by removing objects that could hurt them.
- Tell them you are worried about their health and safety, and ask if you can connect them with someone who can help get what they need to be healthy and safe right now. (Also see “How to communicate with a person experiencing psychosis,” page 57.)



If someone says or shows they are going to physically harm you:

- Get out of the way as much as possible, creating a safe distance between you or perhaps removing yourself entirely.
- If it seems safe, say: “Let’s keep talking about this. We can figure this out without anybody getting hurt.”
- If they back off from threatening physical harm, follow the guidance about “How to communicate with someone in crisis” (see page 63).

If someone says or shows they are going to physically harm someone else:

- It may be easier and safer for you to remove other people from the situation than to try to move the person in crisis.
- Follow the guidance about “How to communicate with someone in crisis” (see page 63).
- If it seems safe, say: “Let’s keep talking about this. We can figure this out without anybody getting hurt.”
- You might say: “I’m worried things will get worse if you hurt them. Let’s find a way to make things better instead.”

- Help them make a plan to stay away from the person they want to hurt, perhaps by staying in the presence of another person who could be a calming influence.
- If you know the person they are threatening to hurt, consider letting the person know what is happening or reaching out to another person who can help.
- Consider getting help, especially from those skillful at de-escalating crises (see page 62) and avoiding the police (see page 60).

If someone says they are considering suicide, or you suspect they are:

- Take them seriously.
- Ask directly, for example, “Are you having thoughts of ending your life?” or “Are you thinking about killing yourself?” or “Are you considering suicide?”
- Show concern but not alarm.
- Be aware that people in crisis may feel ambivalent about suicide. Focus your words to support the part of the person that wants to live, while not ignoring or downplaying the part of them that wants to die.
- Suicide crises are often time-limited. Your goal is to get the person the immediate help they need to get through the crisis and make it to a different state where they can get longer-term help.
- Be collaborative and honest. Say, for example, “I think it is important for you to connect with someone at the clinic about how you are feeling and what might help. Would you be willing to ride over there with me?”
- Although it is important to remain calm and present, rather than convey fear or alarm, you do not have to help the person all by yourself. Talk with them for a while about what they are experiencing, and then say: “I am worried about your safety, and I feel it is important for others who care about you to know you are feeling this way. Can we call your sister to help us think this through?” Or “I am worried about your safety and I would like us to call a hotline together so someone with more experience can help us think it through.”



After a crisis

Whether the crisis was resolved successfully or not, it will have an effect on you. Make sure to talk about what happened with someone you feel comfortable with so you get support for the impact the crisis had on you. Also, talk with others about anything you or others could do to help the person or people involved as a follow-up now that the crisis has passed. Discuss with others how the root causes of the crisis might be addressed to prevent similar situations from occurring in the future and how to advocate for the changes needed.