

## What Clients and Families Need to Know

Following are some facts and several simple steps to help you, or a loved one, make it safely through a suicidal crisis.

### The Facts

- **A suicidal crisis can escalate quickly.** This doesn't mean it occurs out of the blue. However, a person may go rapidly from feeling distressed to having suicidal thoughts to ultimately making an attempt. The impulse to end one's life and the readiness to actually go through with an attempt are usually short-lived and not a chronic state. The crisis usually fades, but it may flare up from time to time.
- **A suicidal crisis is hard to predict,** triggered not only by mental health or substance use issues, but often by stress and external events, such as an arrest, an argument, or a relationship breakup.
- Since a suicidal crisis is often difficult to predict and can escalate rapidly, reduce access to lethal methods (e.g., a gun) **before a suicidal crisis occurs.** This step can help save a person's life.
- If you, or someone you know, is struggling with despair, carrying out some **simple steps to reduce access to lethal methods** will make the situation safer if suicidal feelings arise.

### The Steps

#### 1. Store firearms for safety.

- Firearms are used in more suicide deaths in the U.S. than all other methods combined. They are easily accessible (especially if they are unlocked and loaded in the home) and irreversible (there's no time to reconsider once the trigger is pulled). Quick and easy access to a loaded firearm during a suicidal crisis adds a lot of risk.
- Many people store their guns away from home while they (or a family member) are going through a rough period. It's like keeping the keys from a driver who's been drinking. Temporary off-site storage is the safest approach. Here are some options:
  - **Relative or friend:** Be sure they are not prohibited from possessing firearms (e.g., due to conviction for felony or domestic violence). Also, find out if your state has laws governing temporary transfers of guns between individuals.
  - **Self-storage rental unit:** Store guns unloaded.
  - **Gun shop or shooting range:** Many do not offer storage services, but some do for a fee or as a free service to regular customers/members. Depending on the storage arrangement, you may need to go through a background check to retrieve your guns.

- **Pawn shop:** For a small loan, you can leave your guns with a pawn shop in most states. To retrieve them, you need to repay the loan and interest, and go through a background check.
- **Law enforcement:** Some police departments will hold guns on a temporary basis in an emergency. Some will even pick them up. Check their policies before bringing any guns in.
- If off-site storage is not possible, here are the second-best options for firearms:
  - **Lock the firearms in a gun safe or tamper-proof storage box** (ideally with ammunition locked in a separate location), and keep the keys/combinations away from the person at risk.
  - **Disassemble the guns**, and store a key component like the slide or the firing pin separately or away from home.
- If none of these options are possible, anything that delays access can help. Consider the following:
  - A locked gun is safer than an unlocked gun, no matter who holds the key.
  - An unloaded gun is a lower suicide risk than a loaded gun, especially if the ammunition is stored separately or away from the home.
- Hiding guns is not recommended. Family members—especially children and teens—can often find them (even when you think they can't).
- If you keep a gun loaded for self-defense, consider other ways to protect your home for now. If you must have it, keep the gun in a lock box. And if you are the one at risk of suicide, consider asking someone else to hold the key or change the combination so you won't have access when you feel at your lowest.

## 2. Lock and limit medications.

- Remove unneeded and expired medications from your home. Information on safe drug disposal is available from the Poison Control Center at 1-800-222-1222.
- For necessary medications, keep only nonlethal quantities on hand. Ask a pharmacist for advice.
- Lock up abuse-prone drugs such as prescription painkillers, anxiety pills, amphetamines, sedatives, and tranquilizers.

## 3. Learn other ways to get help.

- Sometimes coping with a difficult situation takes help. Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline to learn more: 1-800-273-TALK (8255).
- If you or your loved one are already in treatment and things aren't getting better, consider a different treatment. Don't give up until you find a treatment that works.