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THE LEARNING BRAIN

Each week in BCPVPA eNews, we share tips, links and self-assessment tools that will help our members to better understand the mental health continuum, and to use the resources that are available.

bcpvpa.bc.ca/thelearningbrain

Friday May 29, 2020

LOVING SOMEONE WITH A MENTAL ILLNESS

By Rochelle Morandini



It is heartbreaking to watch someone you love struggle with any type of pain – whether it be physical or psychological. You want to help, ease their pain and be their support and positive energy.

Do what you can to support them. At the same time, you need to monitor your own energy levels and psychological health because caregiving can have its own cost to you.

Our current situation in this pandemic has led to significant mental strain for everyone. It is particularly impactful on those who were already struggling with their mental health. The symptoms that people around us are exhibiting in this pandemic certainly reflect the symptoms of a significant mental illness.

During this pandemic, they may experience or exhibit:¹

- **Feelings of hopelessness:** worried about their job, unsure of the future, increased anxiety, fear of the pandemic, feeling trapped at home
- **Loneliness:** socially isolated from family and friends, withdrawal due to inability to cope
- **Harmful self-soothing behaviours:** increase in alcohol and drug use
- **Mood changes:** can be dramatic
- **Tiredness and agitation:** leading to more conflict and challenge
- **Riskier behaviours**



SUPPORTING SOMEONE YOU LOVE

What can you do if you're concerned that someone you love may be struggling?

Here are some of the signs that a loved one may have a mental illness and could use your help:

- They suddenly no longer have interest in hobbies they used to love
- They seem to feel angry or sad for little or no reason

¹ <https://conferenceboard.wistia.com/medias/v95s3v3nkm>

- They don't seem to enjoy anything anymore
- They have told you about, or seem to be hearing, strange voices or having unsettling thoughts
- They seem emotionally numb, like they don't feel anything anymore
- They used to be healthy, but now they're always saying they feel a bit sick
- They eat a lot more or less than they used to
- Their sleeping patterns have changed
- They seem to be anxious or terrified about situations or objects in life that seem normal to you and others
- They have been missing more and more time from work or school
- They have been drinking heavily and/or using drugs to cope
- They are talking about taking their life
- They feel hopeless
- They are avoiding their close friends and family members

[Watch this video:](#) *Can you make someone get help with their mental health?*

What if they deny there is anything wrong or do not want help?

It is important to listen and remain available. Always keep the door open for someone if they ever want to get help or talk about it. [Here is a link](#) to supports for when you want to help, but your loved one does not feel they need support.

What if your loved one stops their treatment?

There may be times when your loved one is starting to feel better and they decide to stop taking their medication or cease seeing their counsellor. Instead of insisting that they should continue their treatment, help them focus on what made them start to feel better.

What was the difference that led to the easing of their symptoms? What was it that made them improve their mood and function? What are they doing now that they were not doing before? What do they think will happen if they stop the treatment? What was the specific thing they felt was making an impact? For example, were the medications helping their brain chemicals? Were they working on learning new skills?

Discuss how discontinuing these things may bring back their challenges and pain.²

British Columbia resources for family members of those with mental illness and addiction

[“Confident Parents, Thriving Kids” \(CMHA\)](#)

A great program by the Canadian Mental Health Association that supports parents of children who may be struggling with their mental health. I took this course and it was excellent.

[Mood Disorders Association of BC](#)

[OpenMind BC: Parents of youth with mental health challenges](#)



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OPENING UP ABOUT SUICIDE

In my 25+ years of consulting with organizations on employee health, the past five years have been riddled with increasing stories of employees threatening suicide, and suicide happening at the workplace. Please know that I am not an expert in suicide awareness or prevention, but I do know that we need to talk more openly about suicide.

² <https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/guides-and-publications/when-a-family-member-is-suicidal>

We need to talk about it and make it safe for people who are struggling to come forward.

We need to talk about how people who have been suicidal can get help and turn their lives around.

IF YOU OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW NEEDS HELP:

National suicide hotline 1-833-456-4566 and text 45645

crisiservicescanada.ca

crisiscentre.bc.ca

Call 1-800-784-2433 or 1-800-SUICIDE or talk to someone on live chat

We need to talk about it – it will not make things worse – but not creating awareness might.

When people are feeling hopeless, they often feel that no one else feels the same way as them. Their perception of their potential future is distorted. Unfiltered thoughts in their mind come and go all the time. When they can't filter them out anymore, the thoughts just continue to breed and cycle — causing more grief and despair.

