***How you can help when we speak of ending our lives***

***‘Don't try to stop us, try to understand us. When you understand us, together we can try and stop us.’***

Caregivers and mental health workers often have powerful uncertainty and anguish when they are caring for us and we are contemplating suicide. We think two common questions can be:

* How can we help when they speak of ending their lives?
* What should we do about our fears or even our panic?

Below we have gathered together a few of our ideas that go some way in answering those questions.

Our ideas were jotted down, generally word for word, in groups and one to one conversations with a therapist. We spoke of what can help, but also of what does not help, as many of use have much to say about what has not been helpful. We think it is important to include both sides of this story.

We want to acknowledge how tough going it can be to stand by our sides when ending our lives seems like the only option. It can be tempting to turn away. When it **is** tough going, one of us offered an invitation to not run away. We hope you can be there and join us in the sorrow. So we want to turn the volume up on the following words, on this invitation:

 *‘Sometimes listening to the sadness hurts your heart. When your heart is hurt and you acknowledge that you have a sad heart – and I can tell you do – don't run away. I like it when you say you have a sad heart because it means you care.’*

The document has the following themes:

* **The complexity of care**
* **If we feel like outliers**
* **If we feel wrong, punished or are asked to promise**
* **When we say ‘we don't want to end our lives’ or ‘don't worry’**
* **If they show they’re okay it makes it easier**
* **The simple life is not so simple**
* **Talk about it**
* **When buying time**
* **Faith and religion helping and hindering**
* **When sorrow and despair swamps us and we want to end it all**
* **Care with words**
* **When other’s worries persevere**
* **Outside times of crisis**

\* A qualification: while speaking about these issues we thought of an important qualification for a document such as this – there’s not going to be one clear quote to help. The following words evoke this:

*‘The thing is, everybody’s so different. It’s difficult to have* ***the*** *correct approach. It’s probably easier to say something about what is not helpful. And it’s almost like you need to know everything about a person before you can help them with suicidal experience. There’s not going to be one clear quote to help everyone.’*

**The complexity of care**

We have placed Mary’s story at the beginning of this document as it evokes some of the seemingly unsolvable complexity of providing care for someone who is swamped by suicidal experience. We want to make such complexity clear at the outset of this document. It seems that despair and suicidal experience can put relationships under unbearable strain and uncertainty, as Mary’s words convey.

* ***I was really angry at them… but she noticed me for good things***

*‘When people try to show they care, I can get really angry at them. I don’t want to tell them I’m set on dying. I can feel guilty, but I want them to leave me alone so I can get on with dying. Recently people saw I was slipping before I saw I was slipping, so I got really frustrated and mad that they cared, and were trying to show their care. I ended up trying to damage the relationship. I thought I’d argue with them so that they would resent me and leave me alone.*

*I thought I would have moved on from the frustration and despair that I’m still alive, but I haven’t moved on from that fully – there’s a part of me that resents everyone and tries to push them away because I’m still alive. So I’m not in that spot where I appreciate their persistence in keeping me alive.*

*There’s a good and a bad side to people’s persistence. Logically I appreciate they stayed, and I think, wow, you have good people around you. However because I have something to fix my problems or end my suffering, it offers solace knowing it can end. So it’s like they’re taking everything away, stealing my only solace.*

*There was something cool when I went on leave with my mum yesterday. A woman came up to me out of the blue and asked me, “Are you Mary?” I thought, “Who are you?”, but quickly realised she was a recovery nurse from when I woke up after my ECT treatments. She remembered me. I thought to myself, she would see dozens of people every day and yet she remembered me. And she could have thought, just in her head, “I recognise her”, and kept walking. I don’t know… it really struck a chord. She remembered the small details. It’s the small differences, when you don’t expect them to happen, you don’t expect to make an impact on people’s lives. It made me think, “Yeah, maybe I’m an okay person, clearly I’m not too bad.” Yesterday I felt suicidal but for someone to recognise me, then come up to me and have noticed me for good things – I guess I never realise the input you can make in people’s lives.’*

**If we feel like outliers**

Some attitudes or words make desperation so much stronger. Many of us know we can feel like there is even less to live for if we feel too different, or like we don't fit in.

