

# Helping young people in Crisis – Advice for Parents

Only **1 in 4 young people** who have mental health problems **receive any professional assistance**<sup>1</sup>. During times of great whole-of-community need, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the **demand for mental health support for young people can out-strip the availability or capacity of expert mental health services**. Consequently, **parents must accept a greater role in managing the acute mental health needs and associated risks of their children**. These notes provide a basic guide for parents to ensure the wellbeing and safety of their children, and how to access appropriate crisis support services but **DO NOT** replace expert advice or opinion.

If you suspect your child has a serious mental health issue and, or, **may be at-risk** but they are **not engaged with a professional**:

- You need to gauge 1) how much the young person's mental health condition affects their **ability to function**, and 2) whether there may be **indications of any risk**.
- Try and find a good time to discuss with your child the option of obtaining some outside support from a school counsellor, private psychologist or public mental health service. Your child seeing their GP may be a good starting point as the GP may be able discuss and offer options.
- Wait times may be significant, but **anyone can access a psychologist in private practice without a medical referral** if necessary or if this could be a barrier to your child getting help.
- For more information, see Neo Advice Sheets #2 *When Should I be Concerned About My Child?* and #5 *Helping Young People Accept Help* - [www.neopsychology.com.au/faqs-and-advice-sheets](http://www.neopsychology.com.au/faqs-and-advice-sheets)

**At any time, if you form a belief that your child is at imminent risk:**

The *type* and *urgency* of your response should be **proportional to the potential consequences of the risk and the likelihood of something dangerous occurring**. In the order of the urgency or risk, the following steps should be considered and taken if necessary. Remember, caution should underpin your decisions, rather than hopeful optimism. That is, if unsure, assume the worst.

1. **Manage or remove any risks in the environment:** Remove any means of self-harm (e.g. medications, weapons) and access to unsafe places or equipment (e.g. car keys),
2. **Ensure constant supervision, and follow and stay with the person if they leave you,**
3. Ring '000' and seek emergency services attendance as appropriate,
4. If possible, and safe to do so, transport your child to your local Hospital Emergency Department,
5. Ring the Emergency Department of your local Hospital and follow their advice. Usually only during business hours, they may be able to connect you to the hospital Crisis Assessment & Treatment Team (CATT) if this service is available,
6. Call KidsHelpLine 1800 551 800, Lifeline 13 11 14 or your family GP if available for advice,
7. If you are worried about your child's whereabouts call your local Police station or 13 14 44.

1. Commonwealth of Australia (2000)

## If your child is engaged with a professional and they are in acute crisis or risk but direct professional support is not immediately available:

- Follow any prepared **safety plan**, if available, or advice you've been provided in the past,
- Assess your child's level of risk by using the Key Questions below,
- Call KidsHelpLine 1800 551 800, Lifeline 13 11 14 or your family GP if available for further advice,
- Send updated information about the crisis to the professional asap or at their next appointment.

## How to help your child manage distressing emotions and thoughts:

Prevention through adequate sleep, exercise and social and/or fun time are vital. Typically, the goal is to be **calmly distracted from negative thoughts/emotions by being immersed in an engaging activity** of some sort. Use known solutions to distress that have worked in the past or been suggested by a professional. Other options include:

- Any focussed activity that may shift or distract from negative thoughts/emotions,
- Use relaxation strategies: slow and deep breathing, mindfulness meditation, imagine being in a safe/happy place, music, bath/shower, drawing/painting, exercise/sport, yoga, gardening, walking/riding/driving, cooking, journaling, video games, etc.
- Set short-term goals to stay busy and engaged in (preferably) physical activity,
- Stay in the presence of others to feel social support,
- **Make a recovery plan** to give structure and hope to getting through this difficult time,
- Consider sleeping with, or in the same room as your child for safety, comfort, feeling secure.

## Key Questions to ask your child to gauge their level of need or risk:

- Q - *How different/bad have you been feeling currently compared to "normal" or "neutral" on a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is the worst ever, and 1 is normal?*
- Q - *Are you feeling unsafe at the moment, or might in the future?*
- Q - *Should I be worried about you/your safety at the moment?*
- Q - *Are you able to stay/keep yourself safe at the moment? What would help you be safer?*
- Q - *Is there a chance you might become unsafe if/when something changes: you stay at your other parent's house, you leave the house, at night when I'm asleep, etc?*
- Q - *What does/can help to improve your mood/feelings?*
- Q - *What does/can help to distract you from, or change any negative or unsafe thoughts?*
- Q - *Who is the best person to talk to help you through these feelings/thoughts?*
- Q - *What can we do to get you through this time of distress/being unsafe until you can get help?*

## Resources >

**Reachout!:** [www.reachout.com.au](http://www.reachout.com.au)      **Lifeline crisis counselling by text:** **0477 13 11 14**  
**Suicide safety plans:** [www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/beyondnow-suicide-safety-planning](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/beyondnow-suicide-safety-planning)  
**headspace:** [www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au)      **YouthBeyondBlue:** [www.beyondblue.org.au/ybblue](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/ybblue)  
**Coping with self-harm:** [www.lifeline.org.au/get-help/information-and-support/self-harm](http://www.lifeline.org.au/get-help/information-and-support/self-harm)

## ...and for parents >

**Parentline:** 13 22 89      **Distress tolerance worksheets:** [www.therapistaid.com](http://www.therapistaid.com)  
**Raising Children Network** [www.raisingchildren.net.au/teens/mental-health-physical-health](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au/teens/mental-health-physical-health)