

Responding to Texters in Crisis or Displaying Threatening, Manipulative or Abusive Behavior

Mental Health Crisis Text

If the texter:

- Threatens to hurt or kill themselves
- Talks about wanting to hurt or kill themselves
- Talks about death, dying or suicide
- Exhibits other warning signs of suicidal behavioral
 - Talking about wanting to die or kill oneself
 - Expressing the desire to kill or injure themselves
 - Looking for information about methods of suicide
 - Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live
 - Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
 - Talking about being a burden to others (“People are better off without me”)
 - Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs
 - Acting anxious or agitated, behaving recklessly
 - Withdrawing or feeling isolated
 - Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge
 - Displaying extreme mood swings
 - Talking about wishing to harm themselves
 - Expressing a heightened fixation with death or violence

Staff Responses:

Always consider a post about suicide to be serious and genuine. While we can imagine instances where a statement could be disingenuous or a joke, it is important to err on the side of caution and to recognize any concerning messages as an honest and true expression of suicidal crisis.

After you provide one of the responses below, there may be times when a texter wishes to continue to directly engage with you for support beyond what you feel appropriate providing. During instances of repeated engagement, continue to emphasize the importance of having the individual connect with mental health resources.

- “We are so sorry about the struggles you are going through and we want to help. Please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK. The call is free and confidential, and crisis workers are there 24/7 to assist you.”
- “It sounds like you are having a very difficult time right now. If you need extra emotional support, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK. The call is free and confidential, and Crisis workers are there 24/7 to assist you. The Lifeline is there for everyone.”
- “I am sorry to hear you are feeling so alone right now but hurting yourself is never the answer. There is hope and help available. Please call the Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or you can visit them online at suicidepreventionlifeline.org. They are here for you 24/7/365.”
- “Thank you for reaching out to us. We’re sorry to hear you are in so much emotional pain right now. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline’s crisis counselors are here for you any time at 1-800-273-TALK (8255). The call is free and confidential.”

- “We thank you for reaching out to us during such a difficult time. We want to make sure you are supported. Please visit suicidepreventionlifeline.org for resources and 24/7 help.”
- “I understand and am very concerned about you/your being upset, so I would like to connect you with someone who can better help you. I am asking you to contact the following number now so that we can get the appropriate help for you. Will you please call or text them now?”
 - o **Crisis Text Line** -Text START to 741741 to be connected to a trained Crisis Counselor. Crisis Text Line provides free, text-based support 24/7.
 - o **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** - Offers free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24/7. Call 1-800-273-8255.
 - o **HELP4WV** - Offers 24/7 call, chat, and text line that provides immediate help for any West Virginian struggling with an addiction or mental health issue. Offers confidential support and resource referrals for those who need help themselves, and guidance for those seeking help for loved ones. Call 844-HELP4WV (844) 435-7498. Text (844) 435-7498.

****If, while engaging with a texter, you believe that the person is at imminent risk of suicide, call 911 for immediate assistance. If possible, continue interacting with the texter. The 911 dispatcher may be able to guide you through steps to help obtain the location of the person in danger.****

For additional information, please see Support for Suicidal Individuals on Social and Digital Media toolkit, developed by the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline to help digital community managers and social media platforms establish safety policies for helping individuals in suicidal crisis.

After the interaction:

- **Immediately** - Check in with your own feelings about the interaction. Take 5 deep breaths.
- **Immediately** - Contact your supervisor or your institution’s mental health staff member to debrief the interaction for the purpose of reviewing any opportunities to ensure ongoing safety (i.e. is it permissible or appropriate to reach out to texter’s school counselor).
- **Within 24 hours** - Contact one of the above crisis lines for personal support and debriefing of your emotional response to the interaction. You are not only doing this to gain support for yourself, but also so you can assist any other staff who may have been aware of the situation. How you care for yourself after a stressful interaction helps set norms for others.
- **Within 24 hours** - Document the interaction in a secure file. Including your text interaction and a summary of any follow-up steps you took.

