



beyondblue
Depression. Anxiety.

FINDING OUR WAY BACK

A RESOURCE FOR ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER
PEOPLES AFTER A SUICIDE ATTEMPT




Acknowledgment of traditional owners and Elders

We would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands and waterways across Australia, and pay our respects to Elders past, present and future. We acknowledge the unique place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and celebrate them as the oldest surviving culture in the world.

The information in this resource will support your contact with other health workers and supports in your community. Do not rely on this resource only.



Finding our way back and other resources in *The way back* series have been proudly funded with donations from The Movember Foundation.



About this resource

How this information might help you

This resource provides practical information for you, your family and friends about what to do and what to expect if someone has attempted suicide.

It is natural to have many different feelings, thoughts and concerns. You might not know what to do or what to say.

This resource is a starting point for working through some of the questions that can come up after a suicide attempt.

We spoke to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who have been through this themselves. People who have attempted suicide, and their family members and friends, played an important role in the development of this resource and their words are used throughout.

The thing they wanted you to know was:

“You are not alone and things can get better.”

Organisations involved

This resource has been written and reviewed by a team of people including representatives from:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation
- Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia
- Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia
- Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of New South Wales
- Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance of Northern Territory
- Danila Dilba Medical Service (Darwin)
- Queensland Aboriginal and Islander Health Council
- Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre
- Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation
- Victorian Aboriginal Health Service
- Hunter Institute of Mental Health
- *beyondblue*.

You can find a copy of this resource online at www.beyondblue.org.au/thewayback



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Snapshot

After a suicide attempt

If you or someone close to you has attempted suicide, you are likely to feel a lot of emotions and react in many ways. This might include:

- feeling sad and sometimes helpless
- feeling guilty or angry
- feeling ashamed or embarrassed about what has happened
- not knowing what to do or say
- being unsure about the future.

Things you can do if you have attempted suicide

- ✓ Talk with someone you trust as openly and honestly as you can about how you feel.
- ✓ See a doctor or other health worker at the hospital or local clinic.
- ✓ Stay somewhere safe – this could be with someone you trust either at home or at a friend or relative’s house.
- ✓ Limit or avoid drinking alcohol or taking drugs – they can make you feel worse.
- ✓ Have a list of phone numbers of friends, relatives and health services that you can ring if you need support.
- ✓ Remove objects around you that you might use to harm yourself.

- ✓ Don’t judge yourself in a bad way – a lot of people go through hard times but things can get better.
- ✓ Try to get into a good routine with sleep and by eating well.
- ✓ Connect with family, community and culture.
- ✓ Do things that you enjoy like listening to music, going fishing, camping, art and sport.

“You have to go and have a good yarn with someone you trust... get it off your chest... it will give you a clear headspace to think about what to do next.”

If you are feeling suicidal it is very important not to be alone.

It is also important to find someone that you can have a talk to. There are people that care and will want to support you to get through this. Have a yarn with someone like a friend, family or community member, Elder or a health worker.

For more information about getting support, go to page 8 or for information about what you can do following an attempt, go to page 11.

For more information about services, go to page 21.

Things you can do if your family member or friend has attempted suicide

- ✓ Be there for them and talk as openly and honestly as you can with them.
- ✓ Listen carefully without making judgments and try not to ask too many questions.
- ✓ Support them to go to the hospital, doctor or local clinic.
- ✓ Offer to help them find somewhere safe and comfortable to stay.
- ✓ If you feel comfortable doing so, remove objects in the house they might use to harm themselves.
- ✓ Offer practical assistance like cooking meals or helping around the house.
- ✓ Offer to do things with them that they enjoy like going for a walk, on a picnic, to a movie or watching sport.
- ✓ Look after yourself, as times can get tough.
- ✓ Tell someone else and ask for advice if you are unsure of what to do or say.

For more information about providing support to a person after a suicide attempt, go to page 15.

If you are worried that someone close to you is thinking about ending their life, talk to them as soon as possible.

