

Workers' Responses in the Dark Times

We are women who have experienced dark thoughts and survived. We want to share our hard won wisdom with you, to assist you in helping others. Please listen to our words with respect.

What Has Been Most Helpful In Counselling

Witnessing the pain and distress: Having you really listen is such a relief. I need someone to know this terrible stuff is really happening to me – the situations in my life and the pain I experience because of this.

Listening to the pain and sadness: When you ask questions about how the thoughts are affecting me, this lets me know that you are really listening. I know that you are interested in what is happening to me.

Trust: It takes time to build trust. Over time it is easier to talk about something traumatic. Saying something out loud is hard. When there is less trust I find it easier to write the words down.

Genuine empathy and compassion: It is very powerful for me to know when my story has moved you to sadness or anger, at the hurt or injustice I have experienced. It makes me feel like I matter, when the dark thoughts are telling me that I am nothing, I am worthless and I deserve this pain.

Writing things down or videoing: Sometimes I can't hear you because of the sound of the thoughts rushing like water in my ears. It is like I am drowning in sadness. When we write things down, or you email me later or I can watch the video of our session, it helps me hold onto important things we have discovered together.

Helping me feel safe: I am taking a huge risk in telling you about the dark thoughts. You could judge me and think I am bad or weird, or ring Mental Health and I could be locked up, or you could decide I am not a safe parent and call Community Services (child protection). I need to build up trust, and this takes time. I can tell that you don't judge me by your questions, and your responses to my statements, by your tone of voice and your facial expressions. This makes me feel safe.

The regularity is important: Knowing that it is the same person I see each week is very important. She gets to know me and she can read when I seem low or have a headache and can't concentrate and she asks me about it. Then she gives me options that we can cut the session short, and we go with the flow. In the beginning it helped to build trust by having the same worker. Having the same time each week is helpful too. The thoughts tell me not to turn up to my appointment, so having a regular time helps me prepare myself.

Building connection: It helps to build connection when I have the same person each time. I don't have to worry about judgement, when the counsellor already knows my story. I can hear your attitude and warmth in your voice.

High spirits: At Playgroup the leader has very high spirits and her positiveness makes me want to stay for the whole time, when the thoughts are telling me to leave early.

What Has Not Been Helpful

Just asking about safety: When a mental health worker only asked me about safety, it felt like she wasn't interested in how I was feeling or how hard things are. Once she knew I wasn't going to kill myself, she moved to another topic.

Hypothesising: A worker once suggested that the dark thoughts help me, because they distract me from other problems in my life. This was devastating. I cried every day for two weeks. Firstly, experiencing thoughts that tell me I deserve to die and that I have no choice in this, is the worst pain I have ever experienced and is not helpful. Secondly, by implying that I am avoiding other problems it makes me feel like I am not doing enough about the other things, when I am actually doing so much that I am exhausted. Thirdly, if I am not doing enough about the other problems, then to me that means that I mustn't love my family enough, which adds power to the idea that I deserve to die. Fourthly, it suggests that I am *trying* to 'be suicidal' on some subconscious level, which confirms the idea that 'something is wrong with me', which brings shame and stops me from asking for help next time.

Arrogance/rushing: when the psychiatrist rushes my appointment and only gives me 3 minutes, it feels like he is being arrogant, and that I'm not listened to. He only asks about repeats for scripts. This makes me angry, especially when I report side effects and he says 'Well that's medication - keep going with it.'

Intensity: With the mental health team it is either every day phone calls, which feels too intense, or a drought where they don't call at all. A 5 second phone call asking if I'm okay or if I have suicidal thoughts is just annoying. If you are going to call, make it a worthwhile conversation, otherwise it seems like you are 'just doing your job'. Please don't call when the kids have just gotten home from school. Everyone is loud and making demands – this is not a good time to be asked if I'm suicidal!

Breaking Trust: When workers aren't transparent about calling Community Services (child protection) it breaks trust. I can't work with you if I don't understand why you think my suicidal thoughts are a risk to the kids. I can't speak to you if I don't trust you.

This document contains contributions from Taylor, Tahlia and Lucy (pseudonyms).
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