

Prisoners: Suicidal thoughts

How to cope

This factsheet may help you if you are in prison and dealing with suicidal thoughts, feelings, or intentions. It has ideas you can try to help yourself. It explains how you can stay safe, and how you can get support. This information is for adult prisoners in England who are experiencing suicidal thoughts. It's also for their loved ones, carers and anyone interested in the subject.

Please note: We have included links to websites and PDF documents in this factsheet. We know that prisoners don't usually have access to the internet. But we have included the links to websites and PDF documents, as they might be of use to your loved ones or staff who are supporting you. You could ask them if they could print out some useful information for you.

Key Points.

- There are things you can do to help yourself if you are experiencing suicidal thoughts in prison.
- You can talk about how you're feeling with someone you trust. Also, you can call an emotional support helpline like the Samaritans on 116 123.
- You can ask for help and support from medical staff, the safer custody team, your personal officers, the prison chaplain, listeners, and insiders.
- You can try to do things which take your mind off what you're thinking.
- You can make a crisis plan and crisis box.
- If you are the prisoner's loved one and you are concerned, you can take action.

This factsheet covers:

1. [How can I help myself?](#)
2. [How can I get help and support?](#)
3. [How can I make a crisis plan and crisis box?](#)
4. [I'm worried about my loved one in prison. What can I do?](#)

1. How can I help myself?

Prisoners are more likely to have suicidal thoughts than people in the community:¹

- male prisoners are nearly 3 times more likely to have experienced suicidal thoughts than men in the community, and
- female prisoners are more than 13 times more likely to have experienced suicidal thoughts than women in the community.

When you're feeling suicidal, it can feel overwhelming. It may feel like you have no other option than to act on these feelings. That there's nothing that will make the thoughts or feelings go away. Or that it's the only way the pain will stop.

It may feel like nothing will help. But there are things that you can do, and you may feel differently after you've tried them. See below for more information.

You can try to get through this moment or this day rather than focusing too much on the future.

You can try to change your immediate thoughts by doing something or thinking of something different. It doesn't have to be a big change or take a lot of effort.

Have a look at the following ideas. You may find some of these things help.

Tell someone or raise an alarm if you're in immediate danger

You might be in your cell or elsewhere and feel in immediate danger of trying to take your own life or harming yourself. If you're alone raise an alarm to attract the attention of prisoner officers or other staff. If you're not alone, you can also talk to your cell mate or others.

Don't make a decision today

You don't have to act on your thoughts right now.

You can try to focus on just getting through now, or today, and not the rest of your life.

You may have had these thoughts before, but you might feel less able to cope today. You might find that you are more able to cope in a few days.

We know your feelings of pain are very real. But try to remember that this feeling is temporary and it's likely to pass.

Get help and support from professionals and others

See [section 2](#) of this factsheet for more information.

Try to be aware of your triggers

It might help to think about what triggers your suicidal feelings. Triggers are things which might make you feel worse.

Triggers are different for different people. You may find that things like certain music or photos make you feel worse. Try to stay away from these.

If you can understand what your triggers are, it can help you to be more in control of your feelings or stress levels.

You might have something that could help you to act on your thoughts, like something sharp. It's best to give this to a staff member.

Look at your crisis plan

You can follow your crisis plan if you have one. You may have made a crisis plan with the help of a health professional or made your own.

If you don't have a crisis plan you can make one. You can start to think of some things which you will find helpful.

[Section 3](#) of this factsheet gives more information about how to make a crisis plan.

Look in your crisis box or hope book

A crisis box or a hope book is personal to you and can be filled with items that make you feel happier about life.

If you don't have a crisis box or hope book, you can make one. [Section 3](#) of this factsheet gives more information about this.

Talk to other people

Talk to someone you trust, such as:

- prison staff,
- your personal officer,
- the prison chaplain,
- a listener
- an insider,
- other prisoners, or
- loved ones.

You can read more about the people you can speak to in the [section 2](#) of this factsheet.

You could also try calling an emotional helpline. There is a list of emotional helplines you could call in the [Useful contacts](#) section below.