Tell them that you care about them and want to be able to help. Ask how they are going and if they are thinking of harming themselves.

If they say yes, always treat it seriously and don't think it is attention seeking or something they'll just get over.

You don't need to deal with the situation alone – get support from other family or health workers straight away. Stay with the person until you feel sure they are safe.

For more information about what to do if you are worried a person is suicidal, go to page 18.

Warning signs to watch for

After a suicide attempt it can take some time for things to start to feel better. During this time, people can still be at risk.

Common signs that you or someone close to you may be thinking about suicide can include things like:

- being quiet, sad, not sleeping
- not enjoying usual things like being with friends and community
- feeling everything is hopeless, and that there is no point in trying to make things better
- drinking alcohol or taking drugs, or taking more than usual
- being moody and doing risky things
- thinking and talking about ways to die or suicide
- going back to places where people have died or where they are remembered
- giving away things for no reason and making final arrangements like a will or sorting out debts.

It is important to remember that sometimes there are signs and sometimes there may be no signs that someone is thinking about suicide.

For more information about what to do if you are worried a person is suicidal, go to page 18.

Where to get support

- Ring 000 in an emergency.
- Go to your local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Medical Service.
- Go to your local hospital or GP.
- See the list of 24 hour crisis services and other online sources of information listed at the end of this resource.

For more information about the services available for people who have attempted suicide and their family and friends, go to page 21.

Why people attempt suicide

Everyone's experience is different and there are many reasons why people may attempt suicide. Sometimes it is hard to pinpoint any one reason and it may be that things have built up over a long time.

“[Feeling suicidal] is not talked about much... it is something that so many people go through... it is quite common... This is a huge thing that people need to know – that they are not alone.”

People who have attempted suicide talk about feeling such emotional pain and turmoil that they couldn't see any other way to stop it.

There are a number of things that can lead to emotional pain or make it feel worse.

- Someone close might have died, especially if the person took their own life.
- A person might be in a violent or abusive relationship.
- Drug and alcohol use can add to problems.

- People may feel lost and like they don't belong, particularly survivors of the Stolen Generation and their families.
- Debts and not having enough money can be a big problem.
- A person may feel rejected after a relationship break-up, or a fight with family, friends or the broader community.
- Getting in trouble with the police or going to jail can make people feel they are no good.
- Having a physical or mental illness can make it hard to bounce back when problems happen.
- Feeling hopeless or worthless can make it hard to get through each day.
- Being alone and away from family, culture and community can be isolating.

Common reactions

People who have attempted suicide can feel:

- exhausted and numb
- embarrassed or shamed
- guilt for the worry caused to others
- anger at having survived
- relief at having survived.

Family members and friends can feel:

- afraid
- shocked and confused
- sad and angry
- a sense of betrayal
- guilt at not having been able to stop it.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the oldest surviving culture in the world. Individuals and communities have shown resilience in many hardships and grief since colonisation from the loss of land, children, culture, community, identity and pride. Trauma from these losses has been passed down from one generation to the next and can be compounded by new experiences of racism and hardship.

These experiences can contribute to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' experiences of depression, anxiety and other problems, including attempted suicide and death by suicide.

The strength that individuals and communities have shown in being able to keep going in the face of hardship is something that can be drawn on for healing after you or someone close to you has attempted suicide.

Getting support

If you or someone you care about has just attempted suicide, it is important to see a doctor or mental health worker at either a hospital or clinic to make sure both physical and mental health are OK.

At the hospital

Hospitals often have their own Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander liaison officers or Aboriginal mental health workers. If you would like their assistance, let the nurses know you would like to speak to one of them as soon as possible and find out what hours they work.

At hospital, medical staff will look at physical injuries first. After these have been treated, they will then arrange for a mental health worker to come and talk about what was happening before the attempt.

This may include asking about:

- if there have been any changes in mood
- how day-to-day things (such as work or looking after the family) have been going
- if there have been any major stresses such as someone close dying or a relationship break-up
- if there is a family history of mental health problems.

