

# A GUIDE TO PREVENTING SUICIDE IN THE PRISON ENVIRONMENT

PERSONS DEPRIVED OF LIBERTY



**Authorship:**

**Saiko Allende Leal, Suicide Prevention Observatory of Catalonia.** Master Plan for Mental Health and Addictions. Directorate-General for Health Planning and Research, under the Ministry of Health.

**Meritxell León Blanco,** specialist attached to the Open Environment Unit.

Donís Mas Rosell, psychiatrist at the Mas d'Enric Penitentiary Centre.

**Raquel Róbaló Piriz,** specialist attached to the Community Resources Unit of the Sub-Directorate General for Rehabilitation and Health.

**Carmen Sánchez Afonso,** doctor at the Dones Barcelona Penitentiary Centre.

**Jordi Sererols Serra,** health specialist attached to the Sub-Directorate General for Rehabilitation and Health Programmes, under the Directorate-General for Penitentiary Affairs.

**Penélope Torres Moreno,** Head of the Initial Training Unit at the CEJFE (Centre for Legal Studies and Specialised Training).

**CPAE Quatre Camins,** psychologist and Head of Specialist Care Programmes at the Quatre Camins Penitentiary Centre.

**Consultants:**

**Carla de Balanzó Bono,** specialist attached to the New Transversal Content Projects and Programmes Unit.

**The SUARA Cooperative.**

Inmates on the N'VIU programme (psycho-educational intervention programme for people with suicidal behaviour in the penitentiary environment) at the Quatre Camins Penitentiary Centre.

**Saray Valdivieso Muñoz,** psychologist at the Quatre Camins Penitentiary Centre.

**Catalan Observatory of Justice in Violence Against Women.**

This Guide has been drawn up collaboratively between the Sub-Directorate General for Rehabilitation and Health Programmes under the Ministry of Justice, Rights and Memory and the Mental Health and Addictions Master Plan of the Directorate-General for Health Planning and Research, under the Ministry of Health, as part of the activities envisaged by the 2021-2025 Plan for Suicide Prevention in Catalonia, the Penitentiary Health Programme devised by the Catalan Institute of Health (ICS) and the Centre for Legal Studies and Specialised Training (CEJFE).

Legal Notice This work is licensed under a no-adaptation Creative Commons licence, the full text of which is available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.ca>. Thus, the material may be reproduced, distributed and publicly communicated, provided that its authorship and the Centre for Legal Studies and

EDITOR: © **Generalitat de Catalunya Centre d'Estudis Jurídics i Formació Especialitzada**

First Edition: **21 december 2023.**

Graphic design and layout: **Guspirah S.L.**

<b>P3</b>	<b>CONTENTS</b>
<b>P4</b>	<b>THIS GUIDE AIMS TO HELP YOU.</b>
<b>P5</b>	<b>A PERSON IS AT GREATER RISK IF...</b>
<b>P6</b>	<b>WARNING SIGNS</b>
<b>P7</b>	<b>SUICIDAL BEHAVIOURS AND CONDUCT. HOW SHOULD I RESPOND?</b>
<b>P8</b>	<b>1. WHAT CAN I DO IF I KNOW A COMPANION HAS HAD SUICIDAL THOUGHTS?</b>
<b>P9</b>	<b>2. WHAT CAN I DO IF A COMPANION TRIES TO TAKE THEIR OWN LIFE?</b>
<b>P10</b>	<b>3. WHAT CAN I DO IF A COMPANION TAKES THEIR OWN LIFE?</b>
<b>P11</b>	<b>DON'T BE AFRAID TO TALK ABOUT SUICIDE</b>
<b>P13</b>	<b>4. WHAT IF I'M THE ONE CONTEMPLATING SUICIDE?</b>

**Suicidal behaviour occurs when we see no solution to our suffering. Prevention can help us envisage other ways out of the situation.**

Entering prison is a difficult time in life and can leave you feeling hopeless. Consequently, it's not surprising that you may think about harming yourself or even want to end your life at some point.

