KEEP CALM, STAY SAFE

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU'RE FEELING SUICIDAL

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Having thoughts of hurting or killing yourself can be a lot to manage. These kinds of thoughts can be distressing, and you're probably also dealing with the painful experiences that triggered these thoughts in the first place.

Suicidal thoughts can also be isolating and hard to talk about, for many different reasons. Some people worry about upsetting friends and family, while others believe that they're 'weak' or 'strange' for thinking like this. Other times people feel ashamed for having these thoughts or think that help isn't available.

Suicidal thoughts are **not a sign of weakness** or anything to feel ashamed about - they're actually **very common**. Data indicate that 11.8% of Canadians have had suicidal thoughts in their lifetime. Fortunately, most of these people don't kill themselves – with time and support, they start to feel better.

Help is available for thoughts of suicide and self-harm. These thoughts will pass with time, and there are strategies that you can use to keep yourself safe in the meantime. There are also many different services and organisations that can support you.

If you've made a plan to hurt or kill yourself, and are feeling so low that you're thinking of going through with it, resist your thoughts and call 911 immediately – people there know what to do and how best to help you. If you live outside of Canada, call your local emergency services straight away.

This resource will give you some information on suicidal thinking, describe some strategies you can use to manage these thoughts, and explain what other supports might be available. **Well done on getting this far** – the fact that you're reading this guide means that you haven't given up hope that you can, and will, feel better.

WHY DO PEOPLE HAVE SUICIDAL THOUGHTS?

There are many different reasons why people think about hurting or killing themselves. Often, however, suicidal thoughts are a form of **problem solving**.

The human brain is very good at anticipating, preparing for, and trying to solve problems. This ability is what helps us save for a rainy day, book a doctors' appointment to get a suspicious mole checked, or even figure out what to cook for dinner.

Sometimes, however, we face problems that feel unsolvable. These problems can be things like debt, chronic pain, or the loss of a loved one. Other times, they can be things like intense feelings of shame, worthlessness, or hopelessness. Sometimes, the problem is feeling numb and as though you don't have any emotions at all.

When facing painful and seemingly 'unfixable' problems, our brain tries even harder to think of solutions. Sometimes, these can be helpful solutions, like booking an appointment with a financial planner, talking to friends, and seeking professional mental health support. Other times, the brain considers suicide or self-harm as 'solutions'.

Suicidal thoughts can snowball. The more you think about suicide and self-harm, the more likely it is that your brain will think of these things when you're facing a problem. **It's like the autocomplete function on Google – your brain is more likely to suggest things that you've thought of before**.

But just because the thought of dying comes to mind quickly and easily, it doesn't mean that suicide is the best or the only solution. It may just be the most rehearsed and remembered option.

Remember, **there are ways to change your thoughts so that they're more helpful to you.**

Consider the following example:

THOUGHT

"This is so hard, I'm useless. Nothing will ever change."

FEELING

Low, hopeless, down, lost

ACTION

Withdraw from others, give up

VS

THOUGHT

"This is so hard, but I can get through this, it can't stay like this forever"

FEELING

Hopeful, determined, kind to self

ACTION

Keep going, seek help, don't give up

Shifting your thoughts to be more helpful and realistic is an important skill for good mental health. You can develop this skill on your own through practice, or with the help and guidance of a mental health professional.

Trying to change your thoughts isn't about wishful positive thinking, and it doesn't dismiss how tough what you're going through is. It simply **helps your mind rehearse a different outcome of your struggle**. It helps you to see different options and ways forward.

DEALING WITH SUICIDAL THOUGHTS

Suicidal thoughts won't harm you unless you act on them. The following strategies can help you cope with these thoughts until they pass.

Write down your own examples, highlight strategies that might work best for you as you go, and put all this information together to make your own Coping Plan (included at the end of this resource).

Remember that this too shall pass

Although suicidal thoughts can feel intense, they do pass with time. Suicidal thoughts and urges are like waves – they build up, peak, and then slowly ebb away. And, just like waves, you can ride these painful thoughts and urges out.