Using this information, the mental health worker will talk about what could be helpful and ways to put these ideas in place. They may also make referrals to a doctor, counsellor or other community service for support after hospital.

At the local medical clinic

If you or the person you support have gone to an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander medical service, other health service or local doctor, it is likely that they will also first check out physical injuries or problems.

Once the doctor or health worker is satisfied there are no physical problems, they will talk more about what has been happening, what support is available at home and in the community, and if there are any risks of further harm. Depending on the answers, they may make a referral to the hospital or other service. They will also usually ask you to come back for a follow-up appointment to check how you are going.

Before leaving hospital or the clinic

Before you or the person you are supporting head home, make sure you ask questions and get information. This might include:

- what you can do that will make it easier to get through the next couple of days
- what support is available in the community
- what to do if the suicidal thoughts happen again either during the day or at night
- the names and contact details of telephone services that are available 24 hours a day
- the names and contact details of other services that you can ring if there is a crisis.

Write this information down in the spaces provided on the last page so you can get it quickly if needed.

Linking with health or community services

There are a range of services available to support people after a suicide attempt.


Whether you, or the person you care about, choose an Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal health service, it is important to find one that feels safe and comfortable.

Staff in some services may be relatives and for this or other reasons, you may not be comfortable speaking with them about personal things.

It can take time to find a worker that suits and it is OK to keep trying different services or workers until you find someone you connect with and feel you can trust. It's important to find the right person.

“I was lucky living in a city and being able to have the choice of an Aboriginal medical service and some non-Indigenous but black-fella friendly services... I use the services for different things... If I want to talk, I'll see the counsellor at the Aboriginal service (which is free) but if I just want something quick like a prescription, I'll go to a mainstream service closer to home.”

All health organisations have systems in place for clients to provide feedback. If you feel that you didn't get good care, it is important to let them know so they can improve their services. If the staff have been helpful, it's also important to provide this feedback.



Ask reception or administration how you can provide feedback. Alternatively, contact the Health Services Commission or Department of Health in your state for advice on how to make a complaint or provide positive feedback.

Medications

Medication is sometimes given to people after they have attempted suicide to help with emotions. There are different types of medications and sometimes it can take a little while to work.

Some medicines work for some people and not for others. Some medications can also make the person who is taking them feel worse (even suicidal) and may need to be stopped or changed.

If you or the person you support feel any medicine is not working, it is very important to speak with a doctor as soon as possible. You might want to ask for a longer appointment so there is time to talk through everything that has been happening.

Sometimes, it can take several tries before the right medication is found and it is important to keep seeing a doctor while it is sorted out.

I have attempted suicide. What do I need to know?

The first few days

The first few days after a suicide attempt can be hard going but there are things you can do that may make it easier.

- ✓ Keep appointments with doctors or mental health workers, follow their advice and take any medications they prescribe.
- ✓ Remove things in the house that you could harm yourself with if suicidal thoughts return.
- ✓ Try to get a good amount of sleep and eat proper meals.
- ✓ Limit alcohol and drugs, or avoid them altogether, as they can make you feel worse.
- ✓ Do artwork or keep a journal to express your healing process.

Family and friends can help with these things as well as provide a lot of other support. They will want to let you know they care but may feel unsure about what to do or say. Letting them know what works for you can be helpful.

“After my suicide attempt, there were people around me that I could talk to and a lot of my healing process was tied up in very intimate discussions with people that I had strong connections with.”

Staying safe

Thoughts about suicide and death can stay around for a while after a suicide attempt. It is important to be in contact with other people until things have settled down.

It is important to know what to do if thoughts about suicide or death become strong.

If this happens:

- ✓ tell a family member or friend.
- ✓ ring a telephone counselling service or go to a health service (like the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander medical service, a doctor or the hospital).

If you are a regular user of social media sites like Facebook or Twitter think carefully about whether it is the right time and place to talk about what has happened.