* ***Don’t tell us we are outliers***

*‘Telling us to stop because we are “not of sound mind” does not help. I would say don’t tell us we are outliers because it fuels our wanting to end it. It affirms we are not like everyone else and we won’t be able to get on in society.’*

* ***I’m still the same person, I’m just trying to work out how to be alive***

*‘My parents and my sister don't really know how to handle it and they treat me differently. The way they talk to me makes me very uncomfortable. And they’d come into my room – I didn't like that as I’d feel trapped. So I would say don't treat me differently. I’m still the same person, I’m just trying to work out how to be alive… and my identity, and where I fit in. When I am treated differently I can feel so isolated.’*

* ***Interest and a normal connection, rather than awkwardness or surveillance***

*‘The people around me can treat me like I’m stupid, weird or crazy because of the die thoughts I have. They can treat me as if I don't understand the world, like I’m in a fairyland. They over-explain and say things like, “I’m just walking into your room right now” or “I am going to sit on your bed.” I do speak up with them when I’m having an episode, but I would say it can be better if you have a good connection. If others are interested and it’s a normal connection, it’s easier to share when everything is not okay. I then have good associations with these connections, I see good people, rather than awkwardness or surveillance.’*

**If we feel wrong, punished or are asked to promise**

Desperation can also get stronger if mental health workers or carers do or say things that lead us to feel wrong, punished or require us to promise. These attitudes or words can be conveyed in the smallest of actions, especially when our sensitivities are so finely tuned, which they often are when we feel so undone.

* ***In these moments you need silence***

*‘I know that people can freak out when you want to die. They don't want you to feel it. When I reassure them I am not going to do it AND they hear I’m still thinking like that, like I want to die, then they think it’s wrong. This can bring shame and it intensifies the feeling and makes you feel worse about yourself. When they say you shouldn't be feeling that, I find it dismissive and I end up thinking of what else I’ve done “wrong”. I can then feel like a bad person or that I am in trouble. But all I want to do really is die, I haven’t done anything wrong, I just want to die. In these moments you need silence and no reactions.’*

* ***We can lie if we worry about being ashamed or in trouble***

*‘Some of us here have a tendency to lie because we don't want to be embarrassed, ashamed or in trouble. If we feel punished we can feel like we want to die. We can feel like we are not going to get anywhere. That’s why I never tell people about my self-harm and suicidal thoughts. So often when people ask me if I’m okay, I say yes, but really I am not okay.’*

* ***Mental health units should be prepared for all this***

*‘I would say it can help to be prepared for anything – like a mental tornado is coming through the unit. Sometimes it’s not really our fault; it’s a result of the mental health problem. I can have two different voices inside my head, one’s the good side and one’s the bad side and they go at each other like maniacs. And we do get frustrated a lot – of course we would. It can help to feel prepared for all this, rather than have people feel like they’re being punished.’*

* ***My parents know to not promise anything***

*‘My parents know not to ask me to promise anything with my thoughts and actions. It brings guilt, which just makes it harder. It is the same with self-harm.’*

**When we say ‘we don't want to end our lives’ or ‘don't worry’**

Some of us found it particularly difficult if we tried to reassure people around us, and our reassurances weren’t really accepted. This can set the scene for more agitation.

