Practical Strategies for Family Members

Family members play a critical role in supporting a loved one with suicide risk. Those closest to an individual in distress are often the first to notice his/her changes in mood and behaviour, making them a vital line of defence in suicide prevention. With awareness, compassion and timely action, family members can play an active and impactful role in safeguarding their loved one. The following are some strategies that outline the important ways how family members can offer meaningful and effective support.

1 Recognise the Warning Signs

One of the most important functions of family members is to recognise whether their loved one is at risk of suicide. The warning signs can be subtle or obvious, including:

- Talking or writing about the wish to die or die by suicide
- Expressing the feeling of hopelessness or being trapped, or believing he/she is a burden to others
- Withdrawing from his/her friends, family or previously enjoyed activities
- Experiencing significant changes in mood, behaviour, sleep or appetite
- Giving away prized possessions or saying goodbye
- Having an increased alcohol or substance use
- Engaging in risky or self-destructive behaviour
- Expressing the feeling of worthlessness, shame or excessive guilt
- Obtaining means of harm, such as medication, weapons or other lethal items
- Preparing himself/herself for death, such as arranging his/her affairs

If you notice these signs in your loved one, it is critical to take them seriously and act promptly. Approaching the situation with care, calmness and empathy can make a meaningful difference.

2 Start a Conversation: Presence, Openness and Empathy

Initiating a conversation about suicide may seem overwhelming, but open and compassionate communication is essential. Here are some practical tips for family members:

- Choose a quiet, private time and place free from distractions
- Use open, caring and non-judgmental language
- Listen rather than speak, allowing your loved one to express his/her distress
- Validate his/her feelings without minimising them or arguing
- Ask directly and calmly if he/she is thinking of suicide
- Avoid interruption, criticism or offering quick solutions
- Reassure him/her that he/she is not alone and that you care deeply about his/her well-being
- Express your willingness to support him/her through difficult times

Being there and listening with empathy can help your loved one feel understood and less alone.

3 Encourage Your Loved One to Seek Professional Help

Family members can gently encourage their loved one to seek help from mental health professionals such as psychologists, counsellors, psychiatrists or doctors. This encouragement should be framed as support, not pressure.

Family members can provide support by:

- Helping their loved one identify and reach out to appropriate professional resources
- Assisting in scheduling appointments and follow-up
- Accompanying him/her to appointments if he/she feels anxious
- Arranging transportation to therapy or medical appointments
- Encouraging adherence to treatment plans and medication

Professional help is vital for the recovery and ongoing safety of your loved one.

4 Ensure Immediate Safety and Devise a Safety Plan

Knowing how to respond during a suicidal crisis is crucial. Some immediate safety measures include:

- Not leaving the individual alone if he/she is in immediate danger
- Removing or securing potentially harmful items such as medication, sharp objects or ropes
- Seeking emergency help by calling 999, attending the Accident & Emergency (A&E) Department of a hospital, or contacting healthcare professionals if the risk is imminent

During emergencies, family members and friends can act swiftly to ensure the safety of their loved one and reach out to him/her with immediate care.

In addition, family members can work with their loved one and professionals to devise a personalised safety plan, which may include:

- Identifying warning signs and triggers
- Listing coping strategies that help relieve emotional distress
- Listing the contact information of trusted friends, family members or professionals whom he/she can contact when he/she is in distress
- Identifying emergency resources such as mental health crisis hotlines or hospitals

A good safety plan should provide clear steps to follow in a crisis.

5 Provide Ongoing Support

Providing ongoing support helps create a sense of stability, connection and hope. Family members can support their loved one by:

- Encouraging a healthy daily routine, including having a consistent sleep schedule, exercising regularly and having a balanced diet
- Encouraging the avoidance or reduction of alcohol and substance use
- Supporting his/her engagement in enjoyable or calming activities such as listening to music, spending time with pets, painting, baking or resuming a hobby
- Helping him/her stay socially connected without pressure
- Being there to listen without judgment
- Maintaining regular contact with him/her through checking in or sending simple messages
- Assisting with his/her daily tasks when necessary
- Being alert to triggers or stressful life events and providing more support during these periods
- Encouraging him/her to reach out when he/she needs help
- Assisting with his/her access to mental health services, medication, or other resources

Conclusion

Supporting a loved one with suicide risk can be emotionally challenging, but the involvement of family members can be life-saving. By recognising the warning signs, communicating with empathy, encouraging him/her to seek professional help, ensuring his/her safety, and providing ongoing support, family members can create a secure environment that promotes healing and offers hope. While carers cannot replace professionals, their compassion, presence and commitment can help their loved one feel valued, understood and less alone on the path to recovery.

24-Hour Hotlines

Name of Organisation	Contact information Telephone WhatsApp SMS
18111 - Mental Health Support Hotline	Multilingual, supporting 12 languages 18111 18111
The Samaritan Befrienders Hong Kong	2389 2222 (Chinese) 2389 2223 (English) 5779 7356
Suicide Prevention Services	2382 0000
The Samaritans Hong Kong	2896 0000 (Multilingual)
Caritas Family Crisis Line	18288
Designated Hotline for Carer Support	182 183 5322 2183
Open-up Online Text Emotional Support Platform (For those aged 6-24)	9101 2012 9101 2012
Hospital Authority - Mental Health Direct	2466 7350
Social Welfare Department	2343 2255

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"Shall We Talk" Website

陪我講 SHALL WE TALK

衞生防護中心 Centre for Health Protection

衞生署 Department of Health

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