Try to distract yourself

You might feel it is impossible not to focus on your suicidal thoughts or why you feel that way. If you focus on your thoughts, it might make them feel stronger and harder to cope with. So, you can try doing things that distract you.

For example, you could:

- tidy your cell,
- try writing or drawing something,
- choose an object and think of 10 different ways to use it,
- count to 500,
- be around other people when you are able,
- sign up to a class or job in prison,
- write down your negative thoughts and then screw the paper up and throw it away,
- read a book from the library, or
- write a letter to a relative or friend.

You can find some more ideas of distraction techniques here: www.papyrus-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Distracton-Techniques.pdf

Take care with illegal drugs and alcohol

Overall, alcohol can have a negative effect on your emotions and mental health.² If you're feeling low, drinking alcohol might bring on suicidal thoughts or make them worse.

Alcohol problems are one of the highest risk factors for suicides, especially amongst males.³ So, you can think about avoiding alcohol or cutting down.

Illegal drugs also affect the way you think and feel.⁴ Try and avoid or cut down on illegal drugs if you are feeling suicidal. You may be more likely to take your own life if you take illegal drugs.

You should be able to get support in prison if you have an issue with drugs or alcohol. You can find more information in our '**Mental healthcare in prison**' factsheet at www.rethink.org. Or call our General Enquiries Team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

Be around other people, when you can

Being around people when you can, might help to keep you safe, even if they don't know how you're feeling. It can also distract you from suicidal thoughts.

Exercise

Exercise can help you to feel good physically and have a good effect on your mood and thinking. Doing exercise can also give you something to

focus on. You could try doing things like crunches or yoga in your cell or visit the prison gym when you can.

There may be yoga classes on National Prison radio. You might be able to find books on yoga in the library. Or you can ask the Prison Phoenix Trust to send you some free CD's and books on yoga.⁵ Their contact details are in the [Useful contacts](#) section below.

You can find out more about '**Physical activity and mental health**' here: www.rethink.org/advice-and-information/living-with-mental-illness/information-on-wellbeing-physical-health-bame-lgbtplus-and-studying/physical-activity-and-mental-health

Try to reframe your thinking

You can make a list of all the positive things about yourself and your life. It might be hard to think of these things right now, but it might help.

Think about your strengths and positive things other people have said about you. Regularly write down one thing you felt good about, something good you did, or something good someone did for you.

Try a reframing exercise

You may not feel like focusing on the positive. But it might help you to reframe your thinking. You could try one of the following exercises.

What went well. Write down 3 things that went well today. You might feel like nothing went well. But if you think you can always find things, however small. It might be as simple as 'I told someone I was not okay' or 'I went to the gym.'

Write down things you're grateful for. Write down 3 things that you are grateful for in your life. You could also write a letter of thanks to a loved one, saying how grateful you are. You can focus on the positive things they give you or others.

Reframe the negative. You may have a negative situation or experience you're thinking about. You can write this down then think of 2 positives that have come from it. The negative thing might be 'I'm feeling suicidal'. The 2 positive things might be:

- 'I know I have people I can reach out to', and
- 'I've connected with others who have survived, so I know it's possible.'

You can find more examples of positivity exercises at the link below, which some people find useful: <https://positivepsychology.com/positive-psychology-interventions>

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a type of meditation. It is a way of paying attention to the present moment. When you practice mindfulness, you learn to be more

aware of your thoughts and feelings. Once you are more aware of your thoughts and feelings, you can learn to deal with them better.

It may help you to focus on the present moment and not your suicidal thoughts.

Some mindfulness techniques can be simple but effective, such as the 5-4-3-2-1 practice:

- Look around you. Pick 5 things and study them closely, their shape, their colour, their details. Do this one at a time for each of the 5 things.
- Close your eyes and pick out 4 things you can hear, like talking or someone walking.
- Then choose 3 things you can feel. It can be anything, the clothes you are wearing, a pen, a book.
- Now, pick out 2 things you can smell. It's fine if you can only smell one thing.
- Lastly, concentrate on one thing you can taste. Your tongue is fine.