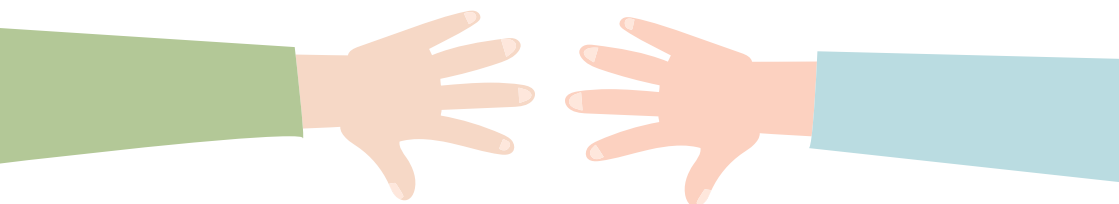


**THIS GUIDE AIMS TO HELP YOU RECOGNISE WHEN SOMEONE IS EXPERIENCING THOSE FEELINGS AND KNOW HOW TO ACT TO PREVENT IT.**

- YOU CAN PLAY A KEY ROLE IN SUICIDE PREVENTION.
- IT CAN HAPPEN TO ANYONE.
- THERE'S NO NEED TO FEEL ASHAMED.
- DEPRIVATION OF LIBERTY IS A HIGH-RISK SITUATION.
- IT CAN BE AVOIDED.
- IS REPORTING THEIR BEHAVIOUR A BETRAYAL? NO, WHAT YOU'RE DOING IS
- HELPING THEM.

## A person is at greater risk if...

- It's the first time they've been sent to prison.
- They have a long sentence, or their case has appeared in the media.
- They have lost contact with family or friends or suffered significant losses or changes (relationship breakdowns, family separation, deaths of loved ones, diagnosis with an illness, changes in the custody of children, separation from their mother at 3 years old...).
- There has been a change in their status under the law or penitentiary conditions or circumstances:
  - Transition to imprisonment.
  - Regression in prison regime category.
  - Increase in sentence time.
  - Deportation.
  - Transition to an open environment or access to parole.
  - Changes in penitentiary centre, wing, or resource.
- They have been placed in isolation.
- They have been discriminated against or suffered intimidation or assault in prison.
- They suffer from mental health issues.
- They have a previous history of suicidal behaviour.
- They are unable to speak or are struggling to speak the language.
- They have been subjected to sexual or gender-based violence and/or other forms of violence.





## WARNING SIGNS

The following behaviours may indicate that the person's risk of suicide has increased:

- They talk about their future life with no sense of hope (for example: "My family would be better off without me", "There's no hope for me"...).
- They behave as if they were saying goodbye:
  - Giving away their belongings.
  - Writing farewell letters or saying goodbye to their companions.
  - Thanking both the other inmates and the staff at the centre.
- They stop taking care of themselves:
  - They stop taking their medication.
  - They neglect personal hygiene.
  - They isolate themselves or often seem to be alone.
- They stop taking part in the activities they used to do, or their performance decreases.
- They suddenly feel much better for no apparent reason. This change of attitude can happen when the person has made the decision to commit suicide and believes that their suffering will soon be over.
- They engage in uncharacteristic high-risk behaviours with no regard for the consequences.
-

## SUICIDAL BEHAVIOURS AND CONDUCT. HOW SHOULD I RESPOND?

1. WHAT CAN I DO IF I KNOW A COMPANION HAS HAD SUICIDAL THOUGHTS?
2. WHAT CAN I DO IF A COMPANION TRIES TO TAKE THEIR OWN LIFE?
3. WHAT CAN I DO IF A COMPANION TAKES THEIR OWN LIFE?
4. WHAT IF I'M THE ONE CONTEMPLATING SUICIDE?