While it is good to talk to others and get support, everyone is different and you might want to think about the following things first:

- It is hard to know how other people reading the messages might react – they could become upset and worried about what has happened to you or it might bring up feelings for them that you may not know about.**
- It might start other people talking about what has happened to you before you are ready to tell them.**
- It can be harder to get any private support that you and your family may need on a public forum.**

Talking about what has happened

You may or may not want to talk about what has happened. It is common to feel unsure and worried about what to say.

When you are ready, it is important to talk about what has happened with people you trust.

This allows others to be there for you and provides a chance to think through what has happened and work out where to go from here.

It is also important to think about what you and those close to you will say to others in the family or community.

Connecting to community and culture

Connecting with family, community and culture can play an important role in helping to manage suicidal thoughts if they happen again. It can give you strength and a chance to feel proud of yourself, your people, your language and your culture.

“You might need to do something or reach out, or work on your own spiritual health, or reconnect with your ancestors in order to help you get through this.”

A good place to start is to have a person or group of people that you trust and who you can talk openly with. Different people can have different roles.

- An Elder may assist you to connect or reconnect with community and culture.
- Family and friends can be good people to talk with about how you are feeling. They can also be good when you just want to enjoy yourself and not talk about what has happened.
- A counsellor might assist you to make sense of what has happened and help you develop strategies for managing tough times in the future.
- Helping other people out from time to time can make you feel good about yourself.



The future

After a suicide attempt it can be hard to see what the future holds. You can expect life to still have ups and downs. However, sometimes going through a suicide attempt can help to identify the really important things in life and what you want to be able to look forward to.

In the words of one Aboriginal person who had attempted suicide:

“I’ve grown up in Melbourne so my experience would be a lot different than the mob in Shepparton, or other communities like in the Top End... but black fellas have kind of a different cultural understandings about depression and mental health stuff... it’s a heart sickness and part of the journey you are on...”

It’s not something you’re to blame for, it might have to do with your brain chemicals but it’s probably more likely to do with your own sense of self and how connected you are feeling to your community and family...

Getting through it all is an ongoing process of looking after yourself and reaching out to people...

You are not alone and things can get better.”

A family member or friend has attempted suicide. What do I need to know?

Working through your reactions

When someone you care about attempts suicide, it is not uncommon to have lots of questions:

- Are they ok?
- Why didn't they tell me?
- Was there more I could have done?
- What happens now?
- What am I going to tell other people?
- What can I do?

It is also common to go through lots of emotions that can change quickly, including fear, sadness and anger.

There is no wrong or right way to react. However, it is important to be aware of your own reactions and how they might affect the relationship you have with the person who has attempted suicide.

If you feel your own reactions make it too difficult for you to listen and talk calmly, ask another family member or friend to provide support until you feel ready. This does not mean that you

do not care about the person; it just means that you might also need some time of your own first.

Providing support

The most important thing you can do for the person is to provide support without judging and to let them know you care.

A good start is saying something like:

"I'm so glad you are OK. You don't have to say anything, but I'm here when you are ready to talk and I want to help you get through this."

There are a range of other things you can do.

- ✓ Avoid asking too many questions about what has happened – sometimes sitting in silence with the person will give them comfort.
- ✓ If you need some space to process what has happened, take the time you need.
- ✓ Don't avoid the person or the subject because you feel uncomfortable – this can reinforce feelings of guilt and embarrassment. Talking about what has happened is OK.
- ✓ Remember it is not what you say, but how you say it. People notice body language.
- ✓ If you don't know how to respond, say so.

“Like so many of our people, I lost many through this dreaded thing we call suicide. My mate, my brother and my niece (his daughter) along with many community members and friends have taken their lives this way.

Supporting others to stay safe and looking after yourself is very important. Just being able to have a hug and a yarn is the most powerful humanistic investment we can make in building resilience in each other and in our community.”

Talking immediately after the attempt

You may find that the person you care about is not able to talk about why they attempted suicide, particularly straight after it happened.

If they begin to talk to you, the main thing is not to interrupt or take over the conversation.