Remind yourself:

- These thoughts and urges will only hurt me if I act on them.
- Although I feel bad now, I won't always feel this way.
- These painful thoughts, feelings, and urges will go away with time, I just need to wait them out.

Avoid things that might make the situation worse

When we're feeling stressed or overwhelmed, sometimes we have urges to do things that bring us relief in the short-term but make us feel worse in the long-term (or often, straight after we do them). Try to resist these urges, for instance:

Avoid drinking alcohol
Although alcohol can 'take the edge off', it is a depressant. Drinking will also disrupt your sleep and leave you feeling worse tomorrow.

Don't take any mind-altering drugs
Don't take drugs that can impair your decision-making and put you at risk of doing something you wouldn't otherwise do. Coming down from these drugs can also leave you feeling worse.

Think twice before calling people who might make you feel worse
Although it's very important to talk to people about suicidal thoughts, reach out to people who'll be available, understanding, and supportive (rather than people who might make you feel worse or put you in a riskier situation).

Make sure your environment is safe

You may have thought about suicide for a long time and might have a plan for how you could kill yourself. Having a plan and access to dangerous items greatly increases your risk of impulsively acting on distressing thoughts and feelings – it makes you **vulnerable to doing things you would otherwise regret**.

Therefore, make sure your environment – a place where you spend most of your time when you're feeling suicidal, such as your home – does not have easily accessible means of hurting yourself. **If you are in a place where you're at risk of harm, leave and go somewhere safe, like a friend's house or the emergency department**.

Connect with others

Sometimes, when you're feeling suicidal, being around people is the last thing you feel like doing. However, people generally find that when they connect with others, these thoughts go away or lessen. Spending time with people you know can take your mind off how you're feeling and help painful thoughts and feelings pass.

- Call or text a friend, to see if they're free for a chat.
- Organise to catch up with friends, either online or in person.
- If you game online, log on to see if anyone's free to play a game with you.
- Sometimes, it can help to talk to a close friend or family member about your suicidal thoughts. Sharing your thoughts and feelings with someone you trust can bring feelings of hope and relief, and remind you that you're not alone. It also means that these people can help you stay safe and get help if needed.
- If no one's free, go somewhere you can be around other people, like your gym, a coffee shop, a museum, or a park. The idea here is to not be alone, to help you feel less isolated.

Do things that will help you feel better

While you wait for these thoughts and urges to pass, focus your energy on doing things that might help you feel just a little bit better. There's probably not going to be anything that will make you feel the best you've ever felt, but even a 1% improvement can help. Here are some things that other people have found helpful.

- ***Do something active.***
  Like a quick walk, jog, some star jumps, or push ups. Exercise can help with the nervous tension that's generated by painful emotions.

- ***Tune in your five senses.***
  Name five things you can see, four things you can hear, three things you can feel, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste right now.

- ***Steady your breathing.***
  Breathe in through your nose for three seconds, and out through your mouth for three seconds. Repeat for at least a few minutes, until you feel calmer. Every time painful thoughts come up, just re-focus your attention on your breathing.

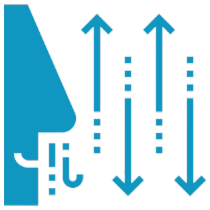
- ***Stretch out your muscles.***
  Release any muscle tension by doing gentle relaxation exercises, from your toes all the way up to your head.

- ***Get comfortable and cosy.***
  Have a warm shower, get into your most comfortable clothes, make a cup of tea, and light a candle if you have one. Get into bed and get cosy if it will help you feel better.

- ***Lighten the mood.***
  Do something engaging and distracting, like listening to your favourite music, watching a funny movie, or re-watching re-runs of your favourite TV show.

- ***Distract your mind.***
  Give your brain something else to think about – try reading a book, colouring in, or doing a puzzle or crossword.

- ***Do something that makes you feel productive.***
  Tidy up your house, declutter your wardrobe, bake something from scratch, or tick something small off your to-do list that's been bothering you.