* ***I want to come out of my room in my own time, when I am ready***

*‘Sometimes, when I am in my room, I know worry can get to my mum, and even when I say, “don’t worry, I’m safe”, she doesn't accept it. At these times I can get angry, which can make the situation worse and I can get even more upset. When this happens I would love it if she used some more patience. I want to come out of my room in my own time, when I am ready. If I come out when I’m feeling like crap I get agitated easier.’*

* ***Accept my answer***

*‘I always say, “I don’t have plans and I don’t want to do it”, when my parents ask me if I am suicidal. Yet it feels like I’m not convincing enough, as their fear or anxiety doesn’t go away. It would be good if my parents could accept my answer; they could say, “I hear you” or perhaps talk to me about why they don’t believe me or talk about their fear or anxiety somewhere else. When they don’t accept my answer it makes me want to do it more, I am not sure why. ’*

**If they show they’re okay it makes it easier**

Many of us want to say how important it is that those who care for us find a way to settle their worries and fears, and it’s often best if they are settled away from our lives. If mental health workers or carers don't do this, the worry and fears can bring more stress all round. However, we want to add that sometimes when we hear worry from caregivers we hear care.

* ***Emotions can get in the way***

*‘It helps if my parents stay calm during the conversation and maybe process their worries elsewhere. It can be important for them to do that before they help me with my stress, otherwise we can fight or the whole thing gets more stressful. Emotions can get in the way. Also it can be a burden to reassure them if they are really worried.’*

* ***I don't want them to take on too much***

*‘I hate going to my parents because all three of us siblings have problems that are significant and so I feel really bad. I don’t want them to take on too much. I want my parents to be okay and if they show they’re okay it makes it easier.’*

* ***They need to be the strong ones right now***

*‘I know this might not be so great to say but I think, they’re the parents, they need to hear what I am saying and to be the strong ones right now, not us.’*

**The simple life is not so simple**

We know it can be so hard to stand with us in this experience, but we would like you to know just how tiring it can be when nothing seems simple. This includes the enormity of what we have inherited from the previous generations. We would like you to know it just seems too hard at times.

* ***Sometimes it can feel impossible***

*‘I would hope that they learn that not everyone can do it, the simple life is not simple to us. Some people can break and lose what’s left in their mind looking for a greater purpose that did not exist in the first place. Sometimes it can feel impossible to find something when you do not know or understand what you are looking for.’*

* ***A realisation that our ancestor’s problems are now given to the next generation***

*‘It helps to be shown with absolute certainty that the person wanting a way out is so distressed and pressured by a multitude of things that the energy to overcome such obstacles would require the person much more energy than is “worth” their life at the time. This can include a realisation that our ancestor’s problems are now given to the next generation to attempt to figure out; problems such as world poverty, global warming and space exploration. Sometimes I think I ought to sacrifice myself for another mind, one hopefully greater than mine in helping evolve humanity.’*

**Talk about it**

Suicidal experience is often so very hard for us to speak about, so when others around us also find it difficult, it can feel like we are climbing a mountain that never ends. Many of us want to be able to talk about our suicidal experience with caregivers and mental health workers much more easily.

* ***Don’t dance around it***

*‘It’s a tricky one. Suicidal thoughts are not talked about enough, as people are way way too scared to talk about them. It’s a taboo no one wants to touch on. I would say don’t dance around it, talk about it, even as though it is fairly every day. Support us. I like it when they say, “I feel you, it’s hard.” My mum supports my emotions and doesn’t brush it under the carpet, but it has taken some time to get there.’*

* ***It’s important that parents are up for it***

*‘It is so important to talk about suicidal thoughts. My parents aren’t so good at talking about it and I don’t have many places to talk about it, as people aren’t comfortable with it as a topic. I think it’s important that parents are up for it.’*

**When buying time**

It is a time of such anguish and sensitivity for us when emergency services have been called. Any harshness pierces us at these times.

* ***Be reassuring and understanding when buying time***

*‘It can be useful to call emergency services at those times we are wanting it to end. But the tone around this time can be important. It can help if people are reassuring and understanding, especially when you are buying time for ambulances or other services.’*

**Faith and religion helping and hindering**

Although some of us have our faith and our spirituality to help us through these dark times, some of us have felt worse as a result of religious messages.

