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We need to talk about suicide – and get to know the signs

The warning signs of suicide are sometimes subtle but learning how to identify them and raise your concerns could help change another person's life – and you don't have to be an expert to make a difference.

Ground-breaking new research from *beyondblue* has found that while few people express their suicidal thoughts directly to others, they often show signs through changes in their behaviour.

A national *beyondblue*-commissioned survey found everyday Australians want to help family and friends at risk of suicide, but are unsure how to identify and respond to the warning signs:

- 50 per cent of participants believe assisting someone at risk requires the skills of a professional;
- 40 cent of survey respondents believe suicide happens without warning;
- 30 per cent believe most people at risk of suicide show no sign; and
- 30 per cent believe discussing suicide could encourage a person to consider planning suicide.

Yet, according to the research, there are simple, safe steps that friends, family and workmates can take to identify and support someone at risk.

***beyondblue* CEO Georgie Harman** said the fact that half of the community think only a professional can make a difference is both a concern and an opportunity.

"You don't need to be an expert," Ms Harman said. "There are simple things every one of us can do and say that can reduce suicide."

The recommended actions arising from the research were:

- Asking the person how they are feeling and explain changes you have noticed in their behaviour;
- Listening without judgement and without trying to advise them how to 'fix' their situation;
- Asking direct questions about whether the person is thinking of suicide and has a plan;
- Showing support and suggesting they seek help from GP or a mental health professional.

"It's natural for family, friends and workmates to worry about saying or doing the right thing if someone is feeling suicidal," Ms Harman said.

"But people who have thought about suicide told us through the research that having someone listen to them and show care and support was the most important thing to them – and you don't need to be a health professional to do that," Ms Harman said.

"And you can't put the idea of suicide in somebody's mind – the research supports that.

"Asking how someone is feeling and asking directly about suicide could be the first step to help someone to reconnect with living, and get them the support they need."

People considering suicide often display uncharacteristic changes in behaviour over weeks or months.

"People consider suicide when they have no hope for life," Ms Harman said. "While they may not openly discuss suicide, there may be changes in the way they act or talk about life that raises alarm bells."

Non-verbal indicators include social withdrawal, a persistent drop in mood, disinterest in maintaining personal hygiene or appearance, uncharacteristically reckless behaviour, poor diet changes, rapid weight changes, being distracted, anger, insomnia, alcohol or drug abuse and giving away sentimental or expensive possessions.

Indirect verbal expressions include hopelessness, failing to see a future, believing they are a burden to others, saying they feel worthless or alone and talking about their death or wanting to die.

Ms Harman said that if a person notices a family member, friend or colleague displaying a combination of these factors, they should take the signs seriously.

“It’s important that we and our sector colleagues use this research and continue to work with the community to ensure people have access to information, training and support so they can act with confidence,” she said.

In one of the most in-depth research projects of its kind, commissioned by *beyondblue* and conducted by University of Melbourne and Where To Research-Based Consulting, researchers spoke to experts in suicide prevention, studied existing literature and surveyed more than 3,000 Australians from all walks of life – including community members, people exposed to suicide and people who have attempted suicide.

Importantly, people who had experienced suicidal thoughts or attempted suicide were asked how they wanted others to support them.

The process generates clear data about attitudes to suicide prevention and provides evidence-based insights into how people at risk of suicide want to be supported.

Learn more about identifying and responding to warning signs of suicide at <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/suicide-prevention/worried-about-suicide/what-are-the-warning-signs>

Mental health professionals are available at the *beyondblue* Support Service via phone 24/7 on **1300 22 4636** or via www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support for online chat (3PM – 12AM AEST) or email responses (within 24 hours).