Remind yourself of your reasons for living

Remind yourself of the things that make you feel like life could be worth living. These are things that make you feel hopeful, curious, interested, connected, passionate, or worthwhile. These things are different for everyone, for example:

- Your parents or other family
- Wanting to eat your favourite food
- Your friends
- Curiosity about what the future holds
- Wanting to learn a new skill
- New experiences you hope to try
- Your pets
- A desire to travel
- Wanting to learn about something
- Wanting to support someone else
- Your work or hobbies
- Goals you'd like to work towards
- Children or other people who depend on you

It can be hard to think of reasons for living when you're feeling suicidal. It might take some time for you to think of even one thing you feel hopeful about. That's okay – once you've thought of one reason, it's easier to think of more. You can take as much time as you like to do this. If you're finding it really hard to think of anything and are feeling very distressed, just take a break. Come back to it when you feel a bit calmer and can think more easily.

Plan something to look forward to

Make a plan to do something fun or relaxing for the next few hours or days, to counter feelings of hopelessness. Try to plan in as much detail as possible. For example, rather than "See friends", try "See Sam at 9:00am at Coffee & Co., then do home yoga at home, then start re-reading the Harry Potter books".

If you get stuck, try planning a combination of:

- **Social activities**, like catching up with friends.
- Things that make you feel **productive**, like doing a load of washing.
- **Fun and distracting activities**, for instance, watching a new TV show.
- Activities you find **relaxing**, like listening to music or drawing.
- **Active** things, like doing some stretches or going for a walk in the sun.

You can also make plans for further in the future. For example, writing a list of places you'd like to travel, or gathering a collection of recipes you'd like to make over the next few months.

Seek professional support

It's a good idea to talk to a mental health professional if you're having thoughts of suicide or self-harm. These people can help you understand why you're feeling this way, teach you strategies for managing painful thoughts and feelings, and help you take steps towards living a fulfilling life.

Talking to your GP is a great first step. GPs can refer you to psychologists and mental health counsellors, prescribe medications, and figure out if these thoughts are a side-effect of a medication. If you have any concerns about your medication, please discuss this with your GP before making any changes.

If you live in Quebec or Ontario and think you may be at risk of suicide, contact one of the following resources immediately. They'll help you cope with these intense thoughts and feelings, and can put you in touch with emergency mental health help if you need it.

In Québec **24 hours a day, 7 days a week**	**In Ontario** **24 hours a day, 7 days a week**
Suicide prevention center : **1 866 APPELLE | 1 866 277-3553** Suicide.ca/en	Mental health crisis helpine: **613 722-6914** crisisline.ca
Info-Social Line: **811, option 2** https://www.quebec.ca/en/health/finding-a-resource/info-sante-811	Distress Centre of Ottawa and Region: **613 238-3311** dcottawa.on.ca

If you are outside of Canada, call the local suicide prevention helpline.

Most importantly, if you have a plan for how to kill yourself and are thinking of going through with it, call 911 immediately or go to the emergency department at the nearest hospital.

Sometimes people feel apprehensive about talking to professionals about suicidal thoughts, because they're worried about being put into hospital against their own will. This happens much less often than you'd think – it mostly happens when someone isn't able to make a clear decision about their safety.

When your mind is clouded by painful thoughts, feelings, and urges, it's helpful to have a pre-made, easy-to-access plan that can help you stay safe. We encourage you to fill in this plan, keep it somewhere safe, and give it to the people you trust to support you. **Remember that thoughts of suicide and self-harm will pass with time**. With time and support, you can and will feel better.

The ways I can make my environment safe and comfortable are:

The things that make me feel worse that I want to avoid are:

The people who I can reach out to for support are:

The things that help me feel safe and calm are:

The reasons I want to keep living are:

The things I'm looking forward to are:

The mental health professionals I can call are:

If you have a plan for how to kill yourself and are thinking of going through with it, call 911 immediately or go to the emergency department at the nearest hospital.

To access additional tools for coping with stress, anxiety, or low mood when things are tough, please visit: **www.equilia.ca**.

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