

Handling Suicidal Conversations

Knowledge and skills to equip you to recognise and support customers in crisis



Handling Suicidal Conversations

Taking calls from extremely vulnerable and distressed customers can be upsetting and challenging.

How we respond during these conversations can make a difference to the individual feeling visible, valued, and listened to, as well as potentially accessing and receiving the specialist support they need.

Put simply, it can make a difference between life and death.

In this course, we will be exploring the subject of suicide.

How to respond when someone tells us they want to end their life together with keeping them safe if they are in immediate danger.

We will also be looking at practical ways to look after ourselves when we experience these conversations.

Key points to consider during the course:

- ~ There may be times throughout this session when people in the group share personal experiences. Please treat everyone with respect and keep everything that is shared confidential within this session. We understand it may be very hard and painful to share.
- ~ If you have any questions or this subject resonates with you personally, please do talk to someone you trust. This session is not just aimed at helping our customers. You or people you know may be experiencing very difficult situations and need someone to talk to.
- ~ At the back of this workbook, there is a list of organisations that provide support and a listening ear. Please do get in touch with them if you need to.
- ~ Please take time at the end of the session to look after yourself. It may be helpful to go for a walk, talk to a friend or sit quietly and reflect.
- ~ We need to look after ourselves before we can help others, so, our well-being is important.

Definition of Suicide and Terminology

Definition – The intentional act of causing one’s own death.

Opinions on the most appropriate terminology for suicide are varied; however, the following phrases have been deemed most acceptable to appropriately describe suicide:

- Attempted suicide
- Attempted to take their life
- Engaged in suicidal behaviours
- Acted on thoughts of suicide
- Died by suicide
- Ended their life
- Killed themselves

Suicidal experiences are highly stigmatised and talking about suicide needs to be approached with careful consideration.

The following terminology is discouraged:

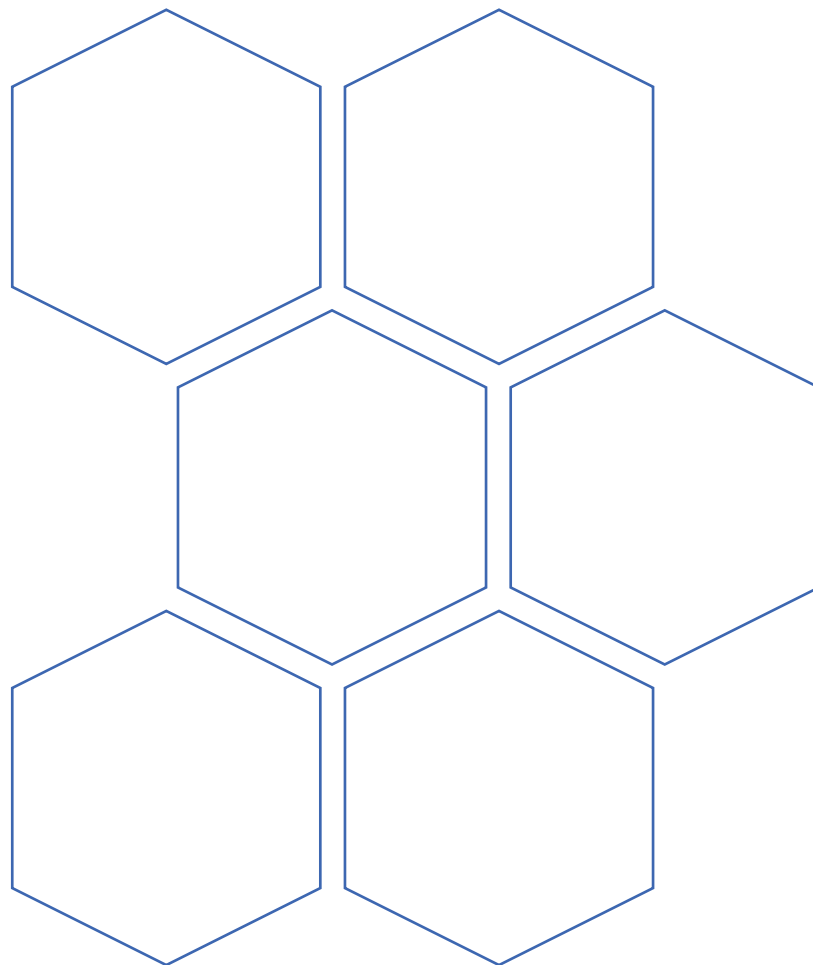
	Suggests wrongdoing and reinforces feelings of failure in other areas of life.
	Carries negative connotations originating from suicide as a criminal act. It was decriminalised in 1961.
	All mentions of suicide must be taken seriously.
	This phrase suggests a person is being dramatic to gain attention from others.
	This dismissive phrase belittles a person’s need for help, and they may feel they are not being taken seriously, which can be dangerous.
	This suggests a person’s thoughts of suicide are stupid or silly and is judgemental.

