

GATWICK DETAINEES WELFARE GROUP

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| **Policy title** | Guidelines for staff and volunteers visiting suicidal people in detention |
| **Approved by** **Date** | Anna Pincus, Pious Keku, Karris HamiltonAugust 2022 |
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**Guidelines for staff and volunteers visiting suicidal detainees**

People in detention at Tinsley House and Brook House are objectively in a very difficult and stressful situation, where they do not know what will happen to them or when. They are very likely to experience low mood from the start but feelings of despair often develop more gradually. Suicidal thoughts can also be expressions of conditions such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Research on suicide attempts in prisons indicates that certain events can trigger suicidal or self-harming behaviour: stressful court appearances, anniversaries, transfers to other institutions, disciplinary hearings and expected visits that don’t take place.

If someone tells you they are having suicidal thoughts, it is always something to be taken seriously and responsibly, even though you might feel it is not necessarily a statement of their intent. It is not useful to dismiss someone’s suicidal feeling as being “just a cry for help”; it is more accurate to think of people expressing a “cry of pain”. Very few GDWG visitors or staff have a professional background in mental health, but this does not mean we cannot support detained people who are suicidal both effectively and with compassion. If people know are not alone with their despair, it can mean a great deal. At least one training course a year focussed on mental health is offered to GDWG staff and volunteers, who are encouraged to take up this opportunity to learn more. The following book is also very informative: “Cry of Pain: understanding suicide and the suicidal mind”, Mark Williams, Piatkus: London, 2014. A copy for loan is in the GDWG office.

## Staff and volunteers tend to share similar concerns about suicide, such as:

* What are the real indicators that someone is serious about committing suicide and not just feeling low?
* What should we say to detained people expressing suicidal thoughts?
* What should we do? Should we tell anyone?
* How can we cope with our own reactions?

The following guidelines address each of these points in turn:

## **What are the real indicators?**

Here are some signs to look out for, common to those experiencing depression and having suicidal thoughts. It is unlikely that an individual will demonstrate them all:

· Withdrawal from the company of others

· Self-neglect

· Weight loss

· Poor concentration

· Slowness of speech and motion

· Sleep disturbance

· Refraining from activities and association with others

· Marked change of character

 · Not taking prescribed medication either because it is not available or by choice

· Lack of motivation about planning for the future

· Hopelessness about the future

· Tidying up affairs, such as giving possessions away

· Concrete plans about how to carry out suicide

· History of suicide attempts

Please bear in mind that other than the last three points, all of the above could also be experienced by people who are in a difficult situation but not necessarily suicidal and shouldn’t be seen in isolation as evidence of suicidal ideation. People with psychotic behaviour (e.g., hearing voices, seeing visions, jumbled speech, having abnormal ideas, experiencing their thoughts being controlled by others, etc) are also at higher risk of feeling suicidal and self-harming behaviour. If someone has previously been seriously suicidal or has someone in their family or a close friend who has been seriously suicidal or killed themselves, then they are at greater risk of harming themselves.

Be reassured that you will not be the only person looking out for these symptoms. Staff at Tinsley House & Brook House should be trained in suicide awareness.

## **What should we say to detained people expressing suicidal thoughts?**

Be aware that unless we have experienced utter despair in our own lives, we cannot truly understand what it is like to feel suicidal. Language problems may arise; if so, use short sentences, such as “*I understand”*. Even if your every word is not understood, the way you say things will transmit your intention. It is important that the person feels that you are listening carefully and taking them seriously. Try not to say dismissive things like *“Things can’t be that bad”,* and do not try to jolly them out of it.

Here are a few suggestions that you might find appropriate to use:

* You can show that you care and are taking the person you are supporting seriously by statements such as *“What you say to me shows me how you really feel”* or *“I realise you are feeling very bad.”*
* You can open up a conversation if the person you are supporting is reluctant to talk by asking, *“Are you feeling low?”*
* If you think the person, you are supporting is having serious suicidal thoughts, it is good to check out with them how far their thinking has gone with questions like: *“Have you thought it would be better if you were dead in the last week? Have you made any definite plans to end your life? If so, what plans have you made? Do you think you can keep yourself safe until my next visit/next week/tomorrow?”*
* It may initially feel intrusive to ask such personal questions, but if the person you are supporting can be encouraged to open up, they are likely to feel less alone and it is also easier to judge how seriously depressed they are. It may be sometimes helpful to ask, gently, what has stopped them killing or harming themselves in the past when they have felt as desperate as this.