The Prison Phoenix Trust can also send you free materials on meditation. Their contact details are in the [Useful contacts](#) section of this factsheet. See here for more details: www.theppt.org.uk/resources

There is more information about getting started with mindfulness of the mindful.org website: www.mindful.org/meditation/mindfulness-getting-started

Mindfulness usually benefits wellbeing. But if it's not working for you, or is causing you difficulty, stop using it. You can try other relaxation technique.

Problem solving

It can be helpful to think differently about your problems.

You can write down a problem you have and the things that might help to ease or solve that problem. You can ask someone to help if this feels too difficult.

This might help you to reframe the problems into manageable challenges. You could start with the small challenge and work your way up.

Breathing exercises

Breathing exercises can help make you feel calmer and reduce stress. Below are some exercises you can try.

Breathing exercises usually benefit wellbeing. But if they aren't working for you, or are causing you difficulty, stop using them. You can try other relaxation techniques.

Slow breathing

- Sit or lie in a comfortable position.
- Keep your back straight and your shoulders back.
- Close your eyes and focus on your breathing.
- Think about how your breathing feels in your body.
- Can you feel it coming in through your nostrils?
- Can you feel it going down your throat, into your lungs?
- Slow down your breathing as much as you can.
- You may find it useful to count as you inhale and exhale.
- See if you can expand your exhale, to make it longer than your inhale. Can you feel your chest expanding? What about your belly?
- If you start to have upsetting thoughts, try bringing your focus back to your breathing.

Box breathing

- Sit or lie in a comfortable position.
- Put on some relaxing music if you want.
- Take one deep breath in and out.
- Breathe in for 4 seconds.
- Hold your breath for 4 seconds.
- Breathe out for 6 seconds.
- Hold your breath for 2 seconds.
- Repeat this cycle for 5-10 minutes.

4-5-8 method

- Start by sitting up straight in a comfortable position or lying down.
- Slowly breathe in through your nose for 4 seconds. If you can't breathe in through your nose, use your mouth.
- Hold your breath for 5 seconds.
- Breathe out slowly for 8 seconds.
- Repeat this cycle 10 times, or as many times as you want. While you do it try to concentrate on your breathing. You can alter the second counts to suit you.

Make a list of what helped when you were feeling low before

Think about what helped when you have felt low in the past. For example, did you distract yourself with something or speak to someone? This list might be useful to look at whenever you feel low.

Remind yourself of your coping strategies

All these different things you can do are called coping strategies. You might want to have a list of them in your crisis plan, crisis box, or hope book.

You can find out more about making a crisis plan, crisis box or hope book in [section 3](#) of this factsheet.

You might also want to think about your own coping strategies and make a list of them.

You can find ideas of other coping strategies here: www.papyrus-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Coping-Strategies.pdf

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2. How can I get help and support?

You might feel alone but remember that there are people who can help.

Can I see a doctor?

You can see a doctor in prison. They could offer you medication or therapy if they think you have a mental health condition.

The doctor can refer you to a specialist mental health team if they think you need more support.

If you want to see a doctor, speak to a member of staff.

You can find more information about '**Mental healthcare in prison**' at www.rethink.org. Or call our General Enquiries Team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

What is the safer custody team?

The safer custody team (SCT) is a team of prison staff who try to keep the prison safe for everyone. They help to manage prisoners at risk of harming themselves, others or being harmed by others.⁶

If you are worried that you are at risk of suicide or self-harm, then speak to a member of staff. They can pass your details to the SCT.

All prisons should have a direct phone number for their SCT. Your loved ones can call it if they are worried about you.⁷

What is assessment, care in custody and teamwork (ACCT)?⁸

ACCT is how prison staff plan support for you to try to keep you safe. This is if you are at risk of self-harm or suicide.

You should have a case co-ordinator. They work with different prison staff to create a plan to try to keep you safe.

You should be involved in the plan. You can agree that loved ones can be involved too.

Staff might regularly observe you during the day and night to check that you are safe. There might be more checks if they think you are a greater risk of harming yourself.

What is a personal officer?

When you go into prison you may be given a personal officer. They are a member of staff you can go to for information, advice, and support.

They are also the person who will give you references for things like jobs or a change in status. Not all adult prisons run a personal officer scheme.⁹

If you are feeling suicidal your personal officer might be able to help.