What I understand about suicide is:

Statistics and Impact

Although suicide is still a topic not widely and openly talked about, the number of individuals ending their lives is increasing year on year. These individuals also include well-known personalities and celebrities.

Here are some facts and figures to consider.



Researchers and suicide prevention organisations predict an increase in suicides with the severe economic adversity the UK is experiencing. Data typically shows an increase in suicides during and after a recession.

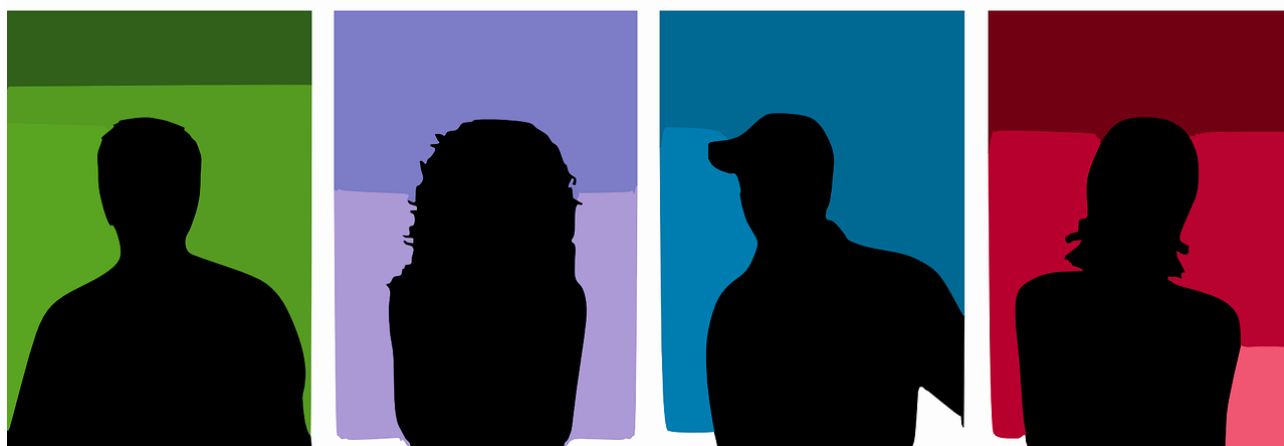
As you can see from these figures, suicide, and especially suicide prevention, is a topic we must take seriously and talk about.

Risk Factors and Indicators

The causes and triggers of suicide are complex. Events such as bereavement, serious financial hardship, divorce, or relationship breakdown can happen to anyone at any time. These sorts of events cause stress and impact a person's ability to cope with life and make decisions.

For some individuals, these circumstances can result in life-threatening decisions and thinking there is no way out.

Risk Factors



Someone wanting to end their life may give warning signs or signal their intention. Suicide prevention starts with recognising the warning signs and taking the individual seriously. It's also important to remember that many people who take their life don't display any signs and may continue to behave naturally to others around them.

Indicators

Stopping the Conversation

When a customer shares any disclosure of suicidal thoughts or intent, it must be taken seriously, even if you think the disclosure may be used to leverage the conversation or situation.

These steps can be helpful to consider when disclosure has been shared.

- ~ Stop the conversation
- ~ Park the reason for the call to one side and focus on what the customer has shared
- ~ Respond – “I’m concerned about what you have shared. It’s important and we need to talk about it.”
- ~ Ask – “Are you safe now?”

Leverage Situation

Inform the customer that whenever there is a disclosure of suicide/self-harm, the conversation will be stopped, and the wellbeing of the customer is a priority.

Ask: “Are you safe and feel comfortable to continue the conversation?”

If the customer confirms they are safe and happy to proceed with the reason for the call, continue the conversation.

At the end of the conversation, check in with the customer and confirm they are safe.

