



Signs of a Mental Health Emergency and Tips on How to Respond

Everyone can feel overwhelmed when confronted with a mental health crisis. It's important to remember that we all do the best that we can with the information and the resources we have available to us. Like any other health crisis, it's important to address a mental health emergency quickly and effectively. With mental health conditions, crises can be difficult to predict because often there are no warning signs. Crises can occur even when treatment plans have been followed and mental health professionals are actively involved. Unfortunately, unpredictability is the nature of mental illness. Unlike other health emergencies, people experiencing mental health crises often don't receive instructions or materials on what to expect after the crisis. It is also possible that the first point of contact may be with law enforcement personnel instead of medical personnel, because behavioral disturbances and substance use are frequently part of the difficulties associated with mental illness.

Warning Signs of a Mental Health Crisis

It's important to know that warning signs are not always present when a mental health crisis is developing.

Common actions that may be a clue that a mental health crisis is developing:

- Rapid mood swings
 - Increased energy level
 - Inability to stay still
 - Pacing
 - Suddenly depressed or withdrawn
 - Suddenly happy or calm after a period of depression
- Increased agitation
 - Verbal threats
 - Violent, out-of-control behavior
 - Destroying property
- Paranoia
- Abusive behavior to self and others
 - Substance use
 - Self-harm (cutting)
- Inability to perform daily tasks
 - Bathing
 - Brushing teeth
 - Changing clothes
- Isolation from communities
 - School
 - Work
 - Family
 - Friends
- Loses touch with reality (psychosis)
 - Unable to recognize family or friends
 - Confused
 - Strange ideas
 - Thinks they're someone they're not
 - Doesn't understand what people are saying
 - Hears voices
 - Sees things that aren't there

What To Do In A Mental Health Crisis

- Make sure to assess the immediacy of the situation to help determine where to start or who to call.
 - Is the person in danger of hurting themselves, others or property? If you need emergency assistance, call 911. **Say it's a mental health crisis and request a Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) Officer.**
 - Do you have time to start with a phone call for guidance and support from a mental health professional?

Techniques That May Help De-Escalate a Crisis

Do

- Keep your voice calm
- Listen to the person
- Express support and concern
- Ask how you can help
- Keep stimulation level low
- Move slowly
- Offer options instead of trying to take control
- Be patient
- Gently announce actions before initiating them
- Give them space

Don't

- Overreact
- Make continuous eye contact
- Touch the person unless you ask permission
- Make them feel trapped
- Make judgmental comments
- Argue or try to reason with the person

If you can't de-escalate the crisis yourself, you can seek additional help from your supervisor or facility social worker (even if they're at another location).

What Are Delusions and How to Respond to Unusual Behavior

Delusions are false beliefs, such as a person feeling they are being targeted by the police or they are on a special mission.

Here's how to help a person with delusions:

- Empathize with their feelings of being scared, upset, confused or angry
- Do not argue with them; they may become agitated, aggressive or start believing you are conspiring against them.
- Do not laugh; it may anger them.
- Do not agree with them; it may solidify their belief.
- Do not directly challenge their belief or try to argue the facts.

Sources: <https://www.nami.org/Support-Education/Publications-Reports/Guides/Navigating-a-Mental-Health-Crisis>
<https://www.mindcharity.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Responding-to-unusual-behaviour-.pdf>

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