



Depression and Bipolar
Support Alliance

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Chapter Crisis Response Guide

Crisis Response Guide

What can I do if someone in our support group is talking of suicide or is threatening the safety of others?

As a DBSA support group facilitator, you can be prepared to lead a response to challenging situations that may arise in your group. If someone is threatening suicide or threatening the safety of other people, the facilitator can take steps to manage the situation.

Included in this Crisis Response Guide are suggestions for managing different types of crises in your chapter. There are suggested plans for:

- Situations when a support group participant is talking of suicide.
- Situations when a support group participant is threatening other people.
- Situations when a support group participant has attempted or completed suicide.

While the following information is intended to help your chapter develop a crisis response plan for your support groups, DBSA does not endorse the use of any particular plan. The guide is built from the input of DBSA chapter leaders and experienced support group facilitators. Furthermore, many of the suggestions are borrowed from local DBSA chapter policies and procedures as well as from other respected sources, such as the New Jersey Self Help Clearinghouse and the American Association of Suicidology.

Being prepared is key to responding to crises in your support group. Don't wait for a crisis to happen before you develop your plan. Be sure that your support group participants are aware of your chapter's policies and plans regarding crisis situations.

Special thanks to:

DBSA Boston (MA)

New Jersey Self Help Clearinghouse

American Association of Suicidology

Support Group Participant Who Is Considering Suicide

Tips to Remember:

1. Suicide is preventable. Most people who are suicidal desperately want to live; they are just temporarily unable to see solutions to their situation or see it as a way to end their pain.
2. Talking about suicide does not cause someone to be suicidal. Don't be afraid to ask direct questions about their intentions or desires.
3. The decision to take one's own life rests with that person, but there are steps that others can take to help and support someone through a crisis.
4. Call for help if needed. There are professionals trained for crisis situations. Call 911. Know of other community resources.
5. Never underestimate the power of a support group to provide hope and support to a person in crisis when it is most needed.

If someone is talking of suicide during a support group that you're facilitating, consider the following actions:

- **Check Yourself.** Take a deep breath and remember that as a facilitator your job is to guide the group through helping each other. All the responsibility is not on your shoulders. Make yourself aware of your own reactions and calmly respond to the situation and try not to panic. Feelings of anxiety are contagious, so do your best to trust yourself and provide authentic support to the person in need. When in doubt, think about what you would want if it were you in crisis. How would you want to be treated, what would you want people to say? While the person may not have the same needs or desires, your sharing may help the person express their own needs and desires.
- **Assess.** Express your concern for the other person with concrete examples, and ask direct questions to determine how specific, how available, and how lethal their suicide plan is. Some questions might include:
 - "I notice that you seem to be withdrawing from your loved ones, are you thinking about suicide?"
 - "I'm concerned by the way you're talking. It sounds like you feel as though your life is not worth living – are you considering harming yourself?"
 - "When you say, 'I'd be better off dead,' are you saying that you are planning to end your life? Do you have plans to do that?"
- **Acknowledge Feelings.** Be empathetic not judgmental. Suicidal thoughts are not *wrong* to have, but they are very dangerous. Do not relieve the other person of responsibility for his/her actions. Acknowledge that you hear them, you understand them, and that they have ultimate control over the decision to take their own life. Don't be afraid to let

the person know how important they are to you and the group; let them know these feelings will pass.