## 1. WHAT CAN I DO IF I KNOW A COMPANION HAS HAD SUICIDAL THOUGHTS?

### WHAT CAN I DO?



#### At the time:

- Ask for help from the people who work at the centre or resource you are in. Remember that you are not betraying the person in question but helping them at a difficult time.
- Do not leave them alone until someone comes to help you.
- Try to get them somewhere quiet for more privacy.
- Listen and let them express themselves.
- That said, if they are very disturbed or have dangerous objects, remember to put your own safety first.
- If someone talks about committing suicide, take it seriously. People who spend time thinking about suicide are more at risk of turning those thoughts into actions.

#### In the following days:

- Continue to look out for warning signs. For example, any failure to attend their regular activities or maintain their usual routine. Notify the people who work at the centre or resource you are in whenever you feel it is necessary.
- Ask them how they're doing and don't be afraid to talk about the suicidal thoughts if they need to.



## 2. WHAT CAN I DO IF A COMPANION TRIES TO TAKE THEIR OWN LIFE?

### WHAT CAN I DO?

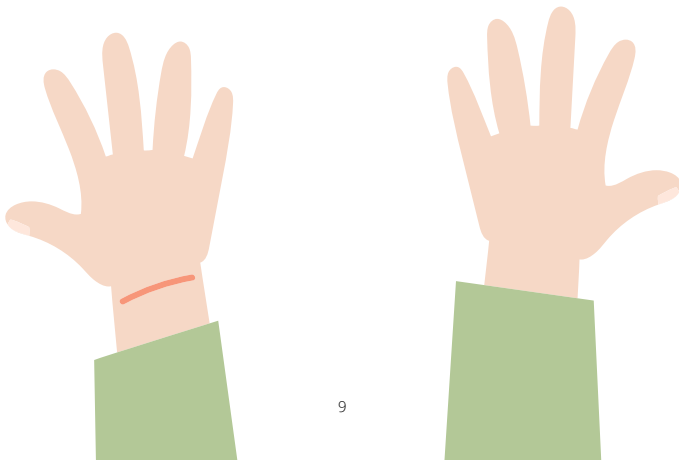


#### At the time:

- Notify the people who work at the centre or resource you are in.
- If the person is very disturbed or has dangerous objects, remember to put your own safety first.
- Do not leave them alone until someone comes to help you.

#### In the following days:

- Continue to look out for warning signs. For example, any failure to attend their regular activities or maintain their usual routine. Notify the people who work at the centre or resource whenever you feel it is necessary.
- Ask them how they're doing and don't be afraid to talk about the suicidal thoughts if they need to.



### 3. WHAT CAN I DO IF A COMPANION TAKES THEIR OWN LIFE?



#### WHAT CAN I DO?

##### At the time:

- Don't be afraid to talk about it and share your feelings. Doing so can help you and others too.
- If you notice that someone has been particularly affected or detect any warning signs, notify the people working at the centre or resource.
- Respect everyone's emotions. We are all different and have different ways of thinking, feeling and expressing our emotions.

##### In the following days:

- Be supportive of the people who were closest to the person who died. They may be particularly affected and feel vulnerable.
- Ask them how they're doing and don't be afraid to talk about suicidal thoughts if they need to.
- If you feel you need it, ask for help or support from a professional.
- In these situations, events may be held in your wing or resource to say goodbye to the person who died. You can participate in any of the events that are organised. Talk to the team at the centre if you have an idea for an event.



## DON'T BE AFRAID TO TALK ABOUT SUICIDE

- It might not seem like it, but talking about suicide reduces the chance of it happening. It allows people who already have suicidal thoughts to share them and ask for help.
- People who have survived a suicide attempt say that what would have helped them the most at the time would have been not to feel alone, for someone to have asked them:
- “What’s wrong?” or “How can I help you?”.