Example response:
“I’m still concerned about what you shared during the conversation. Before we end the call, I’d like to double check you are safe and if there is anything else I can do to support you.”

If appropriate, signpost to charities and organisations that offer support and options.

Non-leverage and Crisis Situation

Reassure the customer you are there to listen, support and keep them safe.

Keep the customer calm and provide a safe space for them to talk or sit quietly.

Lower the volume of your voice and slow the pace down. Maintain a warm, friendly and non-judgemental tone.

Always be sincere and authentic in your responses.

Listen to the customer.

Assess the risk of harm to themselves and to anyone who is with them.

Let them know that support is available, and they have options they can explore to help keep them safe.

At the end of the conversation, check in with the customer and confirm they are safe. *(See response on left)*

If possible, follow up with the customer the next day.

If there is imminent risk to their life, contact the emergency services.

Listening and S.H.U.S.H

Listening is the most important thing you can do during these conversations.

When someone has shared with you an intention to end their life, the most important thing to do is take them seriously and listen. Put aside the topic of conversation and focus completely on the individual.

Taking your time, focusing on the customer, clearing your mind, and really listening to what they're telling you is vital to help keep them safe.

The Samaritans have created an acronym to help you with your listening skills – S.H.U.S.H

S	
H	
U	
S	
H	



Questions and Responses

Many individuals, for a variety of reasons, may not feel ready or comfortable sharing lots of information at the beginning of the conversation. They may just be wanting to let someone know they are not coping and are feeling there is no way out.

Asking questions in a respectful, quiet, and sincere way is a good starting point to help them.

Whilst your instinct will be to show empathy and compassion, it is also worth remembering that some responses can be unhelpful to the conversation.

Helpful

- Thank you for sharing that with me
- Thank you for trusting me with that information
- What you have shared is important and we need to talk about it
- I'm not sure what to say; I'm just really pleased you told me
- I don't have the answers, but I'm just glad you told me
- It sounds like it's a really distressing/painful time for you right now
- I appreciate that must have been difficult/upsetting/painful for you to share
- Are you safe right now?
- How do you feel now you have told me?
- What support do you have?
- What support do you need?
- Have you felt like this before?
- What/who helped when you felt like this before?
- When did you start feeling like this?
- Who have you shared this with?

Unhelpful

- You're not thinking of doing something silly, are you?
- How do you think your family will feel?
- I'm sure you'll be fine after a good night's sleep
- It can't be that bad
- Things could be worse
- Perhaps you're imagining it
- You just need to learn how to cope
- Any sentence that begins "at least..."
- Be strong, brave, courageous...
- You can always/you should/you must...
- I know how you feel

Asking the right questions and actively listening to the response ensures the individual feels heard and offers them the opportunity to share more information.

You may also need to ask more personal and direct questions to understand if they are at immediate risk of harm.

Responding in an Emergency

During the conversation, it may become evident that the individual is in immediate danger. This is the time to ask more direct questions.

You need to ascertain how serious they are about ending their life. The questions involve asking them about their plan, the means and timescale to carry out their plan.

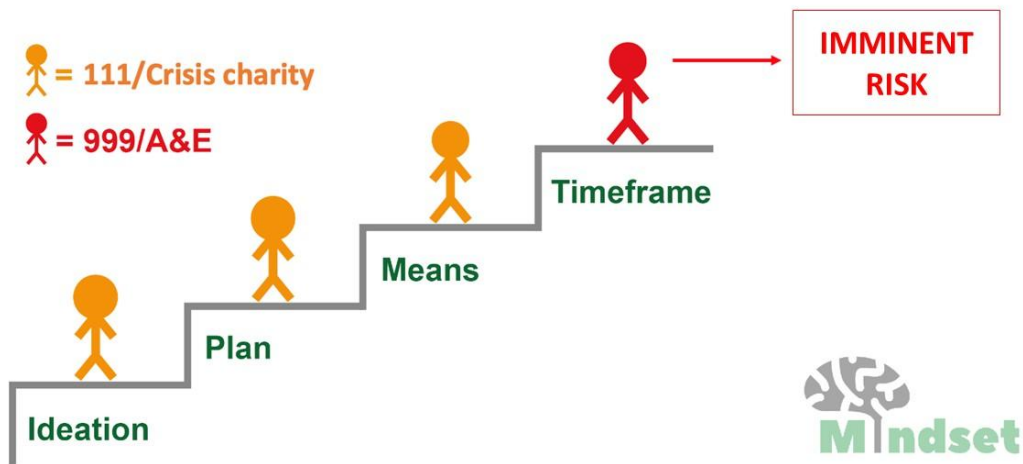
	Are you having thoughts of suicide?
	Have you made a plan or thought about how you would do it? (You do not need to know the details.)
	Have you got what you need to carry out your plan?
	When do you think you will carry out your plan?
	Ask where they are and who is with them. Call 999. Explain you're calling the emergency services. Be honest.
	If possible, stay with them and keep them talking.
	Look after yourself after the call. Talk to someone and avoid taking another call until you are ready.

