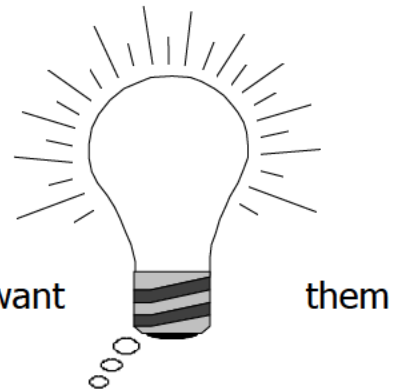


**KEY CONCEPTS AND TECHNIQUES  
FOR ASSESSING THE SUICIDAL CALLER**

**Specific Do's**

**Do....**

- start off the call by saying, "What's going on..."
- use the person's name. This shows sincerity.
- let him/her know you are concerned, you don't want to kill themselves and you do want to help.
- be ready to accept the caller's view of the world, even if it's a bleak and despairing one. Even if it's an irrational one, be able to stay with their feelings.
- suggest that people really do need help at times. In our culture that isn't always easy to do. People's egos are at stake.
- find out when/if a traumatic event happened, whether it was recently or long ago.
- find out the details if there was a traumatic event, and if they're willing to discuss it.
- allow silences.
- use humor when appropriate.
- use open-ended questions. Questions they can answer a simple "yes" or "no" to are not going to give you much insight. The more the caller can communicate, the better.



**KEY CONCEPTS AND TECHNIQUES  
FOR ASSESSING THE SUICIDAL CALLER**

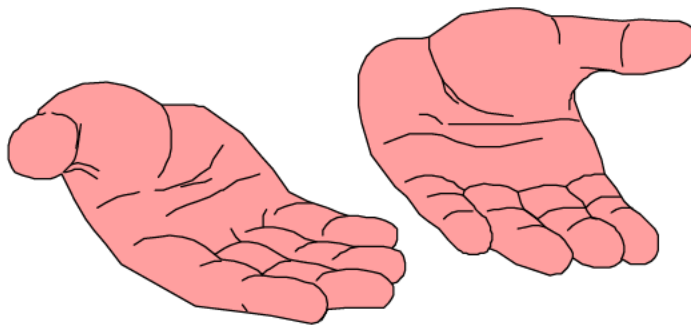
**Specific Don'ts**

**Don't....**



- try to cheer the person up by having a cheerful voice.
- try to get them to agree with you by saying something like, "Don't you think that would be a good idea?" or, "You don't want to kill yourself do you?" Don't say, "You don't really feel like killing yourself." This invalidates their feelings.
- pretend you are all wise. Don't feel like you can or need to fix things for the caller.
- give advice and don't say that we give advice.
- be judgmental. Phrases like "calm down" and "why" questions should be used very carefully or not at all. Both can sound very judgmental.
- tell the caller how to feel. For example, "You shouldn't feel that way" or describing the caller's feelings in milder terms than they would agree with.
- take the opportunity to reflect feelings of a painful incident. "My father tells me how fat I am" followed by you asking, "Tell me about your relationship with your father."
- say, "I know how you are feeling" or "I understand how you are feeling" because you don't.
- get into philosophical discussions or debates.
- promise them anything you can't guarantee.
- start the call with, "How are you doing?" If they're contemplating suicide, they're obviously not doing well.
- be careful about saying, "Is there anything else going on?" If the tone in which this question is asked is perceived wrong, they may think you're trivializing their dilemma.
- put the person on hold unless there is absolutely no way to avoid it.

## **KEY CONCEPTS AND TECHNIQUES FOR ASSESSING THE SUICIDAL CALLER**



## **Rapport Building, Trust, Empathy, and Active Listening**

### **Rapport Building & Trust**

Why is it often easier to speak to a friend about a personal problem than speaking to a complete stranger? Maybe it's because the friend already knows you. Or, perhaps the friend's response is more predictably supportive. Then again, the friend has a demonstrated interest in maintaining the relationship and thus is unlikely to say things that might damage the relationship.

There are two early difficulties in establishing rapport. The first is listening to the caller. Most people will find themselves trying to think about the next question to ask rather than giving full attention to what the caller is saying at the moment. The second difficulty is empathizing with the caller and reflecting their feelings. There is a false belief that by talking about negative feelings we are doing harm.

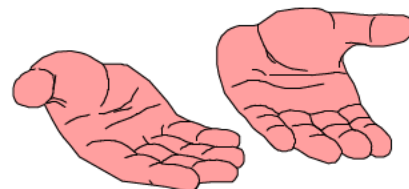
## Empathy

What is empathy? It is feeling as if you were in the other person's shoes. It is imagining that you are going through the same experience. Explore the shades and dimensions of that experience within yourself and with the caller.

Empathy is conveyed by the reflection of the caller's feelings back to the caller. Your voice must reflect the feeling you are experiencing inside.

Why is empathy so important on call-taking? Well first, it allows you to build a better relationship with the caller. By expressing (sometimes venting) their feelings, the caller is forced to organize them in an effort to communicate them. This venting allows a decrease in the emotionality of the situation. An empathetic approach also demonstrates that you can handle all they can throw at you. It helps put the person in touch with what he or she is feeling and it helps to avoid misunderstandings.

There are unexpected positive consequences of reflecting feelings. Sometimes it's not only what you do, it is also what you don't do. For instance, it can produce valuable clues for prioritizing problems later. It can also help the person work on the problems, "Oh, I probably could just..." If you go too fast, important details may be missed, leading to a wrong turn or a break in the perceived understanding. It also "keeps the call in their court". Subconsciously you are sending the signal that they will be thinking for themselves.



## Active Listening

What is active listening all about? It gives acknowledgment to the caller that you are hearing and understanding them. Active listening involves **restatement, reflection, clarification, and summarization.**

Active listening is not editorializing (moralizing, judging, giving advice, logic or evaluation). You must want to hear what the other person has to say. This means you are willing to take the time to listen. You must genuinely be able to accept his/her feelings whatever they may be or however different they may be from your own feelings or from feelings you think a person should have. You must have a feeling of trust in the person's capacity to handle their feelings and to work through them to find their own solutions to their problems. You must appreciate that feelings are transitory, not permanent. Feelings change and discouragement can quickly be replaced by hope. You shouldn't be afraid of the expression of feelings even if the expression is explosive. They will not become fixed forever inside the person. People will be more open to what you have to say if you give them every opportunity to speak their mind.

