

Responding to a Mental Health Crisis

What is a mental health crisis?

A crisis is a time when you lose control or feel like you can't cope. A mental health crisis can occur when a person's usual coping strategies are overwhelmed, causing an intense emotional and/or behavioral reaction. Anyone can experience a mental health crisis; however individuals with mental illnesses are more prone to have these experiences - often with greater intensity. Severe stress, trauma, relationship problems, symptoms of a mental illness, substance use, and lack of access to treatments are some of the factors that can lead to a mental health crisis.

Mental health crises can include:

- Suicidal behaviour or intentions.
- Panic attacks/extreme anxiety.
- Psychotic episodes.
- Other emotions or behaviours that seem out of control or irrational and that are likely to endanger yourself or others.

What is a psychotic episode?

Psychosis refers to a loss of contact with reality, in which people have trouble distinguishing between what is real and what is not. When this occurs, it is called a psychotic episode. Substance use, medical conditions, and mental illnesses such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder can cause psychotic episodes. Psychosis can come on suddenly or can develop very gradually. Symptoms of psychosis can vary from person to person and may change over time.

How can I tell if my family member/friend is in crisis?

Some people show no signs of distress when they are in crisis, so they have to ask for help or let someone know they are having a difficult time. For others, it is obvious when they are having a hard time because they behave very differently. The experience of a mental health crisis can vary from person to person. Signs and symptoms can range from confusion and disorganized speech to feelings of extreme agitation or the fear of being harmed. Some warning signs can include:

- Talking about dying a lot and emailing or posting these thoughts to Facebook or Twitter.

- Increase in drinking or substance use to the point that it causes a lot of negative thinking or negative events in their life.
- Unusual thoughts or behaviors (e.g. thinking that the mailman is out to get them or taping newspapers to cover all the windows).
- Neglect of personal hygiene.
- Dramatic change in sleep habits, such as sleeping more often or not sleeping well.
- Changes in concentration, memory and ability to process information.
- Weight gain or loss.
- Decline in performance at work or school and/or increased absenteeism.
- Noticeable changes in mood, such as irritability, anger, anxiety or sadness.
- Withdrawal from routine activities and relationships.

Sometimes, these changes happen suddenly and obviously. However, often these changes come about gradually and may be harder to notice right away. If something doesn't seem right with your family member/friend, it may help to think back over the past few weeks or months to consider signs of change.

Don't wait to bring up your concerns. It's always better to intervene early, before it becomes an emergency situation. If you have a feeling that something is wrong, you're probably right.

What can I do to support my family member/friend during a crisis?

When your family member or friend is going through a mental health crisis, do not leave them alone. Reaching out is the first step to providing the support they need to get better. Try to get the person to seek help immediately from an emergency room, physician, distress centre, or mental health professional. Take seriously any comments about suicide or wishing to die. Even if you do not believe your family member/friend will actually attempt suicide, they can benefit from your help in receiving mental health support. Below are some other suggestions on what you can do to help:

- Stay calm. Take a few deep breaths or go to a quiet place to help you calm down. If you are calm yourself, it will help your family member/friend calm down as well.
- Sit down to talk in a supportive, non-judgmental way. You might start the conversation with a casual invitation: "Let's talk. You don't seem like yourself lately. Is there something going on?"

- Do more listening than talking. Show your family member/friend that you can be trusted to give support without passing judgment. When discussing your concerns, stick to the facts and try not to blame or criticize.
- Encourage them to see their psychiatrist/doctor right away or to go to a hospital emergency department. Remember, the earlier the intervention, the better the outcome. It is crucial to provide the individual with the opportunity to receive services voluntarily. This is an important aspect towards successful recovery, retaining family ties, and maintaining human respect and dignity.
- If your family member/friend is already connected with a mental health service provider such as a psychiatrist, case manager, peer support worker, etc., attempt to obtain their professional assistance in determining appropriate action. If your family member/friend has a Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP), advance directive, or other written information on preferred treatment during a period of crisis attempt to obtain and follow the recommended course of action.
- If your family member/friend does not have a service provider or a written plan, work with them to learn what treatments and services they would like to receive, or if there is a person that could be contacted to assist during a crisis.
- It is important to provide them with as much choice and decision-making authority in determining their treatment. It can be as simple as asking “Which hospital would you prefer to go to?”, “Do you want to pack a bag?”, “Is there someone I can call?”, or “Do you want me to stay with you or drop you off?”.
- You may have information that professional services will not have. You can call your family member/friend’s psychiatrist/mental health service provider and relate the situation, with or without their consent. They will not discuss your family member/friend’s condition with you, but should be receptive to hearing about the current situation. Be as concise and factual as you can be under the circumstances. If you get emotional, your observations might be dismissed as dramatic and counter-productive. If you have concerns about ruining your relationship, you can request that any information you share is kept confidential and used as sensitively as possible.
- You may find that getting help can sometimes be difficult. You may need to try different services before getting help. Stay persistent and put your concerns in writing as well as sharing them verbally. This will make it harder for professionals to dismiss your concerns and also give you a record of what you have said and when.

- If you think your family member/friend is suicidal or will harm someone else do not leave them alone. Talk to them about their thoughts of suicide. Eliminate access to firearms or other potential weapons that they can use to harm themselves or others, including unsupervised access to medications. Contact a doctor or call 911 immediately if your family member/friend makes suicidal statements or mentioned contemplating death.
- If you feel that there is an immediate need for services or have concerns about your safety, do not hesitate to call 911.

What can I do if family member/friend becomes violent or aggressive?

Sometimes during a mental health crisis or a severe psychotic episode a person may experience such intense feelings of confusion, fear and paranoia that they may act out aggressively toward others, including their immediate family and friends. This may include verbal threats and accusations, destruction of property, and sometimes physical aggression. Your safety is very important. There are things you can do to increase your safety, especially if aggressive or threatening behaviors are recurring.

Police should be contacted in a situation where the safety of people or property is at risk. This can include mental health crises and any instance when you feel threatened and/or experience verbal, emotional and/or physical harm. ***If you or anyone else at home is in danger, call 911 or your local mobile crisis intervention team right away.***

See “Safety Plan for Families and Friends” and “Should I Call Police” fact sheets for more information.

When there are signs of hostility or the threat of violence during a mental health crisis:

- Evaluate the situation: Is your family member/friend talking about hurting themselves, others or property? Do they have a tendency to act out aggressively during a mental health crisis/psychotic episode? Is their behavior becoming increasingly erratic and/or are they becoming more agitated/angry/upset?
- If you believe that there is risk of harm or a threat of violence, keep yourself and those around you safe by calmly leaving the premises.
- Call your local crisis mobile team or 911. Describe the situation and the behaviors you observed. Be as specific as possible. Provide information about their mental health

needs and any other relevant information. Indicate whether they are armed/have access to weapons.

Where can I go for help?

Supporting an individual who is going through a mental health crisis and/or psychotic episode can be extremely distressing for family members and friends. You may feel helpless, angry and confused. You may even experience a mental health crisis of your own. It is important to get help for your own concerns and distress.

The Schizophrenia Society of Ontario is here to help. You call us toll-free at 1-800-449-6367 or email asktheexpert@schizophrenia.on.ca.

Other supports include:

- Your local distress centre. You can find one in your community here: <http://www.dcontario.org/help.html>
- Victim Support Line (VSL): 1-888-579-2888, 7 days a week from 8am – 10pm
- Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868
- Mental Health Helpline: 1-866-531-2600 or visit: <http://www.mentalhealthhelpline.ca>