* ***For suicidal people their faith is in others***

*‘Faith keeps us alive. For many people the faith could be in themselves or it could be the universe. But for suicidal people their faith is in others. That is what keeps us here. When I cannot trust or have faith in myself to keep me here I can trust and have faith in you.’*

* ***Life can hurt***

*‘If I talk about feeling suicidal the Catholic side can get brought into it. Like the idea if I suicide I’ll go to hell. This brings added guilt which isn’t needed.’*

*‘I resonate with this. Like, I hear that Jesus didn't die for me to take my own life. Don’t hold that against us because life can hurt. Don't use religion against us.’*

**When sorrow and despair swamps us and we want to end it all**

We have lots of different thoughts about what we are hoping from others – often desperately hoping for – when futility and sorrow are pushing us under. Some of us have emphasised the quality of the listening, some of us are careful about whom we are talking with, some of us emphasise being included in decisions and require understanding, and some of us simply hope for care.

* ***Try to understand us***

*‘I would say don't try to stop us, try to understand us. Then when you understand us, together we can try and stop us.’*

* ***You don't need a fix-it-Felix***

*‘When you’re in this state you want someone calm and chill, who is going to be there and talk it through; to listen to it. You don't need a fix-it-Felix!’*

* ***Learning about our struggles***

*‘I just want them to sit there and listen. Sometimes they try and fix the problem and it can’t be fixed in the moment. Sometimes just sitting with us, and learning about our struggles is way more helpful than telling us what we should do or freaking out.’*

* ***You’re just wanting someone to hear you***

*‘If they blame themselves and get angry, it can be really devaluing of what you’re going through. Angry reactions are not very good. Don’t get angry. Right then and there you need someone to hear you, you’re still in a crisis spot, you’re just wanting someone to hear you.’*

* ***Be included in decisions***

*‘I feel more comfortable to tell mum something serious if I know she’s not going to act on it, or at least include me in the decisions if she wants to act on it.’*

* ***I want you to be alive on Tuesday***

*‘My friend and I watch Netflix and she puts blankets around me. That really helps, it is warm and comforting. I like it when she says, “I know it’s not all about me and what I want in life, but I want you to be alive on Tuesday so I can see you”. That’s one of the nicest things anyone has said, she cares so much.’*

* ***Distraction cannot be the only thing that helps me deal with the emptiness***

*‘If I’m in my room, zone out and get lost in my head, and feel like shit, being alone is no good. At those times it can be helpful to go for a drive, play a game, go out for food; to do something that’s enjoyable, something that lightens my mood, that’s not just distraction. Distraction cannot be the only thing that helps me deal with the emptiness.’*

* ***Listen by asking questions***

*‘It’s better when you listen by asking questions rather than relating it to your own experiences as that can feel like you’re not listening. It’s important to feel listened to, it’s a big thing.’*

* ***Easier to speak about heavy stuff with people I don't know***

*‘I want people around me to talk with me about nothing. There’s a time and a place to talk about the heavy things. And I don't like to speak about heavy stuff with people I know. Because I am aware of overwhelming people, I find it easier to speak about heavy stuff with people I don't know.’*

**Care with words**

As one of us said, words can really affect us when we’re in this state. We think it is so important that much more sensitivity is shown around how words are used.

* ***Not using words that are used by the psychiatric authorities***

*‘I use the phrase “die thoughts” rather than suicidal thoughts because I don't want to use words that are used by the psychiatric authorities.’*

* ***‘See you soon’ not ‘goodbye’***

*‘When you’re in this state, words can really affect you. I feel like “goodbye” is too blunt, finished and relates it back to your mood. So I say, “see you soon”. It’s future oriented and takes you forward. It’s lighter and more comforting.’*

* ***It’s selfish to try not to understand***

*‘When people say it’s selfish to suicide, I’d say it’s selfish of them to not try to understand; an understanding especially around what it takes to be alive. I wish mental health workers and others could spend a day in my shoes. It’s not easy. I think if they were in a similar state they’d be desperate too.’*

**When other’s worries persevere**

When worries come – and we have seen how they can come to stay – it sometimes reminds us you care and it sometimes brings pressure. Pressure doesn't really help. We have many ideas for what to do when worry comes and starts to make a bad situation worse.

