



Promote. Preserve. Protect

# Resources for Parents Following a Suicide Attempt

What to expect during recovery, safety planning,  
warning signs & risk factors

Information compiled by the Howard County Bureau of Behavioral Health from the following sources:



**American  
Foundation  
for Suicide  
Prevention**

***SAMHSA***  
Substance Abuse and Mental Health  
Services Administration

***NSSF***  
The Firearm Industry  
Trade Association

Visit [hchealth.org](https://hchealth.org) or call 410.313.6300 for more information.



# Acknowledge your own feelings

When someone you love attempts to take their life, it can evoke a range of strong emotions. You may feel angry, sad, or afraid. You may be anxious about your loved one's future. You may feel as though you, yourself, have experienced a trauma. It is important that you seek support and take steps to care for yourself.

## Remember: **recovery is a process**

"My loved one is home from the hospital. Does that mean they are better?"

- Encourage your loved one to stay in counseling, and to communicate any thoughts of suicide to their treatment provider.
- Be patient and gentle. Don't be discouraged by what may seem like setbacks or slow progress.

The recovery process is different for everyone. Recovery usually extends long beyond hospitalization, and will involve support from professionals, as well as friends and family. **The first six months after a hospitalization are especially critical to the suicide attempt survivor's recovery, and the risk for suicide remains elevated for the entire first year.**

## Be with them

One of the most powerful gifts you can provide at this time is your presence. Even when you don't know what to say, just be there with them. For the first few weeks, they need you very close. Face to face is best, but there are so many ways to connect with technology – Skype, phone, text, social media.

During their crisis, your loved one may have perceived themselves as being completely alone, or a burden on you and the others who love them.

## A plan for recovery

Talk openly with your loved one. Ask them what they need, and help them create a good plan for their recovery.

Learn more about safety plans at <https://my3app.org/>, a mobile app that can help identify members of an individual's support system for quick contact, build a safety plan, and access important resources. More information about safety planning can be found on page 6 of this document, as well.

Source: American Foundation for Suicide Prevention - <https://afsp.org/when-a-loved-one-has-made-an-attempt>

# How You Can Help

- Encourage your loved one to talk to their therapist/counselor about developing a safety plan. You can find more information about safety planning through the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#).
- Encourage them to engage in healthy eating and exercise, as well as regular sleep.
- Help identify ways to support their recovery, such as reducing their workload, allowing others to help them with daily responsibilities, and socializing with supportive people.
- Encourage them to engage in self-care and relaxation activities, such as meditation, spending time in nature, and listening to music that helps their mood.
- Ask the provider how you can help make their environment safer, and take action to reduce access to means, such as removing or safely storing firearms and medications.

Source: American Foundation for Suicide Prevention - <https://afsp.org/when-a-loved-one-has-made-an-attempt>

# Reducing the Risk at Home

To help reduce the risk of self-harm or suicide at home, here are some things to consider:

- Guns are high risk and the leading means of death for suicidal people—they should be taken out of the home and secured.
- Overdoses are common and can be lethal—if it is necessary to keep pain relievers such as aspirin, Advil, and Tylenol in the home, only keep small quantities or consider keeping medications in a locked container. Remove unused or expired medicine from the home.
- Alcohol use or abuse can decrease inhibitions and cause people to act more freely on their feelings. As with pain relievers, keep only small quantities of alcohol in the home, or none at all.
- More details on storage options for these items can be found on pages 3-5.






Source: SAMHSA – <https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma18-4357eng.pdf>

# Preventing Unauthorized Access to Firearms

There are several best practices for responsible and secure firearm storage for anyone, and especially where there may be someone at risk:

- Store firearms unloaded, and store ammunition separately in locked storage, when not in use.
- Consider disassembling firearms as an added measure of security to prevent access—know the functionality of each firearm you own, so you can safely disassemble and store it.
- Double check that your firearm is unloaded when moving it in or out of storage.
- Use multiple safeguards at once.

## UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS TO FIREARMS

METHOD	DESCRIPTION	PROS	CONS
<b>Cable Lock</b> 	A cable lock can be used on most firearms, allows for quick access in an emergency and offers security from theft. The cable runs through the barrel or action of a firearm to prevent it from being accidentally fired, requiring either a key or combination to unlock it.	Widely available Inexpensive Can be used on most firearms Can also be used to lock a firearm to another object Allows for quick access Renders the firearm inoperable	Cable can be cut Need to keep keys/combination secure Single firearm use, whereas some other safe storage devices have room to secure multiple firearms
<b>Gun Case</b> 	For those looking to conceal, protect or legally transport a firearm, a gun case is an affordable solution available in a variety of materials including plastic, fabric or metal. Be sure to lock it with an external device like a cable-style gun lock for added security.	Widely available Inexpensive Portable and allows for simple, safe transport of a firearm Protects the firearm from damage Can secure multiple firearms	Most secure when paired with an additional device, like a cable-style gun lock
<b>Lock Box</b> 	With integrated locks, storage boxes provide reliable protection for firearms, and allow gun owners to legally transport them outside of their home.	Ensures safety even if gun is already loaded Portable Protects the firearm from damage Can secure multiple firearms	Can be more expensive than other firearm storage options
<b>Electronic Lock Box</b> 	Electronic lock boxes are an effective way to store or legally transport firearms, and they also prevent theft, since only the person with the code can access the contents. Some electronic lock boxes are specially designed for quick access to stored firearms.	Portable Only firearm owner knows the code for the electronic lock (dual purpose as a theft deterrent) Can secure multiple firearms	Can be more expensive than other firearm storage options
<b>Full Size and/or Biometric Gun Safe</b> 	A gun safe protects its contents from the elements and allows owners to safely store multiple firearms in one place. Gun safes of all sizes are now available with biometric options to ensure only certain people have access.	Biometric aspect only allows the firearm owner to access the safe through a digital identification of a person's unique human characteristic, like a finger or hand print Prevents against thefts Can secure multiple firearms	Most expensive option

Source: The National Shooting Sports Foundation & AFSP: <https://bit.ly/33WAiEe>.

## Out-of-Home Storage

Marylanders to Prevent Gun Violence (MPGV) and Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health partnered to develop the Maryland Safe Storage Map. The Map was created to assist individuals and families in locating out-of-home gun storage sites. Such gun storage facilities can reduce the risk of suicide for youth residing in homes with firearms. The Maryland Safe Storage Map [can be found here](#).

Source: Marylanders to Prevent Gun Violence: <https://mdpgv.org/safestoragemap/>.

## Extreme Risk Protective Orders (ERPO)

In Maryland, family members, law enforcement, and health care professionals can petition the court to temporarily limit someone's access to firearms if they meet certain behavioral risk factors. [You can find more information on the ERPO law here](#).

Source: Maryland Department of Health - <https://bit.ly/2K9PgQd>.

## Other Lethal Means

While firearms are the leading means by which teens attempt suicide, parents also need to consider whether their teen has access to other means of harming themselves or others, including:

- Prescription or illicit drugs
- Alcohol
- Chemicals
- Other weapons, including knives, dangerous tools or even the family car

## Safe Storage Tips

Similar to firearm storage solutions, the best option is to lock these products so they cannot be accessed without your supervision. Below are suggestions to restrict access and keep your home safe:

- Secure medicine or chemical storage cabinets with a lock, or consider purchasing a medicine lock box for your home. Keep the key/combo lock code private.
- If your teen takes a medicine that is lethal in high doses, set up a system where a family member stores this medicine safely and dispenses doses as required.
- Remove chemicals and alcohol from the home if you are worried about an incident.

- Return expired or unused prescriptions to a safe location. Howard County has several [permanent medication disposal sites that can be found here.](#)
- Contact the Howard County Bureau of Behavioral Health for more information about medication disposal, including drug deactivation bags – 410-313-6202.
- Closely monitor remaining levels of prescription medicines (number of pills, etc.) you take, even if these items are secured.
- Ensure all family members with access to medicines, alcohol and chemicals understand access rules and take serious precautions to re-secure these items after use.