- **Engage the Support of Others.** Involve the rest of the group in providing support for the person considering suicide. Ask others to share their stories of survival and recovery. Use the power of the group to provide support, hope, and help. The group should commit to not leave the person alone until he/she is in the care of another responsible person such as a health care professional or a trusted family member.
- **Reassure.** Stress that suicidal thoughts are temporary and that suicide is permanent. Remind the person that there is help and things will get better, even if it doesn't seem like it right now. Ask the person considering suicide to talk about the moments in recent weeks that they have felt the best. Try to bring him/her back to a time when things seemed hopeless but then got better.
- **Be Honest.** Do not promise confidentiality. Do not make unrealistic promises (i.e. no hospitalization, no calling 911, etc.).
- **Get Help.** Do not try to manage this situation alone – or even as a group. Contact trusted people and trained professionals to provide the help that is needed.
 - Tell the person that you will be calling for help.
 - Ask if they have prepared a crisis plan for themselves that you can use to find them the help that they need.
 - Ask if there is a person that they trust whom you can call to assist, such as a family member, doctor, therapist, etc.
 - If no other trained health care professionals are immediately available, and the person appears to be in imminent danger, call 911 for local emergency services. Ask for a Crisis Intervention Team, when available.
- **Support Yourself and Each Other.** After a crisis situation in a support group, it is important to be sure that you have the support that you need, and the group has a chance to debrief about the situation.
 - Refer to your own wellness plan or contact your health care professional to process the experience.
 - As soon as possible (at the current or the next support group meeting) discuss the experience of supporting a group participant through a suicidal crisis as a group, and determine what went well and how you would do things differently in the future.
 - Encourage each other to have personal crisis plans prepared to be sure that each person is treated as they choose. Included at the end of this guide is “DBSA’s Plan for Life” that can help get individuals started.

- **Prepare for the Future.** Discuss with the group the idea of participants giving permission for an appointed group representative to contact an individual's family, doctor, therapist, or counselor in extenuating circumstances. DBSA does not encourage chapters or support groups to require its participants to provide this information. Work as a group to educate each other on individuals' early warning signs that might indicate they are becoming very ill or potentially dangerous.

What other plans/policies/procedures does your group want to consider?

Professional Advisor contact information:

Your local emergency numbers:

Emergency Services: 911

National Suicide Prevention Helpline: (800) 273-TALK

Police: _____

Crisis Intervention Team: _____

Others: _____

Chapter Leaders: In case of a crisis, these chapter leaders and/or group participants should be notified right away:

Follow up: Will your support group follow up with the person in crisis after the meeting? If so, how will the follow up occur?

Violent / Threatening Support Group Participant

Tips to Remember:

1. Safety first. The safety of the support group participants should be the first priority for any support group facilitator. When deciding on a course of action in a challenging situation, always choose the route that provides for the safety of your group.
2. Call for help if needed. There are professionals trained for crisis situations. Call 911. Know of other community resources.
3. Never underestimate the power of a support group to provide hope and support to a person in crisis when it is most needed.

If someone is threatening to harm another support group participant(s) during a support group that you're facilitating, consider the following actions:

- **Check Yourself.** Take a deep breath and remember that as a facilitator your job is to guide the group through helping each other. All the responsibility is not on your shoulders. Be sure to distinguish between anger and threats. Many people have different thresholds of comfort when it comes to anger. Check with the group to see if they feel the behavior is acceptable or not. Make yourself aware of your own reactions and calmly respond to the situation and try not to panic. Feelings of anxiety are contagious, so do your best to trust yourself and provide authentic support to the person in need.
- **Calmly Confront the Behavior.** Clearly state that the behavior being displayed is not acceptable and firmly ask the person to stop. Be firm but respectful in your tone – do not raise your voice or start speaking as you would to a child. Offer to have a discussion to de-escalate the situation privately in a small group (never meet alone with a person who is threatening).
- **Ask the Group for Help.** Refer to the DBSA Support Group Guidelines (included in the addendum to this guide) to which your group should agree to abide by before each meeting. Remind the threatening participant that he/she is violating his agreement with the group, and calmly ask if they can talk about the situation as a group.
- **Ask Someone to Call for Help.** If it becomes necessary, ask at least two people to go together to call 911 or another appropriate service in your community. The safety of the group participants and the person in distress should be the top priority, so do not hesitate to call for help.
- **Seek To Understand.** The distressed individual may simply be frustrated by their inability to communicate something – people need to be heard, so offer to listen intently to truly understand what the person needs. Say something like, "I can see that

you're hurting. I want to help. Help me understand what you're feeling right now. We're here to support you."

