



Age Concern and Help the Aged **Down, but not out factsheet**

Thoughts of self harm and suicide **Author: Dr Dan Harwood**

Feeling that you have no hope for the future or that you would be better off dead can be very frightening but understanding these unpleasant thoughts can help you to deal with them and to see the future a little more positively.

You are not alone:

About one in six people over the age of 65 will have thought that life is not worth living in the last month and about 3% will have actually wished they were dead. So thoughts of self-harm and suicide are not unusual and are nothing to feel guilty about.

What causes these thoughts?

It probably comes as no surprise to learn that most people who have feelings of hopelessness are also depressed. When you are depressed you are likely to feel miserable, not enjoy the things you used to and see things in a negative way.

Suicidal thoughts can leave you feeling worried, out of control, or guilty about having such feelings. You may start to think you are going mad or losing touch with reality. This is because your depression will make it hard for you to put your problems into perspective like you usually can. If you are unable to see solutions to your problems, you will think things are hopeless.

Think back to what might have caused you to feel depressed in the first place. Sometimes there is no reason for depression, but quite often it is triggered by a life-changing event like bereavement, or poor health (especially if you have severe pain) or a loss of independence such as poor eyesight after a stroke.

If you are depressed, problems seem even worse than they really are and this increases your risk of feeling hopeless or suicidal.

However, just because you have suicidal thoughts does mean you are necessarily depressed. In fact, about one quarter of older people who take their own lives have not had any psychiatric illness but have had problems that make them feel hopeless.

Will these feelings go away?

The good news is that suicidal feelings often do not last for long. Often they vary from day to day. People usually find that if they start to solve only one of their problems, or if they feel that others care about them, this can make them feel a little bit more positive. Depression, the commonest cause of suicidal feelings, is treatable.

Most people who have recovered from depression are able to look back at the time they felt suicidal and wonder why on earth they ever felt like that.

What can I do if I feel suicidal?

There are a number of things you can do.

Tell someone: Many people feel they should not talk about their suicidal thoughts. But talking to someone else about these feelings can be a great relief and can lead to help.

Get help: If you are not already getting help for your depression see your GP and be as honest as you can about your feelings. And if you are already seeing someone, be absolutely honest with them about your feelings and work hard with them to get yourself better.

If you feel that the treatment is not working or you do not like a particular treatment do not be tempted to cancel your appointment or to just stop the treatment. Keep your appointment and maybe take a friend or relative along with you, then tell the doctor or therapist what your concerns are.

Involve your family or friends in your treatment: Understandably you may want to keep your feelings private and not involve others in your treatment. But by allowing your therapist to work with your family or friends (with your agreement) may help them to support you better.

Try to keep things in perspective: Remind yourself that suicidal feelings are common, they are not a sign you are going mad, and however bad things seem now the feelings are likely to fade with time. In depression, your thoughts become exaggerated so things seem worse than they are.

Keep safe: If you are finding it difficult to control your suicidal thoughts ask a relative or friend to put all the pills in the house (not just your own) in a safe place. You may also agree that it is safer if your partner or a relative supervises your pills while you are feeling very distressed. These measures will make it more difficult for you to take an overdose on the spur of the moment during a bad patch.

Make a plan: With a friend, relative, or professional, draw up an action plan of what to do if your suicidal thoughts get really strong. Think of any activities which might help to relieve your distress. These might include going for a walk, phoning a friend or listening to music. Write a list of these things. You can then try doing the activities on your list if you are feeling particularly bad. If your action plan is not working and you are feeling unsafe or suicidal, phone a health professional, a relative or a friend. Make sure you and your nearest relative or friend have contact numbers for any professionals involved in your care including numbers for out-of-hours services or crisis teams.

Remember the Samaritans: If things feel really hopeless, and for any reason you do not feel able to talk to your family, friends or health professionals remember that the Samaritans are on the end of a phone 24 hours a day. They will act as a listening ear and help you through particularly bad times.

