

How to Help a Resident Who's Suicidal

As an RA, one of the most stressful parts of your job is helping residents in distress, especially those experiencing suicidal ideation. Here are some ways that you can identify residents at risk and help keep them safe.

Recognizing suicide risk. Identifying residents who are suicidal is a crucial skill to have as an RA. Although the warning signs for suicide look different for everyone, here are several warning signs to watch for in your residents:

1. Social withdrawal or isolation
2. Talking about death or suicide
3. Giving away possessions
4. Overwhelmed with obligations and feelings that there is no way out
5. Hopelessness, helplessness, or talking about feeling trapped
6. Irritability, anger, or bouts of rage or violence
7. Lethargy or agitation
8. Unusual behavior including risk taking or impulsivity
9. Increased alcohol/drug use
10. Feelings of extreme guilt or talking about being a burden to others
11. Obtaining a weapon or other means
12. Sudden increase in mood following an episode of low mood (may indicate a sense of relief upon finally deciding to suicide)
13. Making or rehearsing plans to suicide
14. Inability to identify reasons for living

Ask directly. Many people are afraid that, if they ask directly about suicide, they will plant the idea in someone's head. Research actually suggests that asking directly about suicide is more likely to help someone than make them feel worse. So asking questions like "I wonder if you have been thinking about killing yourself?" "when was the last time you thought about ending your life?" "do you have a plan to kill yourself?" or "do you have access to something you could use to kill yourself?" are useful tools in potentially saving lives.

Listen without judgement. If your resident starts talking about suicide, you may feel pulled to try to change their mind. Your resident trusts you enough to talk to you about something as challenging as suicide, and trying to change their mind is invalidating. Don't try to convince your resident about that suicide is wrong or immoral. Don't debate the validity of their feelings. Don't use guilt (e.g. "think of what killing yourself would do to your family") to try to sway them. While offering hope for the future is okay, don't offer insincere or clichéd reassurances. When someone discloses suicidal thoughts, it's normal to feel shocked or scared; as best you can, try to avoid acting appalled

Communicate that you care. Your resident is more likely to trust you with difficult information if they believe that you care about them and have their best interests in mind. Let your resident know that you are concerned about them and that you care about helping them feel better. Many people considering suicide feel isolate, so spend time with your resident so don't feel so alone. Following up with them on a regular basis after your conversation is another way to signal that you care.

Don't promise to keep suicidal thoughts a secret. It's helpful to start off the conversation by letting your resident know that you won't be able to keep the details of your discussion private. Letting your resident know up front will prevent them from feeling betrayed when you have to inform others about what they told you. Follow your protocol by documenting your conversation and seek consultation from your hall coordinator or a staff counselor as needed.

Pull in reinforcements. Assessing suicide risk is challenging, so asking others to help you is always a good idea. Ask your hall coordinator to help you have a conversation with a resident. Call the [University Counseling Services](#) (319-335-7294) and ask to speak with the consultant on duty or the [embedded counselor](#) for guidance. Better yet, walk your resident to the counseling center or the embedded counselor so a professional can help determine the next step in keeping your resident safe. If you believe that your resident is in immediate danger, call the Department of Public Safety at 319-335-5022, or in an emergency, dial 911.

Refer to other resources. Encourage your resident connect with a support system through their friends, family, faith community, or professional counseling. Our campus has a number of [confidential resources](#) including the [University Counseling Services](#). Remember that all students living in university housing through have access to [counseling embedded in the residence halls](#). Encourage your residents to use resources like the confidential [24-hour crisis line](#) at (319) 351-0140. There are also lots of therapist in the Iowa City area, and the University Counseling Services can help match your resident with the best-fit, soonest-available counselor.

Remember to practice self-care. It's extremely difficult to support someone else if you're not taking caring of yourself. If you are supporting a resident with suicidal ideation, make sure that you're practicing self-care. Self-care takes many forms, so experiment a bit to find your preferred method. Find time to exercise. Practice meditation. Talk to friends, family, or coworkers. Seek counseling for yourself.