

Things to Say (or do) to Help Someone in Crisis

- Acknowledge their feeling
- Witness their process
- Affirm their right to speak
- Validate their experience
- Listen without judgment
- Allow them to process what is going on
- Let them cry

Be sensitive about holding their hand or putting your hand on their shoulder, but do not offer any more physical contact without their initiation. (Remember that for people who have suffered trauma and abuse, physical contact may be upsetting rather than comforting.)

DO Say things like:

- "That sounds really difficult."
- "Is there anything I can do to help?"
- "It sounds like you're in real distress."
- "It sounds like you're having a crisis."
- "It sounds like you're very upset."
- "I hear how awful that must be for you."
- "I'll bet that brought up some difficult feelings."
- "It's okay to cry."
- "I'm here for you."

Top 25 Things NOT to Say (or do) to Someone in Crisis

1. Tell them to stop thinking about the past.
2. Try to relate to them by comparing what they are telling you to your own experience like the time when your purse was stolen or you went through your divorce.
3. Use what they are saying as an invitation to talk about how bad you're feeling.
4. Tell them that everything happens for a reason.
5. Walk away, hang up the phone, or laugh.
6. Tell them how strange/foolish/crazy they are to feel or think such things.
7. Invite them to have sex.
8. Interrupt them to tell a funny story about your cat.
9. Tell them they couldn't possibly be feeling or doing or thinking whatever they just told you.
10. Tell them that their feelings are silly, meaningless or inappropriate.
11. Try to solve their problems for them.
12. Tell them to pray to Jesus.
13. Ask them lots of questions about their past.
14. Tell them to "pick themselves up by the bootstraps" and get on with life.
15. Tell them to talk to a psychiatrist (so you don't have to listen).
16. Try to cheer them up by telling jokes or uplifting stories.

17. Offer them a drink (alcoholic).
18. Tell them how much better you would have handled the situation.
19. Tell them that whatever they're upset about or whatever they have experienced is God's will.
20. Dramatize their pain by being shocked at everything they say.
21. Give them unsolicited advice.
22. Pretend they're not really in crisis and change the subject.
23. Tell them that they're letting their imagination run wild.
24. Compare what they're telling you to other people you know who are crazy, hospitalized, manic, schizophrenic, and/or dead (especially when they've committed suicide).
25. Tell them that someday they'll look back at this and laugh.

How to Recognize if Someone is in Crisis

First, do you already know that they suffer from:

1. Manic depressive or bipolar disorder
2. Chronic depression
3. Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
4. Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)
5. Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD)
6. Suffered the death of a loved one in the last two years
7. Working a 12-step program
8. Does not have a diagnosis that you know about but is clearly depressed, agitated, upset, anxious, grieving or had a traumatic childhood or suffered a traumatic event.

If you already know this about the person, then the following comments are almost certainly "a cry for help," which means that they need someone to listen, acknowledge their pain, and witness their process.

- "I'm having a hard time."
- "XYZ experience brought up a lot of things for me."
- "I'm depressed."
- "I can't talk or think right now because I'm too upset."
- "I had a triggering experience."
- "I want to go out and drink (or do something dangerous, or hurt someone, or hurt themselves)."
- "I wish I was dead."
- "I'm having a breakdown."
- "I can't take it anymore."

This is your cue to stop and listen by following up with an affirming statement like:

- "What happened?"
- "Are you okay?"
- "Can you name (or be more specific about) what you're feeling?"
- "I'm listening. Tell me more."