

Supporting someone through a suicidal crisis and emergency department (ED) visit.

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

Supporting someone during an emergency department (ED) visit for their mental health can feel overwhelming. You might not know what to say, what will happen, or how you can help. You don't need to have all the answers. Simply being there, listening, and helping someone communicate what they need can make a big difference.

Start by asking what they need from you

Where possible, involve them in decisions about their care. You might ask: *'Do you want me to help explain things, ask questions and write things down, or would you prefer I just stay with you?'* They may want you to:

- Help talk to staff
- Remember information
- Take notes
- Contact other supports

Make the environment easier

- If the person is withdrawing from a substance, let staff know as soon as possible (meds are available to help with withdrawal symptoms)
- Find a quiet and comfortable place to sit
- 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).

Help staff understand what's happening

The person may find it hard to explain everything, especially if they're distressed, exhausted or overwhelmed. With their permission, you can help share:

- Concerns about their safety
- Any medication changes
- Drug or alcohol use
- Changes in sleep
- Recent life changes or stressful events
- What has or hasn't helped before

While you're waiting

Waiting can be one of the hardest parts. You can help by:

- Reducing sensory overload (headphones or eye mask)
- Encouraging slow breathing or noticing what's around you
- Helping them write things down so they don't have to hold everything in their head
- Suggesting simple games like Tetris to help cope while waiting
- If helpful, they can chat online to others in the SANE Forums' 'Managing suicidal thoughts and self-harm' space

Check in with staff if things change

Speak up if things change. You know this person. Tell staff if you notice:

- Their distress is getting worse
- They're talking more about suicide or feeling unsafe
- They want to leave but you're worried about their safety
- Their behaviour feels different from usual

You could say: 'I'm worried things have changed since we arrived. Can someone check on them again?'

Before you leave

Before leaving the emergency department, make sure you understand what happens next. If possible, ask:

- What happens next?
- Do we have a plan for staying safe?
- Who should we contact if things get worse?
- 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

Look after yourself, too

Supporting someone in crisis can take a toll. You don't have to be constantly alert to be a good carer. If possible:

- Take short breaks when other trusted people are around
- Drink water and eat when you can
- Step outside briefly if the environment feels overwhelming.
- Chat 24/7 with other carers and family members in SANE Forums

Connect with a broader support network

A crisis may continue or happen again over days, weeks or months. Where possible, discuss who else can provide trusted support and how information can be safely shared. If you're the main support person, accepting small amounts of help can give you more time and energy to focus on the things only you can do.

Visit SANE Forums' Friends, Family, and Carers Space

saneforums.org



Find more practical recovery guides and resources in RecoveryClub.

