



What can I do if someone in our support group is talking of suicide or is threatening the safety of others?

As a DBSA support group facilitator, you can be prepared to lead a response to challenging situations that may arise in your group. If someone is threatening suicide or threatening the safety of other people, the facilitator can take steps to manage the situation.

Included in this Crisis Response Guide are suggestions for managing different types of crises in your chapter. There are suggested plans for:

- Situations when a support group participant is talking of suicide.
- Situations when a support group participant is threatening other people.
- Situations when a support group participant has attempted or completed suicide.

While the following information is intended to help your chapter develop a crisis response plan for your support groups, DBSA does not endorse the use of any particular plan. The guide is built from the input of DBSA chapter leaders and experienced support group facilitators. Further, many of the suggestions are borrowed from local DBSA chapter policies and procedures as well as from other respected sources, such as the New Jersey Self Help Clearinghouse and the American Association of Suicidology.

Being prepared is key to responding to crises in your support group. Don't wait for a crisis to happen before you develop your plan. Be sure that your support group participants are aware of your chapter's policies and plans regarding crisis situations.

Special thanks to:
DBSA/MDDA Boston (MA)
DBSA Gold Coast (FL)
New Jersey Self Help Clearinghouse
American Association of Suicidology

Support Group Participant Who Is Considering Suicide

Tips to Remember:

1. Suicide is preventable. Most people who are suicidal desperately want to live; they are just temporarily unable to see solutions to their situation or see it as a way to end their pain.
2. Talking about suicide does not cause someone to be suicidal. Don't be afraid to ask direct questions about their intentions or desires.
3. The decision to take one's own life rests with that person, but there are steps that others can take to help and support someone through a crisis.
4. Call for help if needed. There are professionals trained for crisis situations. Call 911. Know of other community resources.
5. Never underestimate the power of a support group to provide hope and support to a person in crisis when it is most needed.

If someone is talking of suicide during a support group that you're facilitating, consider the following actions:

- **Check Yourself.** Take a deep breath and remember that as a facilitator your job is to guide the group through helping each other. All the responsibility is NOT on your shoulders. Make yourself aware of your own reactions and calmly *respond* to the situation and try not to panic. Your instincts will guide you. Feelings of anxiety are contagious, so do your best to trust yourself and provide authentic support to the person in need.
- **Assess.** Express your concern for the other person with concrete examples, and ask direct questions to determine how SPECIFIC, how AVAILABLE, and how LETHAL their suicide plan is. Some questions might include:
 - "I notice that you seem to be withdrawing from your loved ones, are you thinking about suicide?"
 - "I'm concerned by the way you're talking. It sounds like you feel as though your life is not worth living – are you considering harming yourself?"
 - "When you say, 'I'd be better off dead,' are you saying that you are planning to end your life? Do you have plans to do that?"
- **Acknowledge Feelings.** Be empathetic not judgmental. Suicidal thoughts are not *wrong* to have, but they are very dangerous. Do not relieve the other person of responsibility for his/her actions. Acknowledge that you hear them, you understand them, and that they have ultimate control over the decision to take their own life. Don't be afraid to let the person know how you feel when you hear them talk about committing suicide.

