When Suicidal Thoughts Arise – Support for Public Safety Personnel

Sensitive Content Warning | PSP | PSP Community | Affected by Suicdal Thoughts | 10-12 min read

This tip sheet provides practical strategies to help you navigate difficult moments and connect with support resources.

This resource is not a substitute for peer support, professional counselling, or emergency services. It is designed to support early help-seeking and provide guidance when suicidal thoughts arise.

JUMP TO MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT QUICK LINKS

Introduction

Mental Health Risks in Public Safety Work
Public safety work can involve ongoing stress, trauma exposure, and emotional strain that builds over time. When suicidal thoughts arise, they can feel overwhelming, frightening, confusing, or even like an escape from emotional pain. Early recognition and support are important.

Understanding Suicidal Thoughts
Suicidal thoughts are often less about wanting to die and more about feeling overwhelmed, hopeless, or unable to see another way forward. They can also be linked to intense mental, emotional, or physical pain.

Importance of Early Support
Experiencing suicidal thoughts does not mean you intend to act on them. These thoughts can be a sign that you need support, care, and connection.



Suicide Crisis Hotline

In Canada, you can call or text 9-8-8 to reach the Suicide Crisis Helpline (24/7). Support is bilingual, trauma-informed, and confidential.

If you or someone else is in immediate danger, call 9-1-1.

Click here to jump to the Suicide Prevention Safety Plan worksheet and instructions below.

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This resource was informed by content from Canada's national suicide crisis helpline (9-8-8) and by Samra, J., & Bilsker, D. (2007). *Coping with suicidal thoughts*. Consortium for Organizational Mental Health.

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Suicidal Thoughts

When to Use This Tipsheet

- When you notice feelings of hopelessness, withdrawal, or feeling trapped
- As a quick reference when thinking feels foggy, rushed, or overloaded
- When suicidal thoughts feel overwhelming, frequent, or hard to control
- During periods of cumulative stress, fatigue, injury, or personal loss
- After a difficult call, incident, investigation, cumulative stress, or other critical event (personal or professional)

Know When It's a Crisis

If you or someone you know cannot stay safe, may act on suicidal thoughts, or distress is escalating quickly, this is a crisis.

If Immediate help is needed. **Do not wait. Do not manage this alone.**

What Happens When You Call or Text 9-8-8?

When you contact 9-8-8, you will be connected with a trained responder who will listen and offer support. What to expect:

- A brief message confirming you've reached the right service
- A choice to speak in English or French
- Callers can indicate if they are under 18 or identify as First Nations, Inuit, or Métis
- Information about confidentiality
- In some regions, calls are answered by provincial or territorial crisis services
- The responder's role is to help you stay safe and figure out next steps — at your pace.

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What Can Help Right Now

If things feel intense, focus on getting through the next short period of time.

Some strategies that may help:

- Stay connected: Be with or contact someone you trust (in person, phone, or text)
- Reduce risk: If it's safe to do so, move away from anything you could use to harm yourself, or ask someone to help with this
- Ground your body: Try slow breathing, cold water on your hands or face, or naming things you can see, hear, feel, or smell to settle your nervous system
- Remind yourself: These thoughts are signals of pain — not instructions. They often pass
- Reach out: Support is always available through 9-8-8

Even small steps toward safety matter.

It can be a great relief to tell someone about your thoughts of suicide.

Tell Someone About Your Thoughts

Sharing suicidal thoughts can feel hard — especially when you're already overwhelmed. Many people worry about burdening others or not knowing how to explain what they're feeling. People often feel relief when they open up to someone.

It can help to start with simple, honest statements, such as:

- *"I'm not sure how to say this, but I'm really struggling."* - You can let the person know that talking about this feels difficult.
- *"I've been having thoughts about suicide/dying/seriously harming myself."* - It's okay to name what you're experiencing. Talking openly about suicidal thoughts can help others understand the seriousness of what you're going through.
- *"These thoughts are happening every day / more often lately."* - Sharing how often the thoughts are happening can help communicate your experiences.
- *"I feel exhausted, angry, numb, or hopeless."* - Describe your feelings and mood if you can.
- *"I need help. Can you help me figure out next steps?"* - It can help to tell the person what you need in that moment, whether that's listening, staying with you, or helping you find support.

Remember

You do not need to have the "right" words. Simply letting someone know what's happening can bring relief and help reduce feelings of isolation.

