

# You're Not Alone

*A mental health and suicide prevention blog for the construction industry*



## How to Respond to Someone in a Mental Crisis

July 2018

*by Bob Swanson*

Last month, I discussed common warning signs of someone having a mental crisis and possibly being suicidal. There are two important things to keep in mind: due to shame and stigma, individuals having suicidal thoughts often appear quite normal. Additionally, unlike physical illnesses, the warning signs that an individual is having suicidal thoughts may not always be clear and visible.

If you've noticed any verbal, behavioral or situational clues, take them seriously. It is important to remember that your positive and caring action may save a life. If you are concerned about someone's well being and personal safety, don't ignore that impulse; act on it. Now you may be asking yourself... What should I do if I pick up on these signs and clues? How can I help someone who is having a mental crisis?

For starters, have a private one-on-one conversation. In an ideal world, a mental health problem would be viewed no differently than a physical one. Unfortunately, that is not often the case. Once you get the individual alone, you can start the conversation by saying,

**"I'm concerned about the recent changes in your behavior and some of the statements you've made recently. I care about you, and I'm here to listen and help."**

Often, this is all it takes for the individual to open up and talk. Make sure the conversation isn't rushed, and that you are really listening. There should be no judgement based on what is said. If the individual is reluctant to talk, patience and persistence are your allies. Once trust is established, it is imperative to ask some critical and difficult questions, such as: "Are you having suicidal thoughts," "Are you thinking of killing yourself," or "Are you thinking of ending your life?"

There are a few questions and statements you *should not* ask, since they imply judgement and increase shame. These would include the following: "You're not suicidal are you," or "I hope that you aren't planning to do anything stupid like ending your life." Also do not ask, "Are you thinking of hurting yourself?" A person in this situation is not thinking of hurting themselves. They want to end their pain; their remedy to end the pain is suicide.

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If at this point you are convinced that the person is having suicidal thoughts and is a possible danger to themselves, do not leave them alone. Ask if they are willing to get some help, and stress that you are there for them. Since you are likely not trained as a mental health professional, getting additional help is critical.

It is essential to have the person's approval for getting outside help.

How things proceed from here depends on each situation. For a moment compare this to a person bleeding. For a minor cut, only first aid is required. However, for major bleeding, immediate medical care is required. If the person has indicated having suicidal thoughts, contact the national suicide prevention line at 800-273-TALK.

The Suicide Prevention Line is a 24/7 resource staffed by trained professionals. If a lethal device is present and imminent physical harm is possible, call 911 and ask for a Crisis Intervention Team (CIT). They have been trained to handle these type of situations.

Identifying the warning signs of suicide is difficult, but knowing how to respond when you spot them in someone is extremely important. You can save a life by having a non-judgemental conversation with someone and helping them get help.



### About the Author - Bob Swanson

Bob Swanson is the past president of Swanson & Youngdale and the first Chairman of FCA International. He tragically lost his son Michael to suicide on March 13, 2009 at the age of 33. Bob now focuses his efforts on creating awareness of the impact of mental health and suicide in the construction industry.