The symptoms of someone considering suicide are not always obvious. People may not tell you they are thinking of hurting themselves. They may, however, show patterns of behaviour that may indicate something is not right.

Suicidal warning signs may include the person:³

- Planning to or saying they want to hurt or kill themselves or someone else
- Talking, writing, reading, or drawing about death, including writing suicide notes and talking about items that can cause physical harm, such as pills, guns, or knives
- Saying they have no hope, they feel trapped, or there is no point in 'going on'
- Buying guns or bullets, stockpiling medicines, or taking other actions to prepare for a suicide attempt. They may have a new interest in guns or other weapons

³ <https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/health-topics/hw29139> and <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/suicide-prevention/warning-signs.html>

- No longer wanting to see people and wanting to be alone a lot
- No longer taking care of themselves or following their medical provider's advice
- Giving away their things and/or hurrying to complete a will
- Withdrawing from family, friends, or activities
- Feeling like they have no purpose in life or reason for living
- Increasing substance use, like drugs, alcohol, prescription meds and inhalants
- Feeling hopeless about the future or feeling like life will never get better
- Talking about being a burden to someone or about being in unbearable pain
- Experiencing anxiety or significant mood changes, such as anger, sadness or helplessness

Watch this video: ["Mental illness consumed my marriage - until this epiphany"](#)

Note: the [warning signs for children, teens, and young adults](#) may be different than adults. They may include

running away from home or doing risky or dangerous things, such as drunk driving.

"We know that those at risk for suicide do not necessarily want to die but do want help in reducing the pain they are experiencing so that they can go on to lead productive, fulfilling lives. There is a lot of ambivalence surrounding the decision to take one's own life, and by recognizing this, and discussing it, we can help the suicidal person start to recognize alternative options for managing their suffering. Often suicidal people are experiencing intolerable emotional pain, which they believe to be unrelenting. They often feel hopeless and trapped. By helping them to recognize and explore alternatives to dying, you are planting the seeds of hope that things can improve."

- [Crisis Centre BC](#)



HERE IS WHAT YOU CAN DO

If a friend or loved one is thinking about suicide, they need professional help even if suicide isn't an immediate danger. Always take it seriously. It is important to show a potentially suicidal person that you care and are concerned for their safety. This shows that we are taking their feelings seriously. We need to listen to the person without judgment and show them empathy.

How can you help?

As discussed in *The Learning Brain* last week, support from family and friends is an important and valuable part of helping someone who is going through a mental illness. This includes emotional and practical support. If you are currently supporting or want to help a friend or family member, [HeretoHelpBC](#) provides good and practical ideas of how you can support them from:

- recognizing when someone needs help, to
- helping with medications, appointments and treatments, to
- supporting a healthy lifestyle, to
- providing emotional support.

A recent review found that when a family was educated about the illness, the rate of relapse in their loved ones was reduced by half in the first year. The reality is that finding a treatment that works is often a process of trial and error. Therefore, family members can be key in helping identify signs of improvement.

Taking care of an ill family member or friend can be stressful. Remember that you need emotional support too. It may be helpful for you to talk to others about what it is like to support someone who is struggling with mental illness. Be open with loved ones and confidants about what you are going through – talk about it.

You may want to consider joining a support group for family members of people with mental illness. There, you can connect with other people going through the same things and they can help you work through your own emotions. It's very important to make sure you are taking care of your own mental health as well. If you are struggling yourself, seek help.

Take it seriously

If a friend or loved one is thinking about suicide, they need professional help even if suicide isn't an immediate danger. Always take it seriously. It is important to show a potentially suicidal person that you care and are concerned for their safety. This shows that we are taking their feelings seriously. We need to listen to the person without judgment and by showing empathy.

Tip: Be prepared by saving the crisis line number (1-800-784-2433 or 1-800-SUICIDE) on your phone for quick access before your discussion.

What to do when someone is suicidal, according to Mayo Clinic:

[For more information see this link.](#)

- **Encourage the person to call a suicide crisis number.** If they are too distraught or do not have the energy – ask if you can dial the number and get someone on the line and then pass the phone back to them.
- **Encourage the person to seek treatment.** A person who is suicidal or severely depressed may not have the energy or motivation to seek help. If the person doesn't want to consult a doctor or mental health provider, suggest finding help from a support group, crisis center, faith community, teacher or another trusted person. You can offer support and advice but remember that it's not your job to substitute for a mental health provider.
- **Offer to help the person take steps to get assistance and support.** For example, you could research treatment options, make phone calls, review insurance benefit information, or even offer to accompany the person to an appointment.
- **Encourage the person to communicate with you.** Someone who's suicidal may be tempted to bottle up feelings because they feel ashamed, guilty or embarrassed. Be supportive and



understanding and express your opinions without placing blame. Listen attentively and avoid interrupting.