- **De-escalate.** Don't overlook the obvious – many situations can be effectively handled by offering to accompany an upset person on a walk or out for a cup of coffee. Keep it simple – some distressed individuals can be asked to come back on a day when they are feeling better. In some cases it may be appropriate to walk the person home, call a friend or family member, or offer to accompany them to their doctor. Remember, never go anywhere alone with a person who is threatening.
- **Support Yourself and Each Other.** After a crisis situation in a support group, it is important to be sure that you have the support that you need, and the group has a chance to debrief about the situation.
 - Refer to your own wellness plan or contact your health care professional to process the experience.
 - As soon as possible (at the current or the next support group meeting), discuss the experience of supporting a group participant through a crisis as a group, and determine how you would do things differently in the future.
 - Encourage each other to have personal crisis plans prepared to be sure that each person is treated as they choose.
- **Prepare for the Future.** Discuss with the group the idea of participants giving permission for an appointed group representative to contact an individual's family, doctor, therapist, or counselor in extenuating circumstances. DBSA does not encourage chapters or support groups to require its participants to provide this information. Work as a group to educate each other on individuals' early warning signs that might indicate they are becoming very ill or a potential danger to others.

What other plans/policies/procedures does your group want to consider?

Professional Advisor contact information:

Your local emergency numbers:

Emergency Services: 911

National Suicide Prevention Helpline: (800) 273-TALK

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Follow up: Will your support group follow up with the person in crisis after the meeting? If so, how will the follow up occur?

Support Group Debriefing in the Event of a Suicide Attempt

Adapted from DBSA Boston

In cases of suicide attempts or completed suicides by a group participant, family member or friend, it is important for a support group to debrief. Society discourages talk of suicide and suicide attempts, but a DBSA support group is one place where people can have these conversations in an atmosphere of trust and care. Before starting any conversations regarding suicide, the facilitator should give an opportunity for those who may be triggered by this topic to excuse themselves.

If the person who has attempted suicide is not present at the meeting...

Honor the group participant's right to privacy and, if possible, speak with them prior to the meeting to see if they are comfortable with this being discussed. If they are not comfortable, please respect this right and lead the group away from discussion about the attempt. If they are, report to the support group the facts as you know them, or ask others to report on the facts of the situation. You do not need to give details about the actual attempt, the focus of the discussion should be on sharing feelings. Give group participants an opportunity to respond individually about how they feel about the suicide attempt. Give ample time to the topic, but be sure to move on to other topics in the meeting – including, of course, the progress toward recovery each person has made since the last meeting. Remind the group of the confidentiality policy of the meeting.

If the person who has attempted suicide is present at the meeting...

If the facilitator is made aware of the suicide attempt, ask the person (in private) if they want to talk about the attempt. If they are not comfortable talking about this with the group, please respect this right and lead the group away from discussion about the attempt. If the person is willing to discuss their attempted suicide, ask them to tell the group how they were feeling then and how they are feeling now. Whether or not the person talks further, ask group participants to respond individually about how they feel about what the person who attempted suicide has reported. Facilitate the group in expressing genuine care and concern, and move on to other topics.

If the group is not aware of an attempted suicide, but the person brings it up during discussion...

Be sure that people talk about it – don't ignore it. Ask the person if it would help her/him to talk about how they were feeling then and how they are feeling now. Help the group express that you are all glad to have the person there. Whether or not the person talks further, ask group participants to respond individually about how they feel about what the person who attempted suicide has reported. Facilitate the group in expressing genuine care and concern, and move on to other topics.

In the event of a group participant, family member, or friend completing suicide...

At the beginning of the meeting, inform the group of the situation. Tell the facts as you know them, or ask others to report on the facts of the situation. You do not need to give details

about the method, the focus of the discussion should be on sharing feelings. Allow the group some flexibility in their communication. Allow grieving, and allow time to just be with one another as a group. Let the group know that they may bring this up during discussion in future meetings, and facilitate a discussion about all the support systems that are available for the group participants after they leave the meeting. Consider bringing in a trained grief counselor or utilize your professional advisor as a resource at a specially arranged meeting. Be sure to discuss other topics at the meeting – including, of course, the progress toward recovery each person has made since the last meeting. You may consider arranging (or having another group participant arrange) for a card, flowers, or other appropriate gestures on behalf of the group.

What other plans/policies/procedures does your group want to consider?