Source: The National Shooting Sports Foundation & AFSP: [https://bit.ly/33WAIeE.](https://bit.ly/33WAIeE)

# Safety Planning

Following a suicide attempt, a safety plan should be created to help prevent another attempt. The plan should be a joint effort between your relative and his or her doctor, therapist, or the emergency department staff, and you.

As a family member, you should know your relative's safety plan and understand your role in it, including:

- Knowing your family member's "triggers," such as an anniversary of a loss, alcohol, or stress from relationships.
- Building supports for your family member with mental health professionals, family, friends, and community resources.
- Working with your family member's strengths to promote his or her safety.
- Promoting communication and honesty in your relationship with your family member.

Remember that safety cannot be guaranteed by anyone—the goal is to reduce the risks and build supports for everyone in the family. However, it is important for you to believe that the safety plan can help keep your relative safe. If you do not feel that it can, let the emergency department staff know before you leave.

SAFETY PLAN	
<b>Step 1: Warning signs:</b>	
1.	_____
2.	_____
3.	_____
<b>Step 2: Internal coping strategies - Things I can do to take my mind off my problems without contacting another person:</b>	
1.	_____
2.	_____
3.	_____
<b>Step 3: People and social settings that provide distraction:</b>	
1.	Name _____ Phone _____
2.	Name _____ Phone _____
3.	Place _____
4.	Place _____
<b>Step 4: People whom I can ask for help:</b>	
1.	Name _____ Phone _____
2.	Name _____ Phone _____
3.	Name _____ Phone _____
<b>Step 5: Professionals or agencies I can contact during a crisis:</b>	
1.	Clinician Name _____ Phone _____ Clinician Pager or Emergency Contact # _____
2.	Clinician Name _____ Phone _____ Clinician Pager or Emergency Contact # _____
3.	Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
4.	Local Emergency Service _____ Emergency Services Address _____ Emergency Services Phone _____
<b>Making the environment safe:</b>	
1.	_____
2.	_____
<small>From Stanley, B. &amp; Brown, G.K. (2011). Safety planning intervention: A brief intervention to mitigate suicide risk. <i>Cognitive and Behavioral Practice</i>, 19, 256-264</small>	

# Advocating at the Hospital

When discussing next steps after a hospital encounter with your family member and the treatment team, ask the following questions:

Questions Family and Friends Should Ask about the Followup Treatment Plan	
<p><b>Ask your family member:</b> <i>It is important to be honest and direct with your questions and concerns.</i></p>	<p><b>Ask the treatment team:</b> <i>This includes the doctor, therapist, nurse, social worker, etc.</i></p>
Do you feel safe to leave the hospital, and are you comfortable with the discharge plan?	Do you believe professionally that my family member is ready to leave the hospital?
How is your relationship with your doctor, and when is your next appointment?	Why did you make the decision(s) that you did about my family member's care or treatment?
What has changed since your suicidal feelings or actions began?	Is there a followup appointment scheduled? Can it be moved to an earlier date?
What else can I/we do to help you after you leave the emergency department?	What is my role as a family member in the safety plan?
Will you agree to talk with me/us if your suicidal feelings return? If not, is there someone else you can talk to?	What should we look for and when should we seek more help, such as returning to the emergency department or contacting other local resources and providers?

**Remember: it is critical to schedule a follow up appointment as soon as possible after discharge from the hospital emergency department.**

Source: SAMHSA – <https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma18-4357eng.pdf>



# What Leads to Suicide?

There's no single cause for suicide. Suicide most often occurs when stressors and health issues converge to create an experience of hopelessness and despair. Depression is the most common condition associated with suicide, and it is often undiagnosed or untreated. Conditions like depression, anxiety, and substance problems, especially when unaddressed, increase risk for suicide. Yet it's important to note that most people who actively manage their mental health conditions go on to engage in life.