- **Be respectful and acknowledge the person's feelings.** Don't try to talk the person out of their feelings or express shock. Remember, even though someone who's suicidal isn't thinking logically, their emotions are real. Not respecting how the person feels can shut down communication.
- **Don't be patronizing or judgmental.** For example, don't tell someone, 'Things could be worse' or 'You have everything to live for'. Instead, ask questions such as, 'What's causing you to feel so bad?', 'What would make you feel better?' or 'How can I help?'.
- **Never promise to keep someone's suicidal feelings a secret.** Be understanding but explain that you will not be able to keep such a promise if you think their life is in danger. At that point, you must get help.
- **Offer reassurance that things can get better.** When someone is suicidal, it seems as if nothing that can make things better. Reassure the person that with the appropriate treatment, they can develop other ways to cope and can feel better about life again.
- **Encourage the person to avoid alcohol and drug use.** Using drugs or alcohol may seem to ease their painful feelings, but ultimately it will make things worse. It can lead to reckless behaviour or feeling more depressed. If the person can't quit on their own, offer to help find treatment.
- **Remove potentially dangerous items from the person's home, if possible.** If you can, make sure the person doesn't have items around that could be used for suicide such as knives, razors, guns or drugs. If the person takes a medication that could be used for overdose, encourage them to have someone safeguard it and give it as prescribed.

[This 5 min video that forever changed my understanding of suicide.](#)



Victor He - unsplash.com

If someone has attempted suicide:

- Don't leave the person alone.
- Call 911 or your local emergency number right away. Or, if you think you can do so safely, take the person to the nearest hospital emergency room yourself.
- Try to find out if they are under the influence of alcohol or drugs or may have taken an overdose.
- Tell a family member or friend right away what's going on.

If a friend or loved one talks or behaves in a way that makes you believe he or she might attempt suicide, don't try to handle the situation alone:

- Get help from a trained professional as quickly as possible. The person may need to be hospitalized until the suicidal crisis has passed.
- Encourage the person to call a suicide hotline number.
- Contact 911 immediately if the person is at imminent risk and is alone or has quickly left your location.

Maybe the person contemplating suicide is you.

If you are thinking about suicide, you are not alone. Many people have thoughts of suicide, for a number of reasons. Thoughts of suicide can be very scary.

You—or the person you love who is at risk—may be hurt, confused, overwhelmed and hopeless about your future. You may feel sadness, grief, anger, guilt, shame, or emptiness. You may think that nothing can be done to change your situation. It may seem like your feelings are just too much to handle right now.

It is important to know that thinking about suicide does not mean that you will lose control or act on these thoughts. Having suicidal thoughts does not mean you are 'weak' or 'crazy'. Many people think about suicide because they are looking for a way to escape the pain they are feeling.

When someone is thinking about suicide, they often feel their situation seems hopeless and wonder if they can stand another minute of feeling this bad. But there are ways to get through this and feel better. **No one has to face this situation alone. Help is available.**

LifeLine Canada: [learn more about coping with suicidal thoughts.](#)

[See this article on Coping with Suicidal Thoughts.](#)



Hope and healing after suicide

I have two friends who have each lost a sibling to suicide. One, where the suicide was a complete shock to my friend and his family. My other friend watched her sibling struggle and struggle, and despite everyone's effort to help, her sibling chose to end his life.

What I saw in these friends — in the aftermath of suicide — was shock, pain, disbelief, grief and sadly, so much guilt. *'Why didn't I see what was happening? I should have tried harder to help'*. These are complex and raw feelings of friends, who themselves, now need support.

If you or someone you know has been or is in this situation,
[please access this valuable handbook](#): *Hope and Health after Suicide*.

Crisis Services Canada: [Get support and see more information here](#).



**WHAT OTHER HEALTH
TOPICS DO YOU WANT TO
LEARN MORE ABOUT?**



Let us know on our Twitter
and Instagram this week!
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engage, share and comment!

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Get in touch! If you have any questions about The Learning Brain series, contact
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