My Plan for Life

My Contact Information

Name: _____

Address: _____

Day Phone: _____ Evening Phone: _____

Cell/other Phone: _____

Employer: _____

My Doctor's Contact Information

Doctor's Name: _____

Address: _____

Office Phone: _____ Emergency Phone: _____

Pager/other Phone: _____

If my doctor is not available, contact these medical professionals: _____

My Health Care Information

Preferred Hospital: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

2nd Choice Hospital: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Medications: _____

Allergies to/intolerance of any medication: _____

Insurance or Medicaid information: _____

Support Information

Things that might trigger an episode, such as life events, travel, physical illness, or work stress:

Warning signs such as talking very fast, paranoia, lack of sleep, slowed down movement, excessive alcohol or drug use:

Things people can say that are calming and reassuring:

Things people should do in crisis such as take away car keys and lock up anything dangerous such as weapons and medications:

Things emergency staff can do, such as explain things, talk slowly, observe personal space, or write things:

Reasons life is worthwhile and recovery is important:

DBSA Chapter Functions

DBSA Chapter Fundamentals

DBSA Chapter Outcomes

DBSA Chapters exist to *improve the lives of people living with mood disorders* on a local level. These chapters engage in four major functions to achieve this mission:

- **Support**
The chapter offers consistent, comfortable, welcoming peer-led support services to their community that help people successfully manage their disease.
- **Education**
The chapter provides scientifically sound, wellness-based educational programs and resources to community participants, and does not promote a specific medication, business, treatment or provider.
- **Community Outreach**
The chapters receive and actively reach out to community members in need of chapter services. The chapter publicizes relevant community and chapter opportunities, and maintains communication lines for interested parties.
- **Advocacy**
The chapter actively advocates for personal self-care and works with local advocacy agencies, as available, to help improve the lives of people living with mood disorders.

Through the four chapter functions, the exemplification of our chapter principles, and the dedication to our mission, policies and guidelines, DBSA chapters work toward the following outcomes:

- Help people live successfully with their condition.
- Provide emotional support and the wisdom of experience to peers, families, and friends.
- Build self-esteem and empower participants to actively improve their life, and the lives of others affected by depression or bipolar disorder.
- Eliminate discrimination and stigma related to depression and bipolar disorder.
- Reach all individuals in the community affected by depression or bipolar disorder with opportunities for support and empowerment.
- Educate chapter participants and the public -- through programs and resources -- about mood disorders.



DBSA Chapter Principles

- **Focus on self-help**
Each person has the ability to help themselves. Together we all know more than one of us alone. Everyone has value and something to add to the group process. Each of us is the authority on what we need.
- **Peer-leadership**
We are all equals. Our chapters are governed by our participants, and our support groups are led by people living with a mood disorder or their friends/family.
- **Confidentiality**
No one may publicly reveal information about the people attending chapter activities or what is said during a support group meeting. Exceptions to this policy are made only when safety is of concern.
- **Safety and Acceptance**
Chapter activities and support groups are welcoming to all and foster a nurturing atmosphere.
- **Consistency**
Chapter services are offered at consistent times and places for the comfort of participants.
- **Accessibility**
Support groups are free of charge, and all activities are accessible to anyone who can benefit from them.

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance

DBSA Support Group Guidelines

- **Share the air**
Everyone who wishes to share has an opportunity to do so. No one person should monopolize group time.
- **One person speaks at a time**
Each person should be allowed to speak free from interruption and side conversations.
- **What is said here stays here**
This is the essential principle of confidentiality, and MUST be respected by all.
- **Differences of opinion are o.k.**
We are ALL entitled to our own point of view.
- **We are all equal**
We may not all be of the same race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation. We may not all share the same culture, language, beliefs, or lifestyle. We are unique individuals and though we are different, we are all equal and we promote the acceptance of our differences.
- **Use "I" language**
Because we do not participate in support groups as credentialed professionals, *we do not INSTRUCT or ADVISE*. We, however, do share from our own personal experiences. Example: "In my experience, I have found..."
- **It's o.k. not to share**
People do not have to share if they do not wish to.
- **It's everyone's responsibility to make the discussion groups a safe place to share**
We respect confidentiality, treat each other with respect and kindness, and show compassion.