It can be our instinct to say, *‘Please don’t do that’* if someone says they are planning to harm themselves. On the one hand, this demonstrates to someone that you care, and it would matter to you if they self-harmed. However, be careful not to place additional pressure on the person you are supporting.

1. **What should we do?**

## · Bear in mind the state of mind of the detained person you are visiting each time you visit, checking for signs of despair or possible suicidal risk, noting any significant changes in their mood, behaviour or demeanour.

· Encourage the detained person you are supporting to become involved in activities - so as not to withdraw into themselves. Don’t persist with this if the person you are visiting is clear they are not interested.

· Be non-judgmental, non-threatening and empathetic, allowing the person you are supporting to talk openly and freely. You can help by listening and bearing witness to their anguish, letting them know you care and they are not alone. Just being there for the person and listening in an accepting way can help them feel less isolated and frightened.

· Check if there is practical assistance you can offer such as calling solicitors or family members. By modelling the activity the detained person would do if feeling well, you are again emphasising that you are together with them and reminding them of the practicalities of their situation.

· When a detained person is expressing difficulty in dealing with the future, then it might help to talk about safe subjects connected to the past. For example, looking at ways in which they have been strong previously may help them become more resilient now.

· With the detained person you might consider coming up with a step-by-step plan for when they are feeling suicidal. Ask them to write down who they would contact first, including that person’s contact details. If that person isn’t there, who would they contact next – and so on. For example, they could speak to someone in the Welfare Office or speak to religious staff or call our office and you may consider giving them the Samaritans’ number to call any time of day or night.

· Ask the detained person whether they would like one of the GDWG staff team to contact Medical Justice to request a psychiatric assessment which could be a first positive step to move their case forward.

· Ask the detained person if they would like one of the GDWG staff team to contact one of the healthcare staff, or if they would like to be placed under supervision (in practice this means being confined to their room with the lights left on 24/7).

## Under normal circumstances, everything a detained person tells us remains confidential within GDWG. However, the GDWG leaflet given to each detained person explains that we cannot keep that confidentiality if a person is thought to be a risk to him/herself or others. As well as wanting to avoid a detained person doing serious harm to themselves, it is not right for a visitor alone to hold the responsibility of knowing someone is intending to end their life. This responsibility must be shared with a member of the GDWG team who will then take further action. We should also think of the risk to GDWG’s reputation if we do not share important information appropriately and someone is seriously hurt.

If the detained person you are visiting tells you of a concrete plan to end their life which they are intending to put into action as soon as you leave, you must let them know that this is information you must pass on to someone. If you think there is imminent danger, please inform the Serco staff on duty before you leave the centre. Once the visit is over, ring the Director’s mobile number and inform her of your concerns (07804903157). She will then consider the circumstances with you and, if appropriate, will either call the person in detention to find out more, ask what they would like done or to explain to them the course of action we have to take. She will then contact the relevant team in the removal centre concerned and file an immediate report with them. If you are visiting outside office hours, and you get no reply from the Director, please call the Chair of Trustees via Karris (07985749627).

1. **Support for Visitors**

Please do not feel that you have to keep what you are hearing to yourself. Talk straight away to a member of GDWG staff or call your buddy or Area Group Co-ordinator - they are there to advise and support you. If you wish, they can arrange for you to visit the person you are supporting with another visitor or with one of the office staff to support you.

Share your concerns and feelings at local group support meetings and talk to family and friends (remembering the right to confidentiality of those you support). You are encouraging a detained person to access social support, and we recommend you do the same for yourself.

Don’t feel insecure about your abilities. Reflect on how the detained person you are visiting would be without your support – having you means they are not alone. Remember that there are things over which you can have no control.

Related policies:

- Adults safeguarding policy and procedures