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Supporting someone through a mental health crisis

The Traffic Light system

It involves agreeing with the person you care for on how both of you will decide the severity of a crisis using colours. You may be able to include this in the Safety Plan.

- **Green:** They are in a stable state and not experiencing a crisis. During these times, focus on providing emotional support, listening and encouraging self-care.
- **Amber:** They are showing or feeling early warning signs of a crisis. Implement your safety plan and use de-escalation techniques to prevent the situation from worsening.
- **Red:** They are at immediate risk of harm or are experiencing severe distress. Call for professional help and use the Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) steps above.

Further Information

The following phone services may be useful during a mental health crisis:

- **Lifeline:**
13 11 14 – Available 24/7
www.lifeline.org.au/131114/
- **NSW Mental Health Line:**
1800 011 511 – Available 24/7
www.health.nsw.gov.au/mentalhealth/Pages/mental-health-line.aspx

- **Kids Helpline:**
1800 551 800 – Available 24/7
www.kidshelpline.com.au/about/contact-us
- **Beyond Blue:**
1300 224 636 – Available 24/7
www.beyondblue.org.au
- **13Yarn** – An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Crisis Support service:
139 276 – Available 24/7
www.13yarn.org.au

More Links

- **Mental Health First Aid:**
The 5 Steps of Mental Health First Aid
<https://www.australiawidefirstaid.com.au/resources/5-steps-of-mental-health-first-aid>
- **Carers NSW:**
<https://www.carersnsw.org.au/about-caring>

Information for carers

Caring for a person with a mental health issue can be challenging. This information provides practical advice to help you navigate a crisis when the mental health of the person you care for becomes seriously unwell.

If you, the person you care for, or anyone else is at risk of serious harm, call emergency services on 000.



**Mental Health
Carers NSW**



What are signs of a mental health crisis?

Signs that a person is having a mental health crisis may include:

- Difficulty with daily tasks or activities, like going to work and getting out of bed.
- Difficulty or inability to take care of personal hygiene, like having a shower, brushing teeth, and changing clothes.
- Sudden or intense changes in mood – the person you care for might have intense anger, sadness or anxiety that seems overwhelmingly out of control and inappropriate for the circumstances.
- Verbal aggression, threatening, intolerant, or agitated behaviour.
- Harming or threatening to harm themselves or another person.
- Withdrawal from people, including you.
- Self-medicating (either with prescribed medication or illegal drugs).
- Experiencing thoughts and beliefs, or hearing voices, which they find disturbing and intrusive.



Communicating during a crisis

When the person you care for is experiencing a crisis, effective communication is essential. Here are some tips you may like to consider:

- Stay calm: Their crisis may be distressing, but it can help them when you stay calm.
- Listen actively: Active listening involves paying attention to verbal and non-verbal cues and responding to what is said, but in a calm manner.
- Validate their feelings: Acknowledge their emotions and validate their experiences. Phrases like “I understand that you’re feeling overcome” can be helpful.
- Use non-threatening language: Avoid using confrontational or accusatory language. Instead, use “I” statements to express your feelings and concerns. For example, say, “I’m worried about your safety.” rather than “You’re being irrational.”
- Offer your support: Ask them what you can do to alleviate their distress.



Mental Health First Aid steps

The Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) framework provides a structured approach which can be used when a person is experiencing a mental health crisis. It has 5 steps:

- Assess for risk of suicide or harm – Ask if they are thinking about harming themselves, you, or someone else. If you are concerned, you can call the Mental Health Crisis line, Lifeline or take them to a hospital emergency department.
- Listen non-judgmentally – Create a safe space for them to talk about their feelings and experiences without fear of judgment, and assumptions.

- Give reassurance and information – Offer reassurance and provide information about available resources and support options.
- Encourage your person to seek professional help from their treating team or individual health professional, if they have one.
- Encourage self help and support strategies, particularly if these have worked in the past.



Safety plan

You and the person you care for may like to discuss and agree to a Safety Plan that can be helpful to them in future crises. This safety plan could include:

- A list of emergency contacts, including mental health professionals, crisis hotlines, and trusted friends or family who can assist during a crisis.
- A list of ‘triggers’ which can prompt a change in their behaviour. Triggers may include people, places, things, sensory stimuli, or situations that elicit an intense or unexpected negative emotion.
- Warning signs of a possible crisis such as changes in self-care, social behaviour, sleep patterns or appetite, etc.
- What you can both do if the person you care for stops taking their medication, takes the wrong dose, takes more than they should or experiences side effects.
- What you can do that will calm them such as maintaining eye contact as appropriate, nodding to show you are listening and have understood, and showing that you care.
- The person’s preferred relaxation techniques.