### WHAT SHOULD I SAY?

- Listen. Sometimes, just listening is enough.
- Respect their emotions. Don't play down the significance of the emotions the person is feeling at that time. You might not share them, but you can try to understand how they feel.
- Remind them that they can share what's happening to them with a professional. Let them know that they are not alone and that there are many people who can help.
- Suicide is the method the person has found to bring an end to their suffering. Try not to judge; instead, understand that they must be suffering a lot if they are considering it.

### WHAT SHOULD I NOT SAY?

- Avoid giving personal advice or assessments, for example: “It’s not that serious”, “You’re not that bad”... What would work for you may not work for the other person.
- Don't make statements like: “Suicide is for brave/cowardly people”. Suicide is the only way out that the person can envisage right now.

## People who experience a traumatic event such as a suicide attempt or death, often report:

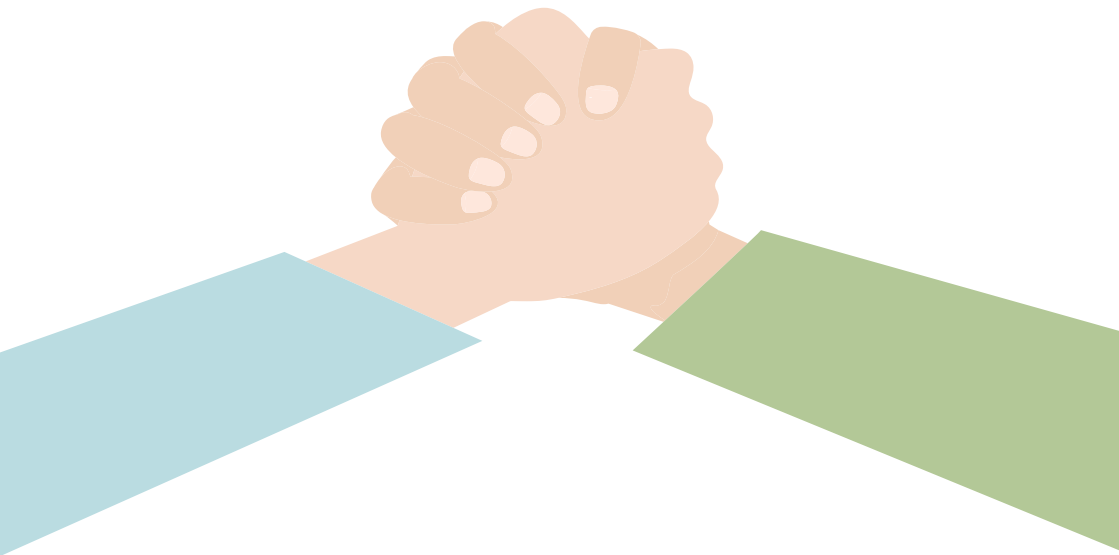
- Finding it harder to sleep or having nightmares.
- Finding it harder to concentrate.
- Feeling more anxious or sad.
- Not feeling like doing things.
- Replaying the event in their mind.
- Losing their appetite or feeling unusually hungry.
- Suffering from headaches.

All of these reactions are normal following this type of experience and they will decrease in intensity as the days go by. However, if you find it hard to cope or they do not decrease over time, remember that you can always ask for help from the people who work at the centre or resource.



## 4. WHAT IF I'M THE ONE CONTEMPLATING SUICIDE?

- Ask for help from someone you trust, whether that's inside or outside the centre or resource.
- Share what's happening to you.
- Remember that the professionals at the centre or in the community are trained to help and support you.
- Don't isolate yourself.
- Try to keep up with your daily activities.
- Try to continue with physical activity.
- Try to keep eating and sleeping well.
- Sometimes, these thoughts can be very intense. Remember that this level of intensity is temporary; it may last for hours or days, but it is never permanent.
- Remember that substance abuse can make the situation worse.



**A GUIDE TO PREVENTING SUICIDE IN THE PRISON ENVIRONMENT PERSONS DEPRIVED OF LIBERTY**