Trying to understand and see things through another person's eyes can be difficult, particularly during times of stress. If you find it hard to understand their perspective, or disagree with their views, try to accept that is how they see things and move your focus to how you can support them now.

“Even though family and friends are really important and will be distressed... they need to be reminded to just listen... not to talk about their own feelings... but focus on what's happening for the person and telling them that they are there for them.”

Your role at the hospital or health service

While the person is being treated by health professionals there are things that you can do to support them.

- ✓ Offer to assist them if and when they need to give information to health workers.
- ✓ Talk separately to the treating doctor, nurses or hospital liaison officer to help you understand more about what is happening.
- ✓ Get information from the health workers on:
 - what sort of support will be useful for your family member or friend when they go home
 - what you should do if you are worried about them at home and who you can contact for immediate help
 - who you can contact if you would like support for yourself or other family members or friends.

Sometimes staff will not be able to give you all the details you would like because of patient confidentiality. If you are unsure about how this works in your situation, ask the staff to explain it to you and the person you are supporting, so that you both understand.

Providing support at home

It is important to talk with the person about what emotional and practical support they need.

It is also important to be honest and clear about what you are able to do. There might be other people or services that could help out with some things.

Emotional support might include:

- being available to listen and support the person to talk about their feelings
- supporting them to find their own solutions to problems.

Practical support might include:

- having them stay at your house or staying with them until you feel sure they are safe
- helping with transport for appointments
- cooking meals or looking after kids
- providing money for expenses where appropriate or helping them get financial help from a service
- offering to get information about services
- offering to do things with them that they enjoy like going for a walk or to the movies.

“Taking someone out to go for a walk, or have a picnic, or go to the movies and do something fun can make a huge difference to someone who’s battling through things and feeling isolated.”

Supporting them to stay safe

People who have attempted suicide will often be encouraged by health workers to prepare a safety plan. If they do not already have one you can encourage them to write one or help them to do it. A plan usually includes:

- ✓ A list of the signs or signals that the person is getting stressed, overwhelmed or suicidal.
- ✓ A list of strategies the person can use to get through the times when the urge to take their life is greatest.
- ✓ A list of people they can talk to and services to contact, including 24 hour emergency services (these are listed on page 21).

Find out more about making a safety plan at www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/learn/safety

If you are worried they are thinking about suicide again

It is common for thoughts about suicide to return after a suicide attempt. Sometimes there are signs and sometimes there may be no signs. Things that could mean a person may be thinking about suicide include:

- being quiet, sad and not sleeping
- not enjoying usual things like being with family and friends
- feeling hopeless, and that there is no point in trying to make things better
- being moody and doing risky things
- thinking and talking about ways to die or suicide
- going back to places where people have died or where they are remembered
- drinking alcohol or taking drugs, or taking more than usual
- giving away things for no reason and making a will or sorting out debts.

If you are worried, consider going through the following steps.

Assess the situation

What is making you worry? Be specific – is it their behaviour, the way they are talking, how they are treating other people?

Talk with a trusted friend, relative, Elder or health worker

Explain why you are worried and ask their opinion.

Talk to the person you are worried about in an open and honest way.

Find a time to talk as soon as possible without distractions. Tell them what you have noticed and ask them if they have felt any signs of getting stressed or overwhelmed.

If you are worried they are suicidal, ask them calmly and directly. For example, "I am worried that you are thinking about harming yourself – is this how you are feeling?"

Asking someone if they are suicidal may feel difficult but it shows you care and you won't be doing any harm. It is often a relief for them to be given permission to talk about how they are feeling.

If they are suicidal, act

Let them know it is OK to have thoughts about suicide and that they are not alone in this. Decide what action to take. If they have a safety plan, look at that for ideas. If you are unsure, stay with the person while you ring 000, or contact a phone crisis support service or local mental health service for advice. See page 21 for a list.

Looking after yourself

Part of looking after someone else is to look after yourself too. There are a number of things you can do.