When calling the emergency services, you will need these 3 elements of information:

1. Telephone number
2. Location
3. Who is with them

Ladder-Up Risk Assessment

Suicide support: Ladder-up Risk Assessment



The BLAKE Protocol

The BLAKE protocol is a tool aimed to help you stay calm, listen with the intent to understand how the customer is feeling and move the conversation to a point where the customer feels safe.



Breathe (to focus)



Listen (to understand)



Ask (to discover)



Keep Safe (from harm)



End (with summary)

The importance of Self Care

After having a conversation with someone who is considering ending their life, it is crucial to prioritise your own self-care.

These conversations can be emotionally draining and overwhelming, leaving you feeling mentally and physically exhausted. Engaging in self-care helps you recharge and process your own emotions, ensuring you remain resilient and capable of offering support in the future.

It may involve talking to a trusted friend, seeking professional guidance, practicing relaxation techniques, or simply taking time to rest. By caring for your own well-being, you maintain the emotional strength needed to continue supporting others effectively.

Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue is the emotional and physical exhaustion that can occur from constantly supporting others through their pain and suffering. It often affects individuals in caregiving or helping professions, such as healthcare workers, first responders, customer service, but anyone offering ongoing emotional support can experience it.

Compassion fatigue can lead to feelings of detachment, decreased empathy, and burnout. Recognising the signs early—such as irritability, lack of motivation, or emotional numbness—is essential to prevent long-term effects. Practicing self-care, setting boundaries, and seeking peer or professional support are critical strategies for managing compassion fatigue and maintaining personal well-being.

Vicarious Trauma

Vicarious trauma occurs when someone is indirectly exposed to the traumatic experiences of others, often through repeated stories or interactions with individuals who have experienced trauma.

This exposure can lead to significant emotional and psychological distress, as the person absorbing the trauma may begin to feel similar symptoms to those who directly experienced it, such as anxiety, fear, or hopelessness.

