

How Can I Know if Someone is Suicidal?

Ask these questions—in this order—to find out if the person is seriously considering suicide. Many of the answers to these questions may be upsetting, especially if your family member does not identify you or other family members as a reason to live. However it is important to reserve judgment at least initially so that you can continue to get candid answers.

1. “Have you been feeling sad or unhappy?”

A “Yes response” will confirm that the person has been feeling some depression.

2. “Do you ever feel hopeless? Does it seem as if things can never get better?”

Feelings of hopelessness are often associated with suicidal thoughts.

3. “Do you have thoughts of death? Does it seem as if things can never get better?”

A “Yes response” indicates suicidal wishes but not necessarily suicidal plans. Many depressed people say they think they’d be better off dead and wish they’d die in their sleep or get killed in an accident, however, most of them say they have no intention of actually killing themselves.

4. “Do you ever have any actual suicidal impulses? Do you have any urge to kill yourself?”

A “Yes” indicates an active desire to die. This is a more serious situation.

5. “Do you have any actual plans to kill yourself?”

If the answer is “Yes,” ask about their specific plans. What method have they chosen? Hanging? Jumping? Pills? A gun? Have they actually obtained the rope? What building do they plan to jump from? Although these questions may sound grotesque, they may save a life. The danger is greatest when the plans are clear and specific, when they have made actual preparations, and when the method they have chosen is clearly lethal. If the person has access to whatever they need to execute their plan, the situation is more dangerous. After you finish gathering information, one of your first tasks will be to limit access to the things that they need to complete their plan. This may mean taking away a gun or the keys to their car, or simply taking the person to the hospital where they would not be able to follow through on their plans.

6. “When do you plan to kill yourself?”

If the suicide attempt is a long way off, say, in five years, the danger is less imminent. If they plan to kill themselves soon, the danger is grave.

7. “Is there anything that would hold you back, such as the effect on a pet or someone in our family, or your religious convictions?”

If the person says that people would be better off without them and if they have no deterrents, suicide is much more likely.

8. “Have you ever made a suicide attempt in the past?”

Previous suicide attempts indicate that future attempts are more likely. Even if a previous attempt did not seem serious, the next attempt may be fatal. All suicide attempts should be taken seriously. Although some mental health professionals differentiate between “suicide attempts” (where the person intended to die) and “suicidal gestures” (where the person’s primary intention was not to die but to send a message or achieve some other goal), it is important to note that suicide gestures can be more dangerous than they seem, since some people do accidentally kill themselves when attempting to only make a gesture.

9. “Would you be willing to talk to someone or ask help if you felt desperate? Whom would you talk to?”

If the person who fears suicidal is cooperative and has a clear plan to reach out for help, the danger is less than if they are stubborn, secretive, hostile, and unwilling to ask for help. If they report a plan to reach out to a specific person, make sure that they have the person’s telephone number and, if possible, make sure that they have discussed the fact that they have suicidal thoughts at times with the person who they identify as the one they would most likely talk to if they were desperate. If they have not felt comfortable discussing these thoughts with that individual yet, or are reluctant to raise the subject at this time, it is less likely that they will feel comfortable enough to broach the subject with that person when they are in crisis.

Source: NAMI website www.nami.org , search word “criminal justice”