* ***You’re not a bad parent because you’re trying***

*‘If you’re worried about being a bad parent, you’re not a bad parent. Many parents wouldn’t worry about this. If you’re trying to do your best you’re not a bad parent because you’re trying. It shows you care, you’re not sitting back waiting for it to happen.’*

* ***Push me, but not too hard***

*‘If you’re worried about me and I say I don't want to leave my room, you can push me to do something I’d enjoy. But don't push me too hard. And I could say something like, “I’m enjoying being my myself.”’*

* ***It doesn't mean you’re doing anything wrong***

*‘A lot of us don't have great connections with our families and it can be hard to say what’s on our minds. Sometimes you’re not the person we want or need to talk with. This doesn't mean you’re doing anything wrong.’*

* ***They’re doing an amazing job at caring***

*‘I really appreciate what my parents have been doing. I don’t think they could do any better. I see their frustration at times – not very often though. They can be frustrated when I don’t reach the goals I set for myself. They’re doing an amazing job at caring.’*

* ***I think parents can need help to feel better***

*‘My parents have been amazing. When I hear their guilt, I feel guilt, it’s kind of like an Inception thing. I try to reassure them, to make them feel less guilty. I think parents can also need help to feel better. So I attempt to come to terms with the illness and accept it, which can free their guilt, which then in turn frees my guilt.’*

* ***‘Responsibility’ to fix it can be counter-productive for everyone***

*‘My mum gets very anxious about how I am going, feels guilty, then feels she is responsible for how I am going and that she has to fix it. This sense of needing to fix it can be counter-productive for everyone.’*

* ***It’s really nice he gets it***

*‘I feel like I’m really lucky because my dad has depression, even though he’s not sure of himself as a dad. When I say how I feel I know he’s felt it on a bigger scale. It’s really nice he gets it.’*

* ***Middle ground between blame and guilt***

*‘I do think there can be a middle ground between being blamed by parents and parents feeling guilty and fixing it. I was blamed for my trauma. I think my parents don’t need to feel guilty or to fix it – they just need to listen and not to blame.’*

* ***Set up a safe place***

*‘I think it can be good to set up a safe space, perhaps with a therapist, especially when you’re worried. You can talk things through and we can say things like “it did hurt when you did this or reacted in this way”. This feedback can help them to learn what will help their child.’*

* ***It can bring a divide***

*‘I feel like if I regress, however big or small, my parents can see it as a reflection on them, when it isn’t and that gets in the way. Then there’s a divide between us.’*

**Outside times of crisis**

We know that it is useful to think and plan for the storm when the wild weather has passed, even if momentarily. When the weather is calmer we can plan for the times when the storm is passing through and we can’t find a safe harbour.

* ***Work out a plan when we’re happier***

*‘It’s best to have a conversation; to sit down and talk with us about a plan for when we want to die. It is important to have that conversation when we’re happier. At those times when our backs are against the wall and we want to end our lives you can implement these plans we’ve worked out.’*

* ***We will be grateful even if doesn’t seem like it at the time***

*‘Be reassured that after the crisis we will be grateful to you for saving our lives, even though we will not be grateful at the time. We will probably be angry or irritable.’*

* ***The presence of suicidal thoughts shouldn’t be innately scary***

*‘I would say don't think about it as black or white. It’s not that you have suicidal thoughts and then one day you suddenly don't. They often don't go away, we just get better at managing them. Yet their presence shouldn’t be innately scary. I think of it as a reaction. It’s often the first thing my brain resorts to out of habit.’*

* ***I am really happy sometimes***

*‘I don’t know if I can take away their terror about ending my life but it might help them to know that I am really happy sometimes.’*

* ***I text her every morning***

*‘I have this thing where I text her every morning. One day I slept in ‘til 9.30 on a Monday. She flipped her shit. She cares so much. So with our deal, she doesn't have to worry if she doesn't get a text.’*