What is a prison chaplain?

A prison chaplain can give you spiritual support and guidance. You can talk to them if you are feeling suicidal.¹⁰

The chaplain should help people of all religions. They should also help you if you are not religious.¹¹

You may be able to see a humanist pastoral support visitor if you would prefer to see them.¹² Humanists do not believe in a god. They believe it is possible to live a good and fulfilling life without following a traditional religion.¹³

What are listeners?

Listeners can provide confidential, emotional support to you. You can speak to a listener about how you are feeling.

The listener scheme is run by the Samaritans. They train certain prisoners to become listeners.¹⁴

What are insiders?

Insiders are other prisoners who have been trained to give you information and reassurance. They do this when you first go to prison.

They aim to make you feel less anxious during your first few days or weeks in prison.¹⁵ You could speak to an insider if you need help.

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3. How can I make a crisis plan and crisis box?

What is a crisis plan?

The aim of a crisis plan is to help you:

- when you are experiencing a mental health crisis, and
- be safe when you are feeling suicidal.

It can include support that can be available to you and things you can do to help yourself.

A doctor or someone from the safer custody team may be able to help you make a crisis plan.

You can make a list of things that you can do to help yourself.

You can also write down the names of your personal officer, insider, or a listener at the prison. Having all this information to hand may help to make suicidal thoughts easier to handle.

There is no set way for how a crisis plan should look. But there is a crisis plan template at the end of this factsheet which you could use.

You should keep your plan in a safe place, and you can change it as you need to.

You can find a plan template on the Papyrus website here: www.papyrus-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Suicide-Safety-Plan-Template-1.pdf.

You can find more templates and guidance on how to fill one in, on the Staying Safe website here: www.stayingsafe.net/home.

What is a crisis box?

A crisis box has many different names such as a 'happy box', a 'self-soothe box', or a 'hope box.' You can call it whatever you like. It is personal to you.

Creating a crisis box can be a good distraction or self-care activity.

The idea of a crisis box is that it is filled with items that make you feel better. You can use it when you feel anxious, stressed, or suicidal.

You can fill it with anything, such as:

- something to distract you, like a puzzle or colouring book,
- reminders of positive things you have learnt in therapy sessions,
- your favourite book,
- a copy of your crisis plan, or
- photographs of people you love and who make you happy.

The charity Papyrus has more information about crisis boxes. Click the below link for more information:

papyrus-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/HOPEBOX-resource.pdf

You may also like to create a hope book. This could be a scrap book with pages covering different things you like. And that make you feel good. Papyrus has more information about their 'HOPEBOOK' below.

www.papyrus-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/HOPEBOOK.pdf

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4. I'm worried about my loved one in prison. What can I do?

You might be worried about your loved one while they are in prison if:

- they say they're having suicidal thoughts,
- you think they might harm or try to kill themselves, or
- their mental health is very bad.

If you're worried you can:

- tell a member of staff,
- contact the safer custody team, or
- contact the duty governor.

See [section 2](#) of this factsheet for more information on what the safer custody team do.

All prisons have safer custody hotlines that you can contact.¹⁶ You can tell them why you're concerned about your loved one. You can find the contact details of the safer custody team at your loved one's prison by:

- clicking on this link:
www.prisonersfamilies.org/pages/category/need-urgent-help?Take=24,
- scrolling down to where it says 'Filter' 'Prisons',
- then click on the drop-down menu where it says 'All', and
- search for the prison that your loved one is in and click on it.

Or you can call the prison and ask to speak to the safer custody team.

Who are the Prisoners' Families Helpline?

You can contact Prisoners' Families Helpline for advice and information.

Prisoners' Families Helpline

Provide advice and information to people who have a family member involved in the criminal justice system.

Phone: 0808 808 2003

Email: info@prisonersfamilies.org

Website: www.prisonersfamilies.org

They have a useful video and information to help you in you are worried about a loved one in prison:

www.prisonersfamilies.org/pages/category/need-urgent-help?Take=24

Please note: We have included website addresses as well as phone numbers and postal addresses. We know that prisoners don't usually have access to the internet. But we have included the website addresses, as they might be of use to your loved ones or prison staff who are supporting you. You could ask them if they could print out some useful information for you.