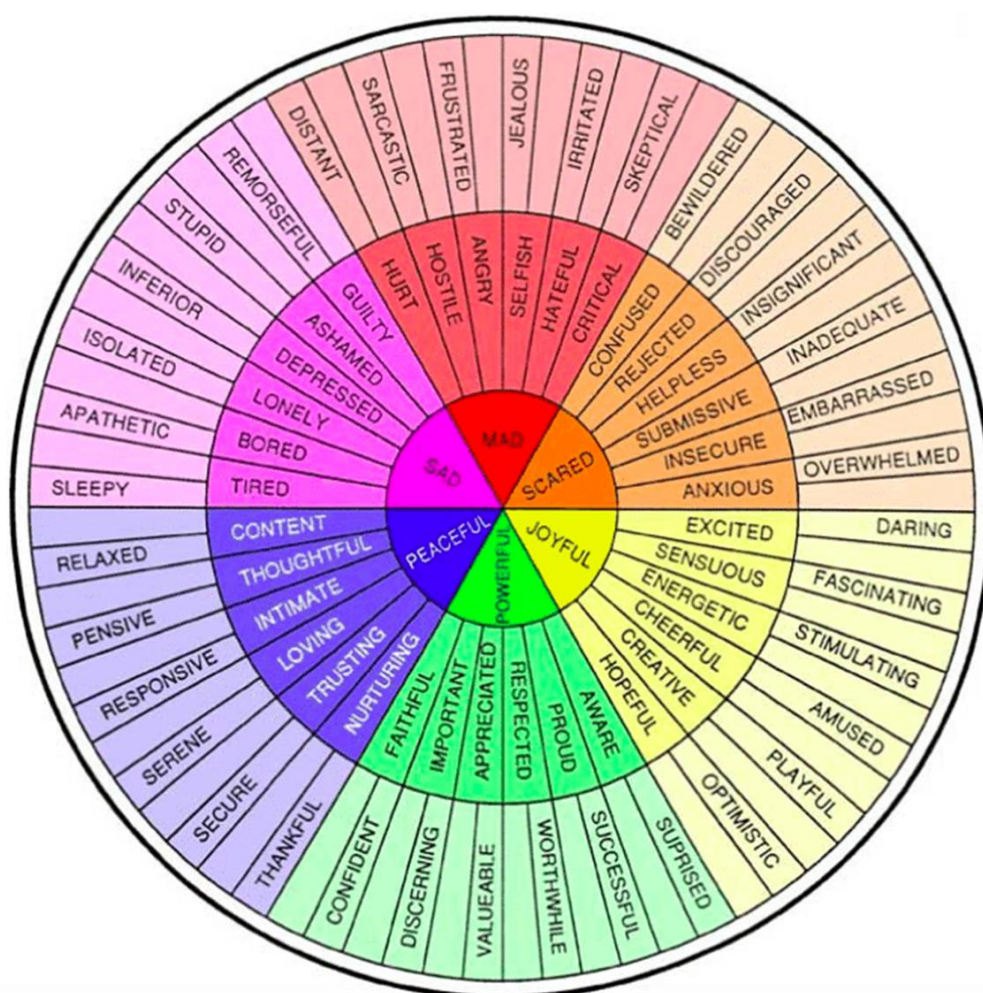
Over time, vicarious trauma can alter a person's worldview, impacting their sense of safety, trust, and connection with others. Recognising vicarious trauma is important and addressing it through self-care, debriefing, and professional support can help prevent its long-term effects on mental and emotional health.

Emotional Resilience

Emotional resilience refers to an individual's ability to adapt to and bounce back from stressful situations and conversations. Emotions are the feelings or reactions we experience based on our personal circumstances, mood, relationships, and interactions with others. Before we can begin to manage our emotions, we first need to identify what we are feeling.

Giving a name or label to how we are feeling can help us understand and respond to it.

Looking at the Feelings Wheel, you can begin to identify some of the emotions you may be experiencing.



Prioritising Your Well-being

Make your well-being a top priority.

The best way to build resilience is by prioritising the things that are beneficial for our health and well-being.



Sufficient sleep - get into a routine where you switch off devices an hour before bed and have set time to go to bed and wake up.



Hydration - carry a refillable water bottle with you and drink from it through the day.



Movement – incorporate activity into your day, ideally outdoors in the fresh air to relax muscles and release tension.



Nutrition - include nutrient-rich foods in your diet to provide the body with what it needs to function efficiently.



Relaxation – make time for what makes you happy, such seeing friends, a hobby, a good book or a soak in the bath.

What daily or weekly action will you commit to in support of your well-being?

Circle of Control

After these types of conversations, it can be easy to feel that you could have done more to help the individual. You may play the conversation over again in your head, thinking about what you could have done or said differently.

The Circle of Control tool can help you gain a different perspective by looking at 3 elements:

