

# *“I’m Not A Mental Health Professional. What Should I Do If I Suspect Someone is Suicidal?”*

*Melissa M. Bradley-Ball, MS, NCC, BCETS, FAAETS - 2008*

*It’s good news that you are astute enough to notice if a person might be suicidal. First of all, please note that there are no words as important as your ability to listen, notice and offer support. Take your concern very seriously. The majority of people who complete suicide have given (at least) covert threats or hints about it before attempting. Because covert threats are so difficult to pick up on, they sometimes go unnoticed.*

*There will be slightly different approaches if you are face-to-face with the person rather than on the phone with them. Your role is to stay connected until you get more information and, if needed, immediate emergency assistance.*

*Get more information. Although it may seem very scary, it is important for you to find out if they are having suicidal thoughts. You may say, “You seem really down, **have you been having thoughts about dying (or suicide)?**” You cannot make someone suicidal by simply asking that question. In fact, the (possibly) suicidal person can feel less isolated by having someone notice the depth of the emotional distress they feel.*

*If the person says they have thought of suicide or dying, don’t try to talk a person out of their emotions or minimize what they are saying. Don’t simply try to change the subject. Do **listen**. Keep a calm, even tone and remember to breathe! By listening, you are giving them a way to vent and to be heard. Use sentences that are non-judgmental, such as “It sounds like you are feeling trapped” (if that is the indication you are getting). When the suicidal person begins to be heard, they can begin to feel (temporarily) less stressed or hopeless.*

*Although you are not a mental health professional, knowing a little bit about lethality can be helpful. What is the lethality? Lethality gives you more of an indication of how imminent the threat of suicide is. It is recommended that even if lethality is low, that you get the person professional help as soon as possible.*

*“Lethality” is determined by:*

*Do they have the desire to commit suicide?*

**Do they have a plan** how they are going to do so (i.e. pills, gunshot, etc. and when)?

**Do they have the means immediately or easily available** (i.e. pills in their possession or ammunition & weapon in their possession)?

**Have they attempted suicide previously?** If so, do you know how they tried?

**Are they impulsive?** (Teens are particularly impulsive, as are those who have ingested alcohol and/or drugs).

*If the lethality is high, they have the desire, the plan and the means (anything more is extremely high risk), then stay with them or keep talking to them. It is very important not to hang up or leave them. Take their suicidal discussion very seriously. If you know they have and how they tried, ask them directly if they have the means available right then.*

*Do not keep promises not to tell anyone else. You might tell them directly, "I care about you and I will not make that promise. I want to help you in any way I can, but I am not a professional."*

*Find out if the person is drinking or has taken drugs before/during talking to you. If so, you need to find out what they have ingested. If you are concerned with the severity or combination of what has been ingested, you may wish to contact the local Poison Control Center.*

*If you are with them, encourage them to call a suicide hotline (with trained individuals) or contact some other local support. If they are unable or unwilling, take them to an emergency room or contact 911. If you are on the phone with them, encourage them to call a suicide hotline and if they are unwilling, contact 1-800-Sui-cide (1-800-784-2434911,) the local suicide support line or 911. If at anytime, you feel you or others are also at risk (such as homicide/suicide) **call 911 immediately.***

**In Middle TN – Middle TN Health Crisis Services Hotline 1-800-809-9957**

**24 hour Crisis Intervention Center Hotline 615-244-7444**

**Call 911 so they may contact MOBILE CRISIS (MENTAL HEALTH) Team**