## Risk Factors for Suicidality

**Risk factors** – risk factors are characteristics or conditions that increase the chance that a person may try to take their life

### **Risk factor – Health**

- Mental health conditions
  - Depression
  - Substance use problems
  - Bipolar disorder
  - Schizophrenia
  - Personality traits of aggression, mood changes, and poor relationships
  - Conduct disorder
  - Anxiety disorders
- Serious physical health conditions including pain
- Traumatic brain injury

### **Risk factor - Environment**

- Access to lethal means, including firearms and drugs
- Prolonged stress, such as harassment, bullying, relationship problems or unemployment
- Stressful life events, like rejection, divorce, financial crisis, and other life transitions or loss
- Exposure to another person's suicide, or to graphic sensationalized accounts of suicide

### **Risk factor - Historic**

- Previous suicide attempts
- Family history of suicide
- Childhood abuse, neglect, or trauma

Source: American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: <https://afsp.org/risk-factors-and-warning-signs>

# Warning Signs of Suicide

**Suicide warning signs** – something to look out for when concerned that a person may be suicidal is a change in behavior or the presence of entirely new behaviors. This is of sharpest concern if the new or changed behavior is related to a painful event, loss, or change. Most people who take their lives exhibit one or more warning signs, either through what they say or what they do.

## **Warning sign: Talk**

If a person talks about:

- Killing themselves
- Feeling hopeless
- Having no reason to live
- Being a burden to others
- Feeling trapped
- Unbearable pain

## **Warning sign: Behavior**

Behaviors that may signal risk, especially if related to a painful event, loss or change:

- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Looking for a way to end their lives, such as searching online for methods
- Withdrawing from activities
- Isolating from family and friends
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Visiting or calling people to say goodbye
- Giving away prized possessions
- Aggression
- Fatigue

## **Warning sign: Mood**

People who are considering suicide often display one or more of the following moods:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Loss of interest
- Irritability
- Humiliation/shame
- Agitation/anger
- Relief/sudden improvement

Source: American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: <https://afsp.org/risk-factors-and-warning-signs>

# Moving Forward

Emergency department care is by nature short-term and crisis oriented, but some longer-term interventions have been shown to help reduce suicidal behavior and thoughts. You and your loved one can talk to the doctor about various treatments for mental illnesses that may help to reduce the risk of suicide for people diagnosed with illnesses such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or depression. Often, these illnesses require multiple types of interventions, and your loved one may benefit from a second opinion from a specialist.

Different people have different needs, and it may take time to find a counselor or treatment that is right for your loved one. This can be a frustrating process, but if one counselor, doctor, or type of therapy doesn't work, you have the right to keep trying until you find one that does. Think about your loved one's preferences and ask questions to see if the provider might be a good match for their style and needs.

## Maintain Hope and Self-Care

Families commonly provide a safety net and a vision of hope for their suicidal relative, and that can be emotionally exhausting. Never try to handle this situation alone—get support from friends, relatives, and organizations such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), and get professional input whenever possible. Use the resources on the back page of this guide, the Internet, family, and friends to help you create a support network. **You do not have to travel this road alone.**

Sources: SAMHSA – <https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma18-4357eng.pdf>;  
<https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma15-4419.pdf>

# Resources for Support

**Grassroots Crisis Intervention Center** – 410-531-6677

<https://grassrootscrisis.org/>

**Maryland Helpline** – Dial 2-1-1, Press 1, visit <https://211md.org/>, or text your zip code to 898-211

**Crisis Text Line** – text HOME to 741741

**National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** – 1-800-273-8255 or visit <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>

**Trevor Project LGBTQ Crisis Line** -1-866-488-7386

**American Foundation for Suicide Prevention** - <https://afsp.org/get-help>

**NAMI Howard County** – 410-772-9300 or visit <https://namihowardcounty.org/>

**Bureau of Behavioral Health** – 410-313-6202 or visit <https://www.howardcountymd.gov/gethelp>

**Howard County Public Schools** – 410-313-6600  
<https://www.hcpss.org/supports/mental-health-wellness/>

**My 3 App** - <https://my3app.org/> for safety planning