

When Suicidal Thoughts Do Not Go Away

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The popular image of someone who is in danger of suicide goes like this: A person has suicidal thoughts. It's a crisis. The person gets help, and the crisis resolves within days or weeks.

That's the popular image, and thankfully it does happen for many people. But for others, suicidal thoughts do not go away. Their suicidal thoughts become chronic.

The pattern of chronic suicidal thoughts is similar to that of a person with any other kind of chronic condition: For some people, there are flare-ups where the condition is far worse than normal, and then the symptoms subside, but only temporarily. And for other people, the symptoms never subside. Those people live with their symptoms – in this case, suicidal thoughts – every day.

Who Is Prone to Chronic Suicidal Thoughts?

Chronic suicidal thoughts are especially common in people with borderline personality disorder, an illness characterized by unstable emotions and identity; impulsive, often self-destructive actions; and turbulent relationships. The psychiatrist Joel Paris notes that, for many people with borderline personality disorder, "suicidality becomes a way of life."

However, chronic suicidal thoughts can occur in concert with other mental illnesses, such as recurrent episodes of depression, or with no illness at all.

Many people who regularly have suicidal thoughts have considered suicide for so long that it feels normal to them. Some have thought of suicide ever since they were young children. And some have made multiple suicide attempts, sometimes so many that they lost track long ago.

Why Chronic Suicidal Thoughts Persist

Often, intense, ongoing psychological pain fuels chronic suicidal thoughts. But even seemingly minor challenges can intensify the wish to die.

Frank King captures this dynamic well in his TedX talk, A Matter of Laugh or Death. Although King is a comedian, he provides this example in all seriousness:

“See, people don’t understand. Let’s say my car breaks down. I have three choices: Get it fixed, get a new one, or I could just kill myself. I know, doesn’t that sound absurd? But that thought actually pops into my head... It’s always on the menu.”

Some people say it comforts them to know they can die by suicide if ever the pain of life gets to be too much for them. The soothing nature of having an escape has led some experts to refer to “suicide fantasy as life-sustaining recourse.”

As the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche stated, “The thought of suicide is a great consolation: by means of it one gets successfully through many a bad night.”

The Danger of Chronic Suicidal Thoughts

By Dese’Rae Lynn Stage

Even if suicidal thoughts provide some form of escapism and relief, it does not mean that chronic suicidal thoughts are harmless. The more someone thinks of suicide, the more they might get used to the idea. This can weaken their inhibitions and fears about suicide.

Also, chronic suicidal thoughts typically indicate that an unhealed wound needs healing, whether that wound arises from past trauma, mental illness, grave loss, or some other cause.

Even for people who do not view their recurrent suicidal thoughts as a problem, it certainly is better if they can come up with other escape fantasies besides death. Better yet, they can be helped to develop problem-solving abilities, coping skills, hopefulness, and reasons for living that will make the option of suicide unnecessary.

Therapy for Chronic Suicidal Thoughts

For someone with chronic suicidal ideation, therapy tends to take longer than it does for someone in an acute crisis. The goals of therapy are not only to keep a person safe, but also to help them develop the skills and resources that will weaken suicide's allure. Dialectical behavior therapy has been effective at reducing suicide attempts and suicidal ideation in people with borderline personality disorder and chronic suicidality.

Often, it is not a realistic goal for a person with longstanding suicidal thoughts to stop thinking of suicide. Suicidal thinking has become a habit. And nobody can control what thoughts come to them, only how they respond to the thoughts.

One way for someone to respond constructively is to observe their suicidal thoughts with curiosity and detachment. Some of my therapy clients say to themselves something like, "That's not my real self talking. That's my depression (or stress, or post-traumatic stress, or some other condition) talking."

Mindfulness can be especially useful. The psychologist Marsha Linehan, PhD, developed DBT, which essentially is a form of cognitive behavior therapy combined with principles from Zen Buddhism. She uses a metaphor of a train passing by: You can sit on a hill and watch the cars of the train pass, or you can jump onto one of them and get carried away by it.

When to Panic – and Not to Panic – about Chronic Suicidality

So if you know someone with chronic suicidal thoughts, you don't need to respond as though it is an emergency every time they think of suicide. That

would be a lot of emergencies. Chronic suicidal thoughts often are manageable and the person stays safe in spite of them.

Danger occurs when the suicidal thoughts have intensified to such a degree that the person is intent on acting on their suicidal thoughts within hours or days. That is an emergency.

If the person is simply having the same thoughts that they have had for many years, don't panic. Instead, compassionately listen and empathize with the person. Ask how you can be of help. Talk with the person about resources they can use [***see the local Resource List at the end of this document***]. Also talk about how they can keep their environment safe, like by removing firearms from the home.

Chronic suicidal thoughts are not ideal, but they also are not a crisis if there is no intent to kill oneself soon. As odd as it sounds, the option of suicide might be the very thing that helps some people to stay alive.

Stacey Freedenthal, PhD, LCSW, is the author of "Helping the Suicidal Person: Tips and Techniques for Professionals." This post originally appeared in slightly revised form at insurancethoughtleadership.com/understanding-person-with-suicidal-thoughts/.

