

Going to the emergency department (ED) during a suicidal crisis.

A practical guide and checklist for before, during, and after an ED visit.

Going to an emergency department (ED) for your mental health can feel overwhelming. You might feel scared, exhausted, or unsure what to say. You don't need to have everything figured out before you ask for help. The most important thing is letting someone know you're struggling and giving yourself the chance to get support.

If possible, don't go alone

If there's someone you trust, you might ask them to come with you or meet you there. They can help:

- Explain things if talking feels difficult
- Remember information
- Take notes
- Ask questions
- Contact other supports

You can let them know what would feel most helpful. For example: *'Can you help me explain what's happening?'* or *'Can you just sit with me so I'm not alone?'*

Help staff understand what's happening

It can be hard to explain everything when you're distressed, overwhelmed or exhausted. Try to share what feels most important.

This might include:

- Thoughts about suicide or not feeling safe
- Any plans, urges, or ways you've thought about harming yourself
- Recent changes in your mood, thoughts, or behaviour
- Changes in sleep, eating, alcohol, or drug use
- Hearing, seeing, or fearing strange things you did not before
- Recent stressful events or losses
- Things that have helped or made things worse before

If saying it out loud feels too hard, you can write it down or show someone a note on your phone.

Make things a little easier while you wait

Waiting can be one of the hardest parts of being in the ED.

If you can:

- Figure out where the toilets and water fountain are
- If hungry, ask a staff member for a small snack (sandwich and biscuits are usually on hand).
- Use headphones, an eye mask, music, breathing exercises, or grounding techniques to help keep you calm
- Hold something comforting (like a hoodie, blanket or small object)
- Play a simple game like Tetris, watch something familiar, or do something that helps pass the time

Speak up if things change

You know yourself best. Tell staff if:

- Your thoughts about suicide become stronger
- You feel like you might act on your thoughts
- You feel unable to stay safe
- You're feeling worse or becoming overwhelmed

You can say: *'My thoughts have changed since I arrived and I'm worried I can't stay safe. Can someone please check on me?'*

Before you leave

Before leaving the emergency department, try to understand what happens next.

You might ask:

- What's the plan for staying safe when I leave?
- Who can I contact if things get worse?
- Are there warning signs I should look out for?
- Is there a follow-up appointment or referral?

If you have time, it can be helpful to bring:

- ☐ Photo ID (if available)
- ☐ Medicare card details
- ☐ GP, psychologist, psychiatrist, or support worker details
- ☐ List of emergency contacts
- ☐ Pen and paper (or a notes app)
- ☐ Phone and charger/power bank
- ☐ Important phone numbers written down (in case batteries run out)

Medication details

- ☐ A list or photos of current medications and doses (including prescriptions, over-the-counter meds and supplements)
- ☐ Recent medication changes (if known)
- ☐ Allergies or past medication reactions
- ☐ Alcohol, nicotine, or other drug use info

Personal items

- ☐ Reusable water bottles and small snacks (if allowed)
- ☐ Glasses, hearing aids, and/or mobility aids
- ☐ Toiletries (toothbrush, lip balm, deodorant, sanitary products)
- ☐ Spare clothing or underwear (especially if admission is possible)

Comfort and sensory support

- ☐ Headphones and/or earplugs
- ☐ Sunglasses or an eye mask
- ☐ Book, magazine, music, or podcast
- ☐ A hoodie/jumper, scarf, or soft item for comfort

If relevant

- ☐ Advance care or safety plan
- ☐ NDIS or support plan details
- ☐ Cultural or language support information
- ☐ Interpreter needs written down

Be kind to yourself

Getting support during a crisis takes a lot of energy. You don't have to manage everything perfectly. If you can:

- Take small breaks from noise or crowds
- Drink water and eat something when you're able
- Let someone else help with messages or decisions
- Focus on the next small step, not everything at once

Connect with a broader support network

A crisis can continue or come and go over the next few days, weeks, or months. If possible, think about who else can be part of your support network. This might include friends, family or trusted people, our GP or mental health professionals, peer support communities, or support services. Remember, you don't have to do this alone.

Visit SANE Forums' Managing Suicidal Thoughts & Self-Harm Space

saneforums.org



Find more practical recovery guides and resources in RecoveryClub.

