

## **Guidelines For Working with Third Parties**

Individuals reaching out on behalf of someone they are concerned about make up a significant number of contacts to crisis hotlines. According to the American Association of Suicidology, “In general, persons at risk of suicide who don’t contact a crisis center, are likely higher at-risk than someone who calls,” (AAS Organization Accreditation Standards Manual, 2019).

There are a few primary goals when handling a third-party conversation:

- Assess the safety of the person of concern to the best of your ability.
- Educate the third party on how to support and increase safety for their loved one.
- Take necessary, least-invasive action to increase safety for the person of concern.
- Provide support to the third party themselves, and assess for suicidal thoughts.

This document provides guidance on how to work towards these goals during a third-party crisis conversation.

### **Conduct a Safety Assessment**

Gather information from the third party about what has led them to believe their friend/relative/loved one is at risk for suicide. Did they talk to the person of concern in person, over the phone, or text? Or did they learn of the risk through another third party or via social media? As best as you can, complete a Safety Assessment, addressing desire, capability, intent, and buffers for the person of concern, based on the third party’s knowledge about that person.

*Note: Some crisis counselors find it confusing to adapt their center’s first-person Safety Assessment form to a third-party contact. If this is true for your center, consider creating another Safety Assessment form specifically adapted for working with third-party contacts.*

### **When the Third Party has Limited Knowledge**

One factor that sometimes complicates this information-gathering phase is when the third party doesn’t know the person of concern well. Situations like this can arise if the person is a new acquaintance, is a work friend, or they are social media friends. If that is the case, work with the third party as best you can to assess the person of concern’s safety based on the limited information that you have. If the person is a friend only through social media, you can direct them to the [Lifeline’s website page](#) that has tips on reporting suicidal content on a number of the most common social media platforms. (Scroll down the page till you find the section “Social Media Safety.”)

### **Coaching the Third Party**

When an individual contacts the Lifeline concerned about someone else, we want to convey that we are partners in assisting their loved one. We cannot put all the responsibility on the third party, yet we can provide them with guidance.

During a third-party contact, it's helpful to coach the individual on how they might best talk to the person of concern more directly about suicide, and how they could help their friend/loved one get connected to more help. There is guidance available on the [Lifeline website](#), including tips on active listening, the [#BeThe1To](#) steps, Do's and Don'ts, and more. Some things to discuss with a third party include:

- Educate on how to discuss suicide with their loved one, such as:
  - Ask directly about thoughts of suicide and talk openly about it.
  - Be nonjudgmental during the conversation.
  - Listen to their story and reasons for wanting to die without dismissing their concerns.
  - Ask about their own reasons for living/not attempting, and don't impose your own beliefs.
- Educate on safety planning, including making the environment safer for the person of concern. The third party does not need to know the answers to questions (such as what's a distraction skill the person can use); instead, the purpose is to educate the third party sufficiently so they can then ask the same questions of their loved one and help them in creating their own safety plan.
- Create a plan for next steps: what will Lifeline do now, and what will the third party do? This may include the third party choosing a time and place to talk to their loved one about suicide, as well as how they'll bring up the topic. Ask them what has worked when they have had tough conversations with this person in the past.
- Provide appropriate referrals for the third party to pass along to their loved one, including the Lifeline.

*Note: The third party may not be willing or able to take the steps above. In this case, although you can educate them on the helpfulness and importance of these actions, do not criticize them if they are reluctant to intervene with the person they are concerned about. Respect their boundaries, remain nonjudgmental, and explore alternatives.*

### **Action Steps to Consider Taking with the Third Party**

Examples of other recommended steps that crisis counselors can suggest when working with a third party include:

- Facilitating a three-way call with the third party and the person of concern so that the crisis counselor can assess and intervene with the individual directly, with the support of the third party's concerns and information.
- Facilitating a three-way call with the third party and a caregiver of the person of concern to discuss the current situation and potential safety plans.

- Facilitating a three-way call with the third-party and a treatment professional working with the person or concern to discuss the current situation and potential safety plans.
- Confirming that the third party is willing and able to take reasonable actions to increase safety of the person, such as:
  - **Removing access** to lethal means. Consult the [Harvard Means Matter website](#).
  - **Maintaining close watch** on the person of concern during a manageable time interval between the crisis contact and the scheduled time when the person is seen by a treatment professional.
  - **Escorting the person of concern** to a treatment professional or to a local urgent care facility (such as a hospital emergency department).
- Obtaining agreement from the third party to collaborate with a mobile crisis/outreach service arranged by the crisis counselor to evaluate the person of concern if they are determined to be at Imminent Risk.
- If you're unable to connect with the person of concern, yet do not determine them to be at Imminent Risk, suggest the third party encourage their loved one to reach out to Lifeline themselves.

