



# SUICIDE AWARENESS

## A VSGN LEADERSHIP DISCUSSION

Having a chronic illness can lead to depression and hopelessness, which may cause some people to consider ending their life. As a support group leader, what can you do for members of your group that you think might be at risk of suicide?

The information in this document is meant as suggested guidelines. You need to decide how comfortable you are engaging your group members in conversations around suicide. Always seek help from a professional mental health or suicide prevention counselor. If you are not comfortable interceding on behalf of a support group member who may be suicidal, include contact information for the National Suicide Prevention Hotline in your welcome materials, and let the group know that there is no one in the group with the qualifications to handle this kind of situation.

### WATCH FOR WARNING SIGNS

- Change in mood (e.g., depression, irritability, anger).
- Isolation and withdrawal.
- Feeling sad, depressed, or hopeless.
- Talking or hinting about suicide, and/or seeking the means to commit suicide (e.g. weapons, pills).
- Other medical problems.
- Lack of a good support system (e.g. person complains that family/friends don't understand).
- Obsession with death (e.g., in music, poetry, artwork).
- Changes in eating/ sleeping habits /personal hygiene.
- Past psychiatric issues.
- Recent loss of a close relationship to separation, divorce or death.
- History of abuse.
- Work-related problems.

### WHAT YOU CAN DO

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- Talk about suicide as a group.
  - Normalize it.
  - Remove the stigma associated with suicide.
  - Encourage people to share their personal experiences.
  - Tell the group that it's OK to ask for help. You might want to do this at the beginning of each meeting, maybe by including a statement in your discussion guidelines (see "Communicating Expectations").
  - Educate the group about suicide prevention resources.
- If you suspect a person might be suicidal:
  - Ask them if they have ever considered committing suicide.
  - Encourage them to talk about their feelings.
  - Listen compassionately.
  - Reassure them that they are not alone.
  - Ask them if they have discussed this with their family, a counselor, and/or someone in their faith community.
  - Ask them what you can do to help.
  - Give them the contact information for the National Suicide Prevention Hotline and encourage them to call and talk to somebody, even if they're not 100% sure they want to commit suicide.
  - Follow up with them the next day to see how they are feeling and if they have taken any action (either to harm themselves or to get help).
- If you think they may be a threat to themselves, you might consider:
  - Calling a family member.
  - Calling 911.

## COMMUNICATING EXPECTATIONS

- Set clear, formal (preferably written) up-front boundaries concerning the role of the group leader, the limits of his/her responsibilities for taking care of group members, and the steps he/she will take if a group member seems to be self-harming or considering self-harm.
- Have the group talk early on about their responsibilities to each other and willingness to ask for and accept help.
- Clarify that attendees are expected to actively seek and accept help when they are feeling hopeless and discouraged.

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- Add these to your group guidelines and read them at the beginning of each meeting.
- See VeDA's "Facilitating a Support Group" article for more information on creating formal guidelines for your group.

## **TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF**

It can be scary and stressful to be in a position of authority and have one of "your" people be in an acute state of distress. Remember, you cannot take care of others until you have first taken care of yourself. You may want to reach out for both professional support for dealing with the situation (e.g. call the suicide hotline on behalf of your group member) and emotional support for yourself (e.g. counseling). Also remember to maintain confidentiality unless given permission by the group member to discuss their situation specifically.

## **RESOURCES**

National Suicide Prevention Hotline:

- 800.273.8255
- <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

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## **VESTIBULAR DISORDERS ASSOCIATION**