- **Engage the Support of Others.** Involve the rest of the group in providing support for the person considering suicide. Ask others to share their stories of survival and recovery. Use the power of the group to provide support, hope and help. The group should commit to not leave the person alone until he/she is in the care of another responsible person such as a health care professional or a trusted family member.
- **Reassure.** Stress that suicidal thoughts are temporary and that suicide is permanent. Remind the person that there is help and things will get better, even if it doesn't seem like it right now. Ask the person considering suicide to talk about the moments in recent weeks that they have felt the best. Try to bring him/her back to a time when things seemed hopeless but then got better.
- **Be Honest.** Do not promise confidentiality. Do not make unrealistic promises (i.e. no hospitalization, no calling 911, etc.).
- **Get Help.** Do not try to manage this situation alone – or even as a group. Contact trusted people and trained professionals to provide the help that is needed.
 - Tell the person that you will be calling for help.
 - Ask if they have prepared a crisis plan for themselves that you can use to find them the help that they need.
 - Ask if there is a person that they trust whom you can call to assist.
 - Contact the person's psychiatrist, therapist, crisis intervention team, etc.
 - If no other trained health care professionals are immediately available, call 911 for local emergency services.
- **Support Yourself and Each Other.** After a crisis situation in a support group, it is important to be sure that you have the support that you need, and the group has a chance to debrief about the situation.
 - Refer to your own wellness plan or contact your health care professional to process the experience.
 - As soon as possible (at the current or the next support group meeting) discuss the experience of supporting a group member through a suicidal crisis as a group, and determine what went well and how you would do things differently in the future.
 - Encourage each other to have personal crisis plans prepared to be sure that each person is treated as they choose. Included in the appendix of this guide is "DBSA's Plan for Life" that can help get individuals started.
- **Prepare for the Future.** Discuss with the group the idea of members giving permission for an appointed group representative to contact an individual's family, doctor, therapist or counselor in extenuating circumstances. DBSA does not encourage chapters or support groups to require its participants to provide this



information. Work as a group to educate each other on individuals' "early warning signs" that might indicate they are becoming very ill or potentially dangerous.

What other plans/policies/procedures does your group want to consider?

Professional Advisor contact information:

Your local emergency numbers:

Emergency Services: 911

National Suicide Prevention Helpline: (800) 273-TALK

Police: _____

Crisis Intervention Team: _____

Others: _____



Depression and Bipolar
Support Alliance

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Chapter Leaders:

In case of a crisis, these chapter leaders and/or group members should be notified right away:

Follow up:

Will your support group follow up with the person in crisis after the meeting? If so, how will the follow up occur?

Violent / Threatening Support Group Participant

Tips to Remember:

1. Safety first. The safety of the support group members should be the first priority for any support group facilitator. When deciding on a course of action in a challenging situation, always choose the route that provides for the safety of your group.
2. Call for help if needed. There are professionals trained for crisis situations. Call 911. Know of other community resources.
3. Never underestimate the power of a support group to provide hope and support to a person in crisis when it is most needed.

If someone is threatening to harm another support group participant(s) during a support group that you're facilitating, consider the following actions:

- **Check Yourself.** Take a deep breath and remember that as a facilitator your job is to guide the group through helping each other. All the responsibility is NOT on your shoulders. Be sure to distinguish between anger and threats. Many people have different thresholds of comfort when it comes to anger. Check with the group to see if they feel the behavior is acceptable or not. Make yourself aware of your own reactions and calmly *respond* to the situation and try not to panic. Your instincts will guide you. Feelings of anxiety are contagious, so do your best to trust yourself and provide authentic support to the person in need.
- **Calmly Confront the Behavior.** Clearly state that the group has decided the behavior being displayed is not acceptable, and firmly ask the person to stop. Be firm but respectful in your tone – do not raise your voice or start speaking as you would to a child. Offer to have a discussion to de-escalate the situation privately in a small group (never meet alone with a person who is threatening).
- **Ask the Group for Help.** Refer to the DBSA Support Group Guidelines (included in the addendum to this guide) to which your group should agree to abide by before each meeting. Remind the threatening participant that he/she is violating his agreement with the group, and calmly ask if they can talk about the situation as a group.
- **Ask Someone to Call for Help.** If it becomes necessary, ask at least two people to go together to call 911 or another appropriate service in your community. The safety of the group members and the person in distress should be the top priority, so do not hesitate to call for help.