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Plan Ahead: Make Support Easier to Access When You Need It

A safety plan is a prevention tool that helps you recognize early warning signs and take steps before thoughts become overwhelming.

A safety plan may include:

- Early warning signs that tell you you're struggling more than usual
- Coping strategies or reminders that have helped before
- Contacts for trusted people who can support you
- Professional or crisis supports
- Steps to help make your environment safer

Suicide Prevention Safety Plan

A suicide safety plan is a tool that can support you when thoughts of suicide arise.

It helps you remember what matters to you, outlines strategies you can use to get through difficult moments, and identifies people and services you can reach out to for support.

A safety plan can be created with someone you trust, such as a family member, friend, counsellor, or health professional. Involving others is important so they know how to support you and help keep you safe during times of risk.

It's best to develop your safety plan when you're feeling stable and clear-headed, rather than during a crisis. Write it down and keep it somewhere easy to access when you need it.

Keep your plan somewhere easy to access (phone, wallet, or workplace).



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Suicide Prevention Safety Plan

The tool below is a fillable safety plan. Keep this plan somewhere easy to access. This tool does not replace professional care or emergency services.

To learn more about what contributes to thoughts of suicide, visit: 9-8-8: Facts About Suicide

For a digital safety plan solution, see Appendix A



It's okay to ask for help.
You're not alone.
Support is available:

If you or someone you know is in crisis, contact:

9-1-1
Immediate emergencies

9-8-8
Suicide Crisis Helpline (24/7)

1-866-531-2600
ConnexOntario (mental health and addictions)

1-833-677-2668
Peer Support: Boots on the Ground

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Suicide Prevention Safety Plan

1 Step 1. Early warning signs

(Signs that tell me I am struggling more than usual, for example: persistent hopelessness or feeling trapped, withdrawing from others, increased substance use, thinking about wanting to die or disappear, emotional numbness, unbearable pain).

2 Step 2. Things that help calm or comfort me

(Activities that help reduce intensity or get through the moment, for example: speaking with a mental health professional or calling 9-8-8; grounding exercises or distractions like watching a movie, dancing or solving puzzles; surrounding myself with supportive people or pets; recognize that your "brain is not your friend" in this moment)

3 Step 3. Reasons to keep myself safe

(Things that matter to me: People, pets, values, responsibilities, or future moments that matter to me)

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4 Step 4. Person I can contact for support

Name: _____

Phone/text: _____

5 Step 5. Backup person

Name: _____

Phone/text: _____

6 Step 6. Professional supports

(Psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, other mental health professional)

Name/Service: _____

Phone/text: _____

Name/Service: _____

Phone/text: _____

Name/Service: _____

Phone/text: _____

Name/Service: _____

Phone/text: _____

7 Step 7. Crisis support (24/7)

(e.g. 9-1-1; 9-8-8; https://www.hopeforwellness.ca/ or other crisis supports)

Name/Service: _____

Phone/text: _____

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8 Step 8. Safe places I can go

(Locations where I feel safer and less isolated, e.g. friend or family's home, a coffee shop)

9 Step 9. Steps to make my environment safer

(Things you can do to remove immediate dangers, for example: Remove myself from the environment, ask a friend to remove any weapons, sharp objects, pills or medications.)

10 Step 10. Emergency care If I cannot stay safe, I will go to the nearest Emergency Department.

Address: _____

If I cannot get there safely, I will call 9-1-1 for transportation assistance.

Notes:

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Appendix A: Support Options and How to Use Them

Mental Health Professionals Familiar with PSP Work

Psychologists, social workers, and counsellors with PSP experience can provide tailored care. Access may be through EFAP, benefits, or community services.

Find services at:

www.publicsafetymentalhealth.ca

Crisis Services

- 9-1-1 – Immediate danger
- 9-8-8 – Suicide Crisis Helpline (24/7, Canada)

Employee and Family Assistance Programs (EFAP)

EFAPs offer confidential, short-term counselling and referrals for employees and their families, usually available 24/7. Contact your workplace EFAP provider.