Think about the consequences of harming yourself: Lastly, keep in mind that however bad things feel, harming yourself or ending your life will have a very bad effect on your family, friends and those who are trying to help you. When people are depressed they often feel a burden and that others will be better off without them but this is just not true.

Other sources of help

Age Concern and Help the Aged

Free National Information Line: 0800 00 99 66

Many local Age Concerns provide, or can direct you to, a range of support services such as:

- Information and advice
- Day centres and lunch clubs
- Befriending schemes
- Bereavement counselling, depression support, person-centred therapy
- Transport to activities
- Exercise programmes
- A free benefits check
- Insurance services
- Dementia care

For more information, or to find your nearest Age Concern, please contact our free National Information Line on 0800 00 99 66.

More information about our depression campaign 'Down, but not out' and our free resources and factsheets can be found on our website:

www.ageconcern.org.uk/downbutnotout

Other factsheets in the series include:

What is depression? by Professor Carolyn Chew-Graham
The causes and effects of depression in later life by Professor Klaus Ebmeier and Dr Philip Wilkinson
Medication for depression in later life by Dr Robert Baldwin
Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) by Dr Philip Wilkinson
Counselling and Psychotherapy by Judith Brech
Interpersonal therapy by Dr Rebecca Mather
Self help for beating depression and staying well by Philippa Cuttell & Lisa Bracher

Depression Alliance

Provides information and support services to those affected by depression

Telephone: 0845 123 23 20

Email: information@depressionalliance.org

Website: www.depressionalliance.org

Mind

Provides information and advice on depression and campaigns to promote and protect

good mental health for everyone.
Telephone: 020 8519 2122
Email: contact@mind.org.uk
Website: www.mind.org.uk

Mind Cymru

Telephone: 02920 395 123
Email: contactwales@mind.org.uk
Website: <http://www.mind.org.uk>

Alzheimer's Society

Gives support to families by linking them through membership and provides information on Alzheimer's disease and other dementias.
Telephone: 020 7423 3500
Email: info@alzheimers.org.uk
Website: alzheimers.org.uk

Aware (Ireland)

Assists and supports those suffering from depression and their families in Ireland. A helpline is available as well as support groups, lectures, and current research on depression.
Telephone: 1890 303 302
Email: wecanhelp@aware.ie
Website: www.aware.ie/

Samaritans

Provide a confidential 24 hours a day helpline for people who are experiencing feelings of distress or despair, including those which could lead to suicide.
Telephone: 1850 60 90 90 (24 hours)
Website: www.samaritans.org
Email: jo@samaritans.org

CRUSE - Bereavement Care

Offers a service of counselling, advice and opportunities for social contact to all bereaved people.
Telephone: 0870 167 1677
Email: helpline@crusebereavementcare.org.uk
Website: www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

Can help you to find a therapist in your area
Telephone: 01455 883 316
Email: bacp@bacp.co.uk
Website: www.bacp.co.uk

Depression UK

A national mutual support group for people suffering from depression
Email: info@depressionuk.org
Website: www.depressionuk.org

Healthtalk Online

People's accounts of their illnesses and treatment, including older people with depression in the Mental Health Section

Website: www.healthtalkonline.org

Royal College of Psychiatrists

Provides free mental health information and leaflets.

Telephone: 020 7235 2351

Email: leaflets@rcpsych.ac.uk

Website: www.rcpsych.ac.uk



Age Concern England (charity number 261794) has merged with Help the Aged (charity number 272786) to form Age UK, a charitable company limited by guarantee and registered in England: registered office address 207–221 Pentonville Road, London, N1 9UZ, company number 6825798, registered charity number 1128267. Age Concern and Help the Aged are brands of Age UK. The three national Age Concerns in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales have also merged with Help the Aged in these nations to form three registered charities: Age Scotland, Age NI, Age Cymru.