- **Seek To Understand.** The distressed individual may simply be frustrated by their inability to communicate something – people need to be heard, so offer to listen intently to truly understand what the person needs. Say something like, "I can see that you're hurting. I want to help. Help me understand what you're feeling right now. We're here to support you."
- **De-escalate.** Don't overlook the obvious – many situations can be effectively handled by offering to accompany an upset person on a walk, or out for a cup of coffee. Keep it simple – some distressed individuals can be asked to come back on a day when they are feeling better. In some cases it may be appropriate to walk the person home, call a friend or family member, or offer to accompany them to their doctor. Remember, never go anywhere alone with a person who is threatening.
- **Support Yourself and Each Other.** After a crisis situation in a support group, it is important to be sure that you have the support that you need, and the group has a chance to debrief about the situation.
 - Refer to your own wellness plan or contact your health care professional to process the experience.
 - As soon as possible (at the current or the next support group meeting) discuss the experience of supporting a group member through a crisis as a group, and determine how you would do things differently in the future.
 - Encourage each other to have personal crisis plans prepared to be sure that each person is treated as they choose.
- **Prepare for the Future.** Discuss with the group the idea of participants giving permission for an appointed group representative to contact an individual's family, doctor, therapist or counselor in extenuating circumstances. DBSA does not encourage chapters or support groups to require its participants to provide this information. Work as a group to educate each other on individuals' "early warning signs" that might indicate they are becoming very ill or a potential danger to others.

What other plans/policies/procedures does your group want to consider?



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Emergency Services: 911

National Suicide Prevention Helpline: (800) 273-TALK

Police: _____

Crisis Intervention Team: _____

Others: _____

Chapter Leaders:

In case of a crisis, these chapter leaders and/or group members should be notified right away:

Follow up:

Will your support group follow up with the person in crisis after the meeting? If so, how will the follow up occur?

Support Group Debriefing in the Event of a Suicide Attempt

Adapted from DBSA/MDDA Boston

In cases of suicide attempts or completed suicides by a group participant, family member or friend, it is important for a support group to debrief. Society discourages talk of suicide and suicide attempts, but a DBSA support group is one place where people can have these conversations in an atmosphere of trust and care.

If the person who has attempted suicide is not present at the meeting...

Honor the group participant's right to privacy and, if possible, speak with them prior to the meeting to see if they are comfortable with this being discussed. If they are not comfortable, please respect this right and lead the group away from discussion about the attempt. If they are, report to the support group the facts as you know them, or ask others to report on the facts of the situation. You do not need to give details about the actual attempt, the focus of the discussion should be on sharing feelings. Give group members an opportunity to respond individually about how they feel about the suicide attempt. Give ample time to the topic, but be sure to move on to other topics in the meeting – including, of course, the progress toward recovery each person has made since the last meeting. Remind the group of the confidentiality policy of the meeting.

If the person who has attempted suicide is present at the meeting...

If the facilitator is made aware of the suicide attempt, ask the person (in private) if they want to talk about the attempt. If they are not comfortable talking about this with the group, please respect this right and lead the group away from discussion about the attempt. If the person is willing to discuss their attempted suicide, ask them to tell the group how they were feeling then and how they are feeling now. Whether or not the person talks further, ask group members to respond individually about how they feel about what the person who attempted suicide has reported. Facilitate the group in expressing genuine care and concern, and move on to other topics.

If the group is not aware of an attempted suicide, but the person brings it up during discussion...

Be sure that people talk about it – don't ignore it. Ask the person if it would help her/him to talk about how they were feeling then and how they are feeling now. Help the group express that you are all glad to have the person there. Whether or not the person talks further, ask group members to respond individually about how they feel about what the person who attempted suicide has reported. Facilitate the group in expressing genuine care and concern, and move on to other topics.

In the event of a group participant, family member or friend completing suicide...

At the beginning of the meeting, inform the group of the situation. Tell the facts as you know them, or ask others to report on the facts of the situation. You do not need to give details about the method, the focus of the discussion should be on sharing feelings.



Allow the group some flexibility in their communication. Allow grieving, and allow time to just be with one another as a group. Let the group know that they may bring this up during discussion in future meetings, and facilitate a discussion about all the support systems that are available for the group participants after they leave the meeting. Consider bringing in a trained grief counselor or utilize your professional advisor as a resource at a specially arranged meeting. Be sure to discuss other topics at the meeting – including, of course, the progress toward recovery each person has made since the last meeting. You may consider arranging (or having another group participant arrange) for a card, flowers or other appropriate gestures on behalf of the group.

What other plans/policies/procedures does your group want to consider?

Professional Advisor contact information:

Support systems available in the community:

Emergency Services: 911

National Suicide Prevention Helpline: (800) 273-TALK

Others: _____