Samaritans

The Samaritans are there to listen to you if you want to talk to someone. All prisons should have direct lines to either the local branch or the national number.

Phone: 116 123 (open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year)

Address: Freepost SAMARITANS LETTERS

Website: www.samaritans.org

Face to face: If there is no Listener at your prison, Samaritans may visit you. If you are on ROTL (Release on Temporary Licence), you can visit your local branch.

C.A.L.M. (Campaign Against Living Miserably)

CALM is leading a movement against suicide. They offer accredited confidential, anonymous and free support, information and signposting. They provide this to people anywhere in the UK through their helpline and webchat service.

Phone: 0800 58 58 58

Website: www.thecalmzone.net

Sane

Work with anyone affected by mental illness, including families, friends and carers. They provide a helpline.

Phone: 0300 304 7000

Website: www.sane.org.uk

SupportLine

Support line offers confidential emotional support.

Phone: 01708 765200

Address: SupportLine, PO Box 2860, Romford, Essex RM7 1JA

Website: www.supportline.org.uk

Switchboard – LGBT + Helpline

LGBT+ Helpline is a safe space for anyone to discuss anything, including sexuality, gender identity, sexual health and emotional wellbeing.

Phone: 0800 0119 100

Website: www.switchboard.lgbt

PAPYRUS

Charity that provides emotional support to people under 35 who are suicidal. They can also support people who are concerned about someone under 35 who might be suicidal.

Phone: 0800 068 41 41

Website: www.papyrus-uk.org

The Prison Phoenix Trust

They help prisoners with yoga and meditation in prison. You can ask them to send free books to help with relaxation in your cell.

Telephone: 01865 512 521

Address: The Prison Phoenix Trust, PO Box 328, Oxford, OX2 7HF

Website: www.theppt.org.uk

The Forward Trust

This organisation can help people in prison with drug and alcohol addictions.

Phone: 020 3981 5525

Address: The Forward Trust, Unit 106, Edinburgh House, 70 Kennington Lane, London SE11 5DP

Website: www.forwardtrust.org.uk

Alcoholics Anonymous Great Britain

This organisation provides guidance and support to people who live with addiction.

Phone: 0800 9177 650

Address: Alcoholics Anonymous, PO Box 1, 10 Toft Green, York YO1 7NJ.

Website: www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

Crisis plan template

What can help me now?	Who can I call or talk to?	What would I say to someone in my situation?
What can I do to keep myself safe?	What have I done before that's worked?	If the suicidal feelings won't go away, what should I do?
What can I do to distract myself?	What things make me feel worse that I should avoid?	Any other helpful thoughts and ideas

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- ¹³ BBC Bitesize. *What is humanism?* <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/topics/znk647h/articles/zmqpkmn#:~:text=Humanists%20do%20not%20believe%20in,explain%20the%20way%20things%20are> (accessed 16 May 2023)
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This factsheet is available in large print.

Rethink Mental Illness Advice Service

Phone 0808 801 0525
Monday to Friday, 9:30am to 4pm
(excluding bank holidays)

Email advice@rethink.org



Patient Information Forum

Did this help?

We'd love to know if this Information helped you

Drop us a line at: feedback@rethink.org

or write to us at Rethink Mental Illness:

RAIS
PO Box 18252
Solihull
B91 9BA

or call us on 0808 801 0525

We're open 9:30am to 4pm

Monday to Friday (excluding bank holidays)



Equality, rights, fair treatment, and the maximum quality of life for all those severely affected by mental illness.

For further information on Rethink Mental Illness Phone 0121 522 7007
Email info@rethink.org



rethink.org

Need more help?

Go to rethink.org for information on symptoms, treatments, money and benefits and your rights.

Don't have access to the web?

Call us on 0121 522 7007. We are open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, and we will send you the information you need in the post.

Need to talk to an adviser?

If you need practical advice, call us on: 0808 801 0525 between 9:30am to 4pm, Monday to Friday, Our specialist advisers can help you with queries like how to apply for benefits, get access to care or make a complaint.

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