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RESOURCE LIST

Province-Wide in BC

Crisis 24 hrs: **1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433)**

BC211 – Referral Hotline 24/7 Dial 211

Burnaby Mental Health and Addictions

Burnaby residents seeking counselling for persons in suicidal crisis or support for persons concerns about someone at risk to suicide.

Intake: **604-453-1900**

Campbell River Crisis Line

Crisis 24 hrs: **250-287-7743**

Central Fraser Valley Telecare Crisis Line

Crisis 24 hrs: **604-852-9099**

CHIMO Services Crisis Intervention Program

Serves Richmond, South Delta, Ladner & Tsawwassen

Crisis 15 hrs (9 am – midnight): **604-279-7070**

Crisis Centre for Northern BC

All of Northern BC north of Quesnel, except the Peace River Country, Fraser Lake, Fort Fraser & Vanderhoof

Prince George 24-Hour Crisis Line,
Youth Support Line, Youth Online Chat

Crisis Lines:

250-563-1214 – 1-888-562-1214

Youth Line: 250-564-8336 – 1-888-564-8336

Serves from the Alberta border to Haida Gwaii and from Quesnel north to the Yukon border

Crisis Intervention & Suicide Prevention Centre of BC

Serves Vancouver, North Vancouver city & district, Bowen Island, West Vancouver, Burnaby

Also has online chat for youth: www.youthinbc.com

Crisis 24 hrs: **604-872-3311**

Crisis 24 hrs TTY: **604-872-0113**

Serving Powell River & area, Sunshine Coast, Squamish, Whistler, Pemberton and Howe Sound-
the Sea to Sky corridor

Crisis 24 hrs: **1-866-661-3311**

Crisis 24 hrs TTY: **1-866-872-0113**

Crossroads Crisis Centre Society

Serving the Comox Valley area

Crisis 24 hrs: **250-334-2455**

East Kootenay Crisis Line

Serving entire east Kootenay region, from Golden to the Alberta & USA borders
Crisis 24 hrs: **1-888-353-2273 (C.A.R.E.)**

Fraser Health Crisis Line

Serves the Fraser Health Region from Burnaby to Boston Bar: New Westminster, Coquitlam, Maple Ridge, Pitt Meadows, White Rock, South Surrey, Delta, Surrey, Langley, Abbotsford, Mission, Chilliwack, Hope, and Agassiz

Crisis 24 hrs: **604-951-8855 – 1-877-820-7444**

Fraser Valley Regional Crisis Line

Serves Mission, Abbotsford, Chilliwack, Agassiz/Harrison, Hope, Yale & Boston Bar
Crisis 24 hrs: **604-820-1166**
Crisis 24 hrs: **1-877-820-7444**

G.R. Baker Memorial Hospital (Q.U.E.S.S.T. Unit)

Crisis, 24 hrs: **250-992-9414 (Quesnel)**

Kelowna Crisis Line

Serves Kelowna, Westbank, Winfield, Lakecountry
Crisis 24 hrs: **1-888-353-2273 (C.A.R.E.)**

KUU-US Crisis Line Society

Serving Port Alberni, Ucluelet, Tofino, Bamfield, and West coast of Vancouver Island
Crisis 24 hrs: **250-723-4050**
Teen line: **250-723-2040**
Crisis 24 hrs: **1-800-588-8717**

North Island Crisis & Counselling Centre Society

Crisis 24 hrs: **250-949-6033**

PIN Crisis Intervention Society (PIN Crisis Line)

Vernon, Salmon Arm, Enderby, Revelstoke

Crisis 24 hrs: **1-888-353-2273 (C.A.R.E.)**

S.A.F.E.R (Suicide Attempt Follow-up, Education, & Research)

Provides counselling for individuals who are in a suicidal crisis, have made a suicide attempt, or are survivors of a suicide loss.

Intake Worker, 8:30 am to 4:30 pm, Monday to Friday: **604-675-3985**

S.U.C.C.E.S.S. Chinese Help Lines

Cantonese Help Line, 10 am – 10 pm: **604-270-8233**

Mandarin Help Line, 10 am – 10 pm: **604-270-8222**

South Fraser Regional Crisis Line c/o Surrey Community Services

Serves Surrey, Whiterock, Langley and Delta
Crisis 24 hrs: **604-951-8855**

Vancouver Child and Youth Mental Health Referral

For suicidal children and youth (18 & under) at risk to suicide.
Intake: **604-709-4111**

Vancouver Island Crisis Line

Serves: All of Vancouver Island and Select areas of the Northern Interior (follows Island Health regional boundaries)

Vancouver Island Crisis Line (24/7): **1-888-353-2273 (C.A.R.E.)**

West Kootenay – Boundary Regional Crisis Line

Serves Trail & Rossland, the West Kootenay and Boundary regions, including Nelson, Grand Forks, Castlegar, Christina Lake, New Denver, Nakusp and Salmo
Crisis 24 hrs: **1-888-353-2273 (C.A.R.E.)**

Williams Lake & Area Crisis Line

Crisis 24 hrs: **1-888-353-2273 (C.A.R.E.)**