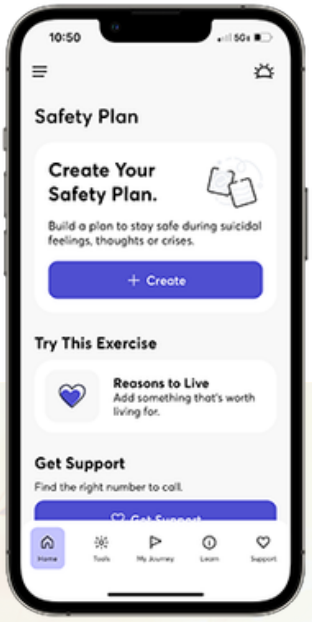


Mobile App: Safety Plan

Designed by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, the free Safety Plan app is for anyone who has experienced thoughts about suicide or self-harm. The app helps you make a safety plan, share your safety plan with loved ones, and use tools to manage distress.
With this app, you can create a custom step-by-step action plan to keep yourself safe during a crisis:

- Make a list of your own personal reasons to live
- Try different coping strategies and activities
- Access crisis support resources
- Track your mood and other mental health symptoms
- Set personal goals and track your progress

During a crisis, it can be hard to think clearly. If you ever experience thoughts about suicide or self-harm, having a Safety Plan can help keep you safe.



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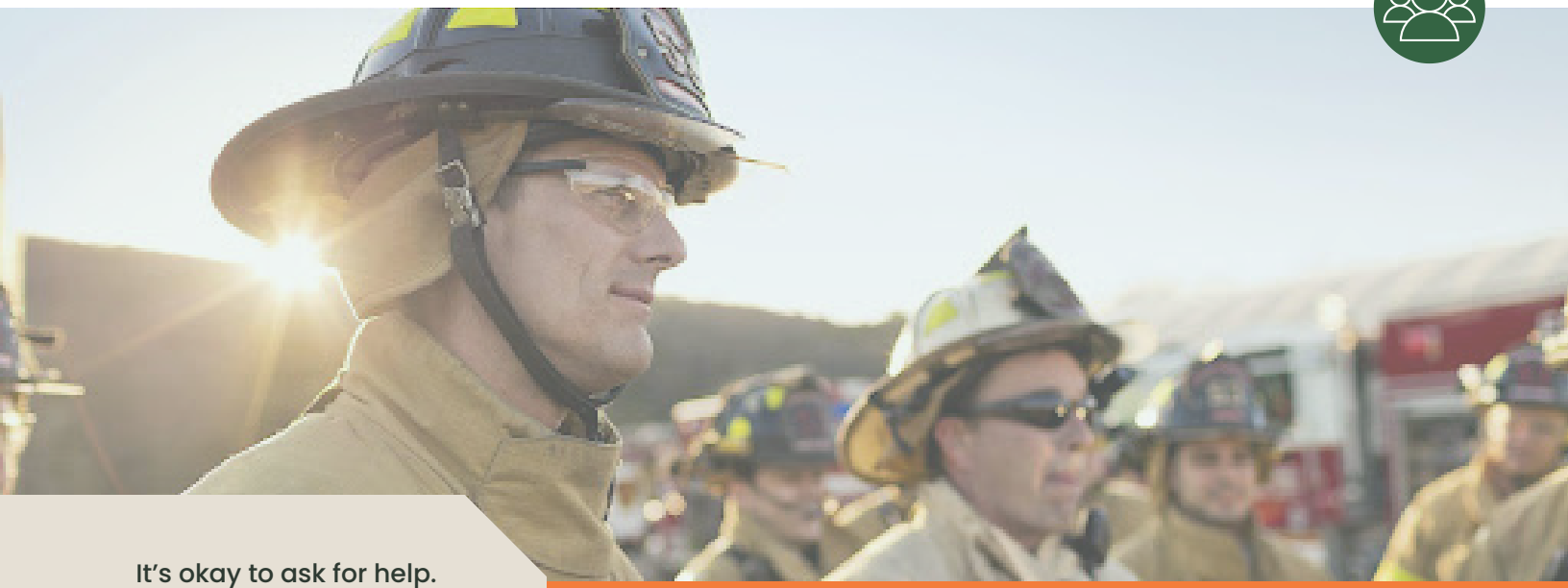
Reaching Out Is a Sign of Strength

Suicidal thoughts are not a moral weakness, character flaw, or failure. They are a sign that something is overwhelming right now.

PSP culture often values self-reliance, but no one is meant to carry this alone. Reaching out — to a peer, supervisor, clinician, chaplain, family member, or crisis service — can reduce the intensity of distress and support recovery.





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