What you can control

These will be personal to you - your emotions, thoughts, responses

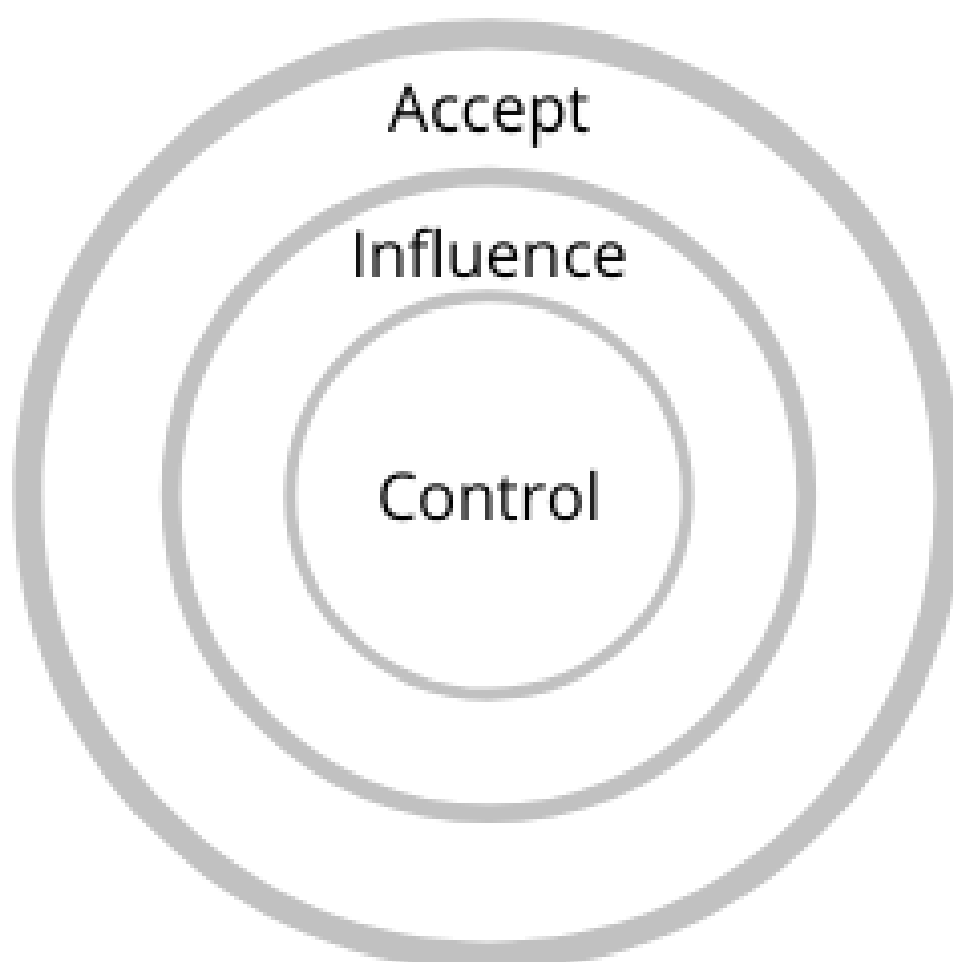
What you can influence

These will be outside of you - the direction and tone of the conversation

What you need to accept

These will be outside of your control and influence - how the customer responds and behaves

Complete a Circle of Control here for your customer conversations:



Further Resources

Here is a list of charities that support people facing personal circumstances that may increase their likelihood to die through suicide.

The Samaritans	www.samaritans.org
CALM	www.thecalmzone.net
Papyrus	www.papyrus-uk.org/
Mind	www.mind.org.uk
National Domestic Abuse Helpline	www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk
GamCare	www.gamcare.org.uk
BetKnowMore	www.betknowmoreuk.org
Alcoholics Anonymous	www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk
TalktoFrank	www.talktofrank.com
StepChange	www.stepchange.org
Cruse Bereavement	www.cruse.org.uk
Victim Support	www.victimsupport.org.uk
LGBT Foundation	www.lgbt.foundation
Galop	www.galop.org.uk

There will also be some local charities that support the vulnerable groups in your community.

Why not contact them for information or to support them in their valuable work?

Other suicide prevention resources:

Free online training	www.zerosuicidealliance.com/training
National Suicide Prevention Alliance	www.nspa.org.uk

Disclosure of Suicidal Thoughts or Actions

Useful Phrases and Responses

SCENARIO: A customer has raised suicidal intentions in conversation.

HOW TO RESPOND

Any mention of suicidal thoughts or intentions should be taken seriously and handled without judgement.

- ~ Thank you for trusting me with that information.
- ~ I appreciate that that was difficult/upsetting/painful for you to share.
- ~ What you have shared is important and we need to talk about it.
Tell me what's been happening.
- ~ I am concerned for you and want to keep you safe.
- ~ I'm not sure what to say, but I am glad that you have told me. Let's keep talking.
- ~ How do you feel now that you have shared that?

FOLLOW-ON QUESTIONS TO ASSESS RISK

Direct Approach: Are you thinking of suicide?

