Sometimes you need help. Sometimes you are help.

Responding to Distressed People
You want to help. As a friend, professional, family or community member, you may encounter people in distress. This information will help you know what to look for, recognize warning signs and take a course of action.

A person is experiencing distress. Signs of Distress Include:

- Nervousness, agitation or irritability
- Infrequent class/work attendance
- Excessive crying, sleeping
- Changes in routine behavior
- Changes in personal or work relationships
- Deterioration of hygiene
- Undue aggressive or abrasive behavior
- Bursts of anger and blaming
- Fearfulness
- Avoidance or withdrawal
- Frequent alcohol and/or drug use, smoking
- Frequent gambling

Express your concerns to the distressed person. Point out your observations and ask about his/her situation.

- I heard you say your meeting with the banker was a disaster. Can you tell me about it?
- I've noticed you haven't come to coffee for a long time and I'm concerned about you.
- I've seen you angry a lot lately and noticed you were harsh with the kids. How can I help?
- I noticed you came to work late again and you look like you haven't slept. I'm concerned.

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Are you worried about the person’s safety or do you see possible warning signs?

Warning Signs Include:

- Has prolonged periods of distress/overload
- Talks about or threatens suicide
- Makes statements such as “I want this all to end” or “I can’t go on anymore”
- Exhibits significant confusion, isolation
- Shows behavior that is bizarre, alarming and/or dangerous
- Makes statements about hurting or killing others
- Has marked change in behavior, mood and/or hygiene
- Appears depressed (frequent crying, insomnia, oversleeping, weight loss/gain, loss of pleasure)
- Appears/reports hopelessness or helplessness
- Engages in self-harm

Directly ask about your concerns and/or warning signs. (Have you thought about hurting yourself or others?)

Yes  No

Directly ask about suicide and/or homicide as it relates to the displayed warning signs. (Do you have a plan?)

Are you worried this person might harm him/herself or others?

- Yes, imminent danger is clearly present
  - Examples
    - Person found unconscious or unresponsive
    - Person reports a history of concerning behavior (e.g., drinking, drugs, cutting, gambling) and now states a desire to engage in this behavior again
    - Person is found intoxicated or appears to be under the influence of substances
    - Person makes statements suggestive of suicidal/homicidal thinking that are not overtly indicative of imminent danger (e.g., “I don’t know if I can keep going.”)
    - Person appears agitated/emotionally distraught and does not respond to your attempts to calm him/her
    - Person experiences a sudden stressful event (e.g., death, breakup, divorce) and seems emotionally unstable/inconsolable, or the person’s response appears unusual
    - Uncontrollable crying over a minor setback, or conversely, no reaction over a major loss.
  - Immediately call 911

- Unclear about whether imminent danger is present
  - Examples
    - Person reports a history of concerning behavior (e.g., drinking, drugs, cutting, gambling) and now states a desire to engage in this behavior again
    - Person is found intoxicated or appears to be under the influence of substances
    - Person makes statements suggestive of suicidal/homicidal thinking that are not overtly indicative of imminent danger (e.g., “I don’t know if I can keep going.”)
    - Person appears agitated/emotionally distraught and does not respond to your attempts to calm him/her
    - Person experiences a sudden stressful event (e.g., death, breakup, divorce) and seems emotionally unstable/inconsolable, or the person’s response appears unusual
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  - Stay with the person. Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline and ask for help in making a plan of action. Help the person move forward in the next step of the plan. If the person leaves and you are concerned for his/her safety or others, call 911. Ask the person for permission to call a family member for extra support.

- No imminent danger is present
  - Examples
    - You observe a person crying or furious after getting off the phone, and she/ he reports being sad or worried about the market and the loss in farm income in recent weeks, but you see no other warning signs.
    - You observe a co-worker or family member who is dealing with a major illness in the family and is struggling to manage, but you see no other warning signs.
    - You observe any number of life difficulties happening to someone but no signs of imminent danger or failure to cope in a safe manner.
  - As much as you are comfortable, listen and provide support, but do not become the counselor/therapist. Reflect the feelings you hear behind the words. Ask clarifying questions and make plans to check in again.

Note: If at any point you believe the person’s “Imminent Danger” status has changed, return to the “Imminent Danger” steps outlined in this decision-making tree.
Resources
for depression and/or suicide risk:

- **Call 211**: Statewide 24-hour helpline, health and human services information and referral.
- **Refer to a local health-care provider or local mental health professional.** If you meet resistance, suggest and accompany the person to a professional you know. Some examples might be: clergy members, medically trained personnel, hospital emergency room personnel, law enforcement agencies/personnel, school counselors.
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:**
  1-800-273-8255 (TALK)
  24-hour crisis intervention if you or someone you know are having suicidal thoughts.