- Take regular breaks and time 'off'.
- Be healthy – eat well, get enough sleep, and exercise as often as you can.
- If you are working, consider speaking with your employer about what has happened and what may help at work (e.g. flexible hours).
- Access a support service for yourself. It can be helpful to talk through what has happened and its effect on you.

The future

After a suicide attempt it can be hard to see what the future holds. You can expect the person you support to still have ups and downs, as you will too. Sometimes the experience of a suicide attempt can also help them, and you, to identify the things in your lives that are really important and what you want to look forward to.

In the words of a family member:

“One day, a young lad came up to me and said ‘Can I yarn?’ I sat with him and he told me the story of what he went through as a young fella. It was horrific and the tears rolled down his cheeks. I just hugged him as if he was my own son.

Years passed, and I saw this lad again and he came up to me and said ‘Thank you for listening when you did. I just want to tell you, I am

happily married now and have a son of my own’.”

He wanted to thank me for that moment we had and say that as a result, he realised he had a purpose in life.

My response to him was ‘No, thank you, because all I did was listen and you are now happy and have a purpose’.

A hug for happiness was next.”

Services and other information

Contact your local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander medical service or one of the following:

Emergency contacts

Ambulance and Police
000

Poison Information Service
13 11 26

Lifeline
13 11 14

www.lifeline.org.au

Free, confidential 24 hour telephone counselling service. The website also provides a range of information for people who are suicidal and concerned family members and friends.

Suicide Call Back Service
1300 659 467

www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au

Free, confidential 24 hour telephone and online counselling service for people who are suicidal and concerned family members and friends. The website also provides a range of information.

beyondblue

1300 22 4636

www.beyondblue.org.au

Learn more about anxiety and depression or talk it through with our Support Service. Free, immediate 24 hour telephone and email support from a trained professional. Online web chat is also available from 3pm–12am, 7 days a week.

For children and young people

Kids Helpline

1800 55 1800

www.kidshelp.com.au

Free, confidential 24 hour telephone counselling for people aged 25 and under. The website also provides a range of information and resources.

headspace

1800 650 890

www.headspace.org.au

Free, online chat, counselling, forums and information about youth mental health issues. headspace also have mental health services for young people and their families and friends across Australia – check the website to find the closest one to you.

ReachOut.com **www.reachout.com.au**

Online forums and chat, fact sheets and videos about youth mental health issues.

You may want to write down the details of your own local contacts in the back of this resource.

For carers and others providing support

Carers Australia **1800 242 636** **www.carersaustralia.com.au**

Carers Australia provides information about programs and services for carers across the country. This includes the Carer Advisory Service and Carer Counselling Program. They also advocate and lobby on a wide range of issues that affect carers.

Resources for talking about suicide

Conversations Matter **www.conversationsmatter.com.au**

Free, online resources to support safe and effective family and community discussions about suicide.

Acknowledgments

This resource was developed as a partnership between *beyondblue*, the Hunter Institute of Mental Health and representatives from the following Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation
- Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia
- Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia
- Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of New South Wales
- Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance of Northern Territory
- Danila Dilba Medical Service (Darwin)
- Queensland Aboriginal and Islander Health Council
- Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre
- Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation
- Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS).

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Hunter
**PRIMARY
CARE**



beyondblue
Depression, Anxiety.

Providing feedback

This is a new resource. We welcome all feedback, comments and suggestions. Please email suicideprevention@beyondblue.org.au

Your contacts

Local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health service

Name _____

Phone _____

Local mental health service

Name _____

Phone _____

Local doctor/GP

Name _____

Phone _____

Local hospital emergency department

Name _____

Phone _____

Other contacts



HOPE. RECOVERY. RESILIENCE. FIND OUT MORE AT www.beyondblue.org.au



Where to find more information

beyondblue

www.beyondblue.org.au

Learn more about anxiety and depression, or talk it through with our Support Service.

 **1300 22 4636**

 **Email or**  **chat to us online at**
www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport

Lifeline

www.lifeline.org.au

13 11 14

Access to crisis support, suicide prevention and mental health support services.



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