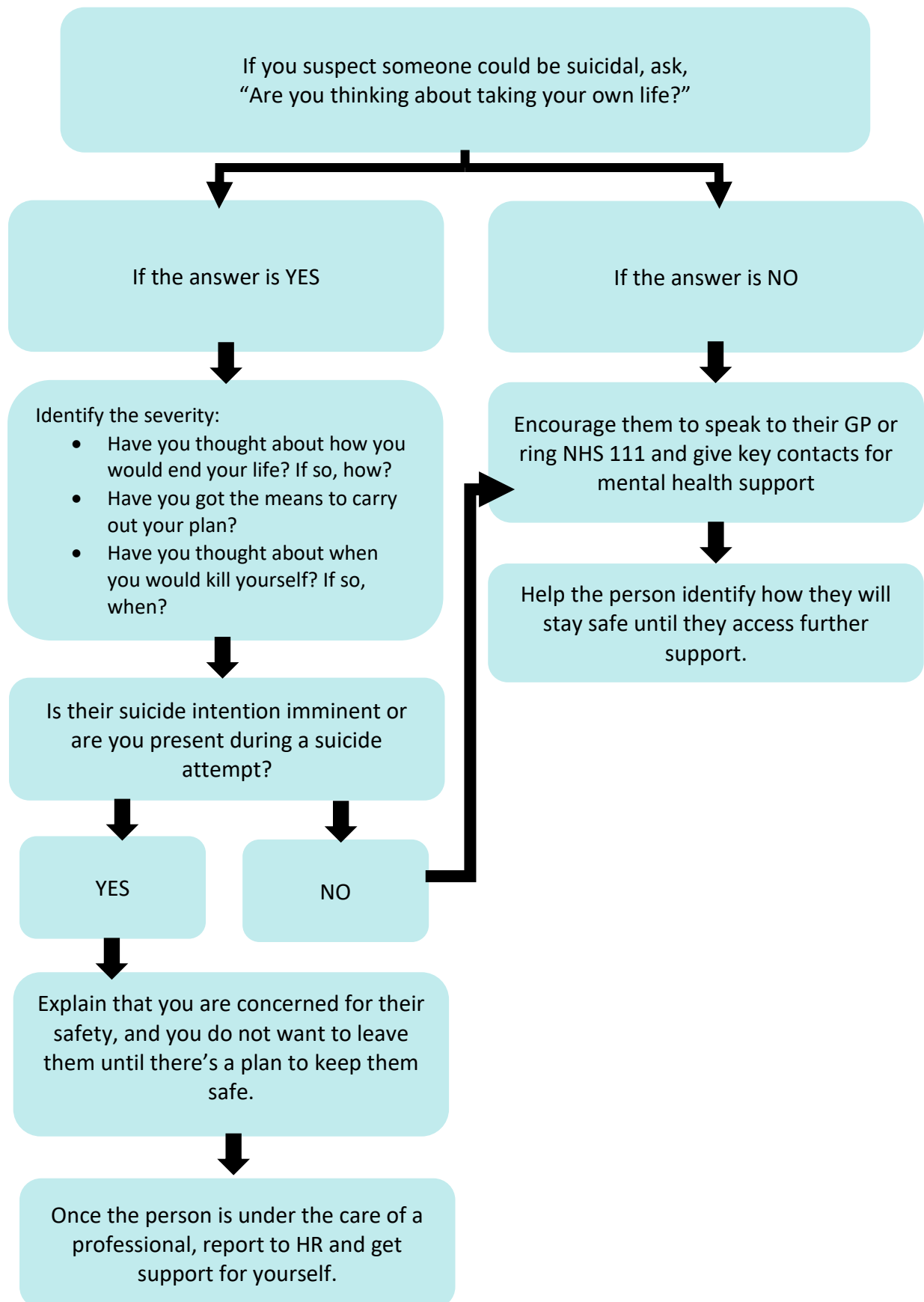
Softer Approach: Sometimes when people feel overwhelmed/out of options, they think of suicide.
Are you thinking of suicide?

- ~ Do you have a plan on how you would take your life? Tell me your plan.
- ~ Do you have the means to carry out your plan? When would you do it?
- ~ How would you feel about talking to someone from the **Samaritans (116 123)** or **CalmZone (0800 58 58 58)**?
- ~ I am concerned about what you have told me, and I want to keep you safe. I am going to call the emergency services so they can help you.
- ~ I am not going to leave you until I know that you are safe, so I will stay with you until they arrive.

TIPS

- ~ Ask open questions to assess the situation and keep the customer in conversation (*who, what, where, when, and how*).
- ~ Avoid telling the customer what they should or shouldn't do.
- ~ Look after yourself after the call. If possible, take a break and ask to speak in confidence with a colleague/manager.

Suicide Intervention Flowchart



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