Example: Called 911 at 3:00pm and spoke with dispatcher. Gave dispatcher texter’s phone number and texter’s stated location. Received message from texter after first responder arrived at 3:25pm.

Threatening Behavior

If the texter:

- Threatens to hurt you or any other person
- Threatens to do harm or conduct an act of violence at a specific location
- Mentions they are a part of or acting on the behalf of a known terrorist organization or hate group

- You do not need to continue any interaction in which you personally feel threatened.
- End the interaction immediately, or if appropriate, you may send a message of warning that refuses the threatening behavior and reminds the texter of the purpose of Txt 4 Success. (i.e. You seem very frustrated. However, at Txt 4 Success we do not tolerate threats of any kind. Are there any questions you have related to going to college that I can help you with?)
- Call 911 if the caller mentions specific details such as:
 - o Telling you the name of a person they are going to harm
 - o Telling you a place where they are going to do harm
 - o Advising of a timeframe of an attack
 - o Please note that if you call 911, you are allowed to disclose name, phone number, and any other details asked by the authorities.

After the interaction:

- **Immediately** - Check in with your own feelings about the interaction. Take 5 deep breaths.
- **Immediately** - Contact your supervisor to debrief the interaction for the purpose of reviewing any opportunities to ensure ongoing safety.
- **Within 24 hours** - Contact one of the above crisis lines for personal support and debriefing of your emotional response to the interaction. You are not only doing this to gain support for yourself, but also so you can assist any other staff who may have been aware of the situation. How you care for yourself after a stressful interaction helps set norms for others.
- **Within 24 hours** - Document the interaction in a secure file. Including your text interaction and a summary of any follow-up steps you took.

Example: Called 911 at 10:00am and spoke with dispatcher. Gave dispatcher texter's phone number and described the threat.

Manipulative Behavior

If you feel that:

- All of your attempts at helping are rebuffed/dismissed
- Demands are being made of you that are consistently beyond your control/scope
- The texter is asking you many personal questions

What you can do:

- Be aware of manipulating behavior from the texter.
- Remember that manipulation is representative of their conflict, and not reflective of you or your work.
- Reinforce the texter's strengths to redirect (i.e. You showed real initiative by reaching out to Text 4 Success for assistance. Now that we're connected, are there any ways I can assist you with your questions about college application?).
- Keep your responses direct, non-accusatory, and professional in tone and word choice.
- Encourage focus on problems that can be addressed on Txt 4 Success (i.e. are there any questions you have related to going to college that I can help you with before we end our interaction?)

After the interaction:

- **Immediately** - Check in with your own feelings about the interaction. Take 5 deep breaths.
- **Within 24 hours** - Review the interaction independently and contact a colleague or supervisor if you feel unsettled by the interaction.

Abusive Behavior

If you feel that:

- The texter's language or hostility is directed at you predominately
- They use sexually provocative language
- You are being mentally or emotionally abused

What you can do:

- Stop responding. Some texters exhibiting abusive behavioral may keep trying and this will help you identify if it's abuse by giving them time to reconsider/reread what they have said.
- Set limits by re-iterating what is appropriate use of Txt 4 Success. This can help protect you in the moment, but also protects staff they may interact with in the future.
- In the case of a texter exhibiting sexually provocative behavior, end the interaction and state why you are ending the interaction (i.e. this service is provided for students seeking assistance with going to college. I am closing out our interaction due to your request for information unrelated to this service).

After the interaction:

- **Immediately** - Check in with your own feelings about the interaction. Take 5 deep breaths.
- **Within 24 hours** - Flag and/or block the texter in the system, providing a brief explanation (i.e. texter removed from platform due to exhibiting of abusive behavior on 2/1/2021).
- If you feel unsettled, contact one of the above crisis lines for personal support and debriefing of your emotional response to the interaction. You are not only doing this to gain support for yourself, but also so you can assist any other staff who may have been aware of the situation. How you care for yourself after a stressful interaction helps set norms for others.