*Note: Check with your center's policies on confidentiality regarding: when the person of concern/third party is a minor, leaving/not leaving a message for the person of concern, what information you can/cannot share with the third party after calling the person they're concerned about. If you need clarification on a situation, please consult your supervisor.*

### **Gather Contact Information**

While talking to the third party, gather any identifying information they are able to share about the person of concern, including their contact information if you are able. Gather contact information from the third party as well, including their relationship to the person of concern. Their commitment to sharing this information can be one tool in determining their reliability as a reporter and their willingness to collaborate in a plan to keep the person of concern safe. See also the section below on *Third Party Anonymity*.

### **Willingness to Directly Connect to the Person of Concern**

There may be times when the third party is unwilling or unable to take further steps to help keep their loved one safe. Be sure to provide empathy to the third party, as they may be fearful for their own safety and wellbeing. It may also be advisable for the crisis counselor to reach out directly to the person of concern to offer assistance. The Lifeline's Policy for Helping Callers at Imminent Risk of Suicide requires that centers have in their policies willingness for direct outreach to the person of concern.

### **Contacting the Person of Concern**

- Typically recommended when a crisis counselor believes there is some level of risk AND the third party is unwilling/unable to intervene at the appropriate level.
  - Centers' internal policies/procedures can go beyond this minimum.

- When reaching out to the person of concern, explain that you had someone contact Lifeline concerned about them and introduce your services.
  - Be aware that the individual may not be as open to sharing, so ensure to utilize your Active Engagement skills.
- Even if an individual declines a conversation, educate them on how to reach back out (provide phone number, chat instructions) and educate on the purpose of Lifeline.

### **Least Invasive Intervention**

When working with the third party on determining the appropriate next steps and whether emergency services intervention is needed, it's important to remember the Lifeline policy that the least invasive intervention always be used. Many times in third-party situations, crisis counselors over-coach the individual to contact 911 about the person of concern. If risk is imminent and other solutions are not able to be put in place to help keep the person of concern safe (see suggestions above), calling 911 might be the appropriate course of action. But in many cases where risk is not imminent or immediate risk is able to be mitigated, it's more important to coach the third party about what they might observe in the future that would necessitate contacting 911 for assistance in keeping their loved one safe.

### **Third Party Anonymity**

There are occasions when a third party may wish to remain anonymous. This may cause a crisis counselor to question the reliability of the third party's information, and to doubt their willingness to collaborate on behalf of the person of concern. The Lifeline recommends some exceptions for preserving third party anonymity, including:

- When the crisis counselor has reason to believe that revealing the identity of the third party to the person of concern might aggravate risks to either the third party or the person they are concerned about (ex: a victim of domestic violence reports their partner is planning to kill them, their children, then themselves).
- When the identity of the third party is believed to be less relevant than their report of a clear and present risk to the safety of the person they are concerned about (e.g., a stranger near a bridge reports a person climbing over the rail and standing on the ledge).

When a third party is reluctant to provide their own name and contact information, take time to explore the reasoning behind this. You can explain that you do not need to share this information with the person they're concerned about; instead, it can just be for the crisis center to be able to follow up.

### **Focus on the Third Party's Needs Too**

Establish rapport and connection with the person reaching out. Don't forget that, while you both are concerned about the potentially suicidal loved one of the third party, your primary "client" is the current caller/texter/chat visitor; in this case, the third party. It's completely possible that the third party is also dealing with significant stressors or emotional distress of their own. While it is exceedingly rare for a person to say they are contacting us about their "friend" and really mean themselves, it is more possible for a third party to be legitimately

concerned about a friend's suicidality and also be struggling with suicidality themselves. Make sure to ask direct questions about the third party's own possible thoughts of suicide during the conversation and be sure that you talk to the third party about ways they can cope with the high emotions and stress of the situation. This can include identifying support systems and professional assistance as needed. Reinforce to the third party that the Lifeline is also here for them during difficult times.