

Thoughts of suicide are dangerous, and all persons with thoughts of suicide should be taken seriously. While thinking about suicide may be difficult, if not impossible to prevent, averting thoughts of suicide from becoming suicidal actions, is achievable. Almost all persons at risk will actively invite help and retain within themselves the desire to live. Often, if the decision to suicide is discussed with someone in a caregiving or helping capacity, this can stop the immediate risk for some period of time, and maybe even for a lifetime.

safeTALK

safeTALK is a program that teaches members of the community to recognise persons with thoughts of suicide, and to connect them to suicide intervention resources. The course is the result of some twenty years of work by internationally renowned training company, LivingWorks, who have been helping communities become suicide-safer since 1983. Their programs are part of national, regional and organisational suicide prevention strategies around the world.

safeTALK training is appropriate for most members of the community. It is designed to fill a gap common to almost all communities – that is a gap caused by the shortage of persons who want to, and can help a person with thoughts of suicide. This is done by:

- Recognising that a person might be having thoughts of suicide.
- Engaging them in direct and open talk about suicide.
- Moving quickly to connect them with someone who is able to do a suicide intervention.

safeTALK is part of a comprehensive suicide prevention framework, and is more than just sensitisation or awareness. It is a training program designed to increase community suicide intervention resources, specifically the number of individuals who are able to recognise and refer persons with thoughts of suicide.

safeTALK assumes that persons with thoughts of suicide are ambivalent, that is, they are of two minds when it comes to suicide. While part of them may want to escape life, another part wants to live, or at least wants to avoid dying.



The **safe** of *safeTALK* stands for *suicide alertness for everyone*, and is grounded in the belief that virtually everyone (over the age of 15) can learn and use the material that *safeTALK* teaches. The letters of **TALK** stand for the steps that the alert helper takes to assist a person with thoughts of suicide: *Tell, Ask, Listen* and *KeepSafe*. These steps are a highly integrated and sequential set of activities.

The **Tell** and **Ask** steps are designed to initiate the alertness process. They bring the thoughts of suicide out into the open and signal to the person with suicide thoughts, that the alert helper wants to help. The **Listen** step activates or strengthens the part of the person that wants to avoid death. The **KeepSafe** step supports the part of the person that desires help by making a connection with someone who can provide suicide intervention.

safeTALK training consists of two sections. The first section begins with reasons why the community wants the participant to become alert, and then moves to personal reasons for becoming alert. The bulk of the first section is used to present the *TALK* steps.

The second section has two main activities. First, is a focus on the effects of misinformation about, and fear of, suicide with the aim of addressing these fears and myths, as well as providing the facts about suicide. The second activity involves practice at being a suicide alert helper.

The order of the various sections of training is grounded in the fact that there tends to be three main obstacles in terms of wanting to become, or be, a suicide alert helper. The first of these obstacles is the lack of knowledge of what to do. That knowledge is provided in the first section of *safeTALK*. The second obstacle is the effect of false societal beliefs that cause otherwise caring and helpful people to *miss*, *dismiss* and *avoid* suicide. These are explored most directly in the first half of the second section. The third obstacle is crossing the behavioural threshold and actually practicing what has been learned about suicide alertness, and the last half of the second section of training is reserved for practice.

Six video scenes – two versions of each scene – are used at various points in the training. The first version shows someone *missing*, *dismissing* or *avoiding* suicide. In the second version, the same helper responds appropriately to the person with thoughts of suicide. The first three clips, involving non-alert helpers, are shown together early in the presentation to help participants quickly come to recognise the impact that fear of suicide can have. The alert counterparts are used throughout the training to illustrate how quickly and easily a person with thoughts of suicide can be recognised.

Various practice challenges are introduced as the training unfolds so that there is a gradual transition from listening to participating, and then to practicing the principles and steps that have been learned. This principle of gradually increasing challenge applies to every aspect of *safeTALK*, and attention to the balance between safety and challenge is one of the hallmarks of all LivingWorks programs.

Summary

There are many ways to help make a community suicide safer, and the tools and resources that are provided as part of the *safeTALK* training cover a wide range of ideas and practices to enable this. The carefully crafted set of helping steps, and the use of creative educational processes throughout the *safeTALK* course makes it possible for participants to leave the session willing and able to be effective suicide alert helpers.

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Resources

LivingWorks – (02) 6215 9499 or www.livingworks.org.au

OzHelp – 1300 OZHELP (1300 694 357)

Lifeline – 13 11 14 or www.lifeline.org.au

Living is for Everyone (LIFE)
www.livingisforeveryone.com.au

Suicide Prevention Australia (SPA)
www.suicidepreventionaust.org

Kids Helpline – 1800 55 1800 or www.kidshelp.com.au