

Suicide Prevention and People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities: What You Need to Know

[Research shows](#) that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) are at a high risk of co-occurring mental health conditions. Roughly 40% of people with IDD have mental health needs, about twice the national average. They are also more likely to have suicidal thoughts compared to those without disabilities. This serious issue is often missed, ignored, or misunderstood, due to a lack of screening methods and training to recognize suicidal risks within the IDD population, along with preconceived biases about people with IDD.

Given the increased risks, family members, friends, direct support professionals, and other caregivers must learn to recognize when someone with IDD may be having suicidal thoughts so those struggling can know they are not alone and that help is available. Below are key things to keep in mind regarding suicide prevention among people with IDD:

People with IDD can and do have thoughts of suicide.

There is a [misconception](#) that having a lower IQ can keep people with IDD from having suicidal or harmful thoughts. [Research studies](#) prove this to be false. A high number of people with IDD have been bullied or have experienced trauma. Children and adolescents with IDD who experience these types of traumatic events are at [an increased risk of having suicidal thoughts](#) with 30 – 64% developing mental health conditions.

These experiences can trigger feelings of stress, isolation, depression, and self-loathing. People with IDD may also respond differently to adverse situations than their peers or have trouble emotionally processing or reacting.

When these cognitive differences are combined with stressors from the environment, past trauma, or bullying, it can be a catalyst for suicidal thoughts. These feelings can be overwhelming for anyone, but especially for people with IDD, who might not understand the implications of suicide.

Assessment tools are often inaccessible.

In clinical settings, many assessment tools used to determine if someone is suicidal are not accessible for the IDD population. The tools include questions they can't understand, require abstract thinking in regard to timelines and the future, and don't take the perspectives of families/friends into consideration as much as self-reporting. The length and format of these formal tests may be exhausting as well, leading to inaccurate responses. People with disabilities might respond to questions with the answer they think they should be providing, as opposed to how they actually feel, as they may be worried about getting in trouble for saying the wrong thing.

Know the signs because it could save someone's life.

Many people who have suicidal thoughts won't actually attempt to commit suicide. However, suicidal thoughts can progress and increase over time, so it's important to notice the signs early on so you can intervene quickly. The path to suicide is not linear, but usually progresses from having suicidal thoughts, to making suicidal plans, and finally attempting suicide. This process is fluid and can escalate rapidly, so it's necessary to continually monitor someone who may be experiencing mental health symptoms.

People with IDD may not know how to verbally express what they are feeling or do not use spoken language to communicate, so their behaviors may communicate their feelings more than spoken words.

Things to consider if you think someone may be depressed or suicidal:

- Have they stopped doing their favorite activities lately?
- Are they withdrawing from others, like their friends and family?
- Have they mentioned feelings of loneliness or despair? For example: saying "I wish I hadn't woken up today" or "I want to go to sleep forever."
- Has their mood or appetite changed lately?
- Do they get frustrated quickly without a clear reason?
- Have they started drinking or using other mind-altering substances?
- Do they have any new bruises or cuts that could be caused by self-harm?

Be compassionate but also direct.

Talking to someone about suicidal thoughts can be very difficult. When discussing this topic with people with IDD, try to convey a soft caring tone, not a judgmental one. Keep the following tips in mind:

- Ask simple, direct questions.
 - Some people may not fully understand what "suicide" means, so you may need to specifically ask, "do you want to die or do you think about killing yourself?" Saying these words directly can be difficult, but the question and intent must be clear.
 - Some people may worry that if you say these words directly it will influence what that person does or put the idea of suicide in their mind. This is untrue and it is better to have clear communication than ambiguity.
- Remind them that it's okay to have sad feelings, that they are not the only ones who can feel this way, and that they are not in trouble. Some people with IDD may worry about getting in trouble if they feel a certain way, so they try to provide the answer others want to hear, not what they are actually feeling.
- Try to be positive with your messaging. Don't dispute their feelings. For example, saying something like, "you don't mean that" or "don't say things like that," dismisses their feelings and can make them lose trust in you.
 - Instead, try acknowledging their feelings and saying, "I hear you. Can you tell me why you feel that way?"
- Try to avoid generic phrases or metaphors in conversations as they may be misinterpreted. Instead, use concrete real-life examples or visuals to help convey your message.

Seek help from professionals, friends, and others.

If someone you know is experiencing suicidal thoughts or engaging in self-harm, encourage them to reach out to someone they can trust to talk to about what they are going through. Explain how important it is to consider professional help, such as a support group or therapist.

[Studies](#) have shown that personal connections to friends, family, and social groups are key to helping prevent suicide. Having just [one close friend](#) can help build feelings of belonging, happiness, and trust, which can lighten internal feelings of loneliness or depression. Expressing concerns to family and friends, noting any changes in their behavior, is incredibly important.

Be prepared to respond to a crisis.

If you suspect someone might be suicidal or may harm others, try to remove any items that could aid in suicide attempts. Ensure any knives or other sharp objects, firearms, and pills are locked up securely.

Encourage the person to call or text the [988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#). 988 provides 24/7 access to trained crisis counselors to assist someone who is experiencing mental health distress. All calls are anonymous and free. If it is not possible to physically keep the person or others safe, call 911 immediately. Tell the 911 operator that the person is experiencing a mental health crisis and provide as much detail as you can about them and their situation. This will allow the police/first responders to be aware of the full situation and react more confidently and effectively when they arrive. Ask if CIT (Crisis Intervention Team) trained officers can be sent to the scene since they are more likely to have specific training on mental health, and possibly on IDD.

Know where to go to get immediate help if someone is experiencing a mental health crisis and might be in harm. Other resources include:

- [Local Crisis Stabilization Unit \(CSU\)](#) – small inpatient facilities that can take in people experiencing a mental health crisis for short periods of time
- Emergency Rooms – ER staff are trained to help in a crisis and can support a person until they are stabilized
- [Learn more](#) about the role of 988 in supporting people with IDD experiencing a crisis or suicidal thoughts.