

Getting help in a crisis

For carers, friends and relatives

If your relative has a mental illness, you may find that there are times when their mental illness gets worse. This factsheet aims to give you information on who to contact if you feel that the situation has reached crisis and they need urgent help.

In this factsheet, we refer to the person you know or care for as your relative, though we understand that you may not be related.



KEY POINTS

- A mental health crisis can mean different things, but is generally when someone's health worsens to the point where they need urgent help from professional services.
- You and your relative may notice early warning signs that their mental health is getting worse. It can be useful to try and get help at this stage to try and stop a possible mental health crisis.
- Different services can help if your relative having a mental health crisis, such as the Community Mental Health Team (CMHT) or crisis team.
- In some circumstances, it may be appropriate to use the Mental Health Act. The 'nearest relative' can ask social services to think about doing an assessment under the Mental Health Act for your relative.

This factsheet covers:

1. [What do we mean by crisis?](#)
2. [How do I get help from professional services?](#)
3. [The Mental Health Act](#)
4. [What if I have problems with getting help?](#)
5. [How do I get help for myself?](#)

1. What do we mean by crisis?

Having a mental health crisis can mean different things to different people, but can include:

- thinking about suicide or acting on suicidal thoughts
- having an episode of psychosis (where you might experience or believe things that others do not)
- doing something that could put yourself or other people at risk.

You may know better than most when your relative is having a mental health crisis. Both you and relative may notice early warning signs that their mental health is getting worse. It can help to try and get help at this stage to prevent a crisis.

Sometimes, someone's support network (such as the people closest to them) can help in a crisis. However sometimes it is still important to try and get help from professional services.

[Top](#)

2. How do I get help from professional services?

Professional services can help people with mental health problems and offer care and treatment. If the person you care about is already in touch with mental health services, these services may already know about some of their problems.

Professional services include:

Crisis teams

Crisis teams are part of mental health services. They can support people who are having a mental health crisis in the community (for example, in their own home). There should be a crisis team in every area which is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The team should make a care plan to make sure your relative has the right treatment and support to get through the crisis. They may offer medication, arrange regular visits to check they are okay and make sure they are in touch with other services to get long-term support. This is to try and to prevent them having to go into hospital. Your relative might still need to go to hospital if they are very unwell.

Accident and emergency (A&E)

You could take your relative to the accident and emergency (A&E) or casualty department of the local hospital. You can also do this if they need physical attention (for example, because of self harm, injury or overdose).

A&E will assess the situation and may arrange for a duty psychiatrist to see your relative, who can do a more thorough assessment. They could get admitted to a mental health ward in hospital. A&E departments often have long waiting times and the waiting areas can sometimes be stressful.

Emergency services (999)

If your relative is at risk of harming themselves or others, or if there is a risk of physical violence or aggression, then you can contact the emergency services on 999. They may then get in touch with mental health services such as the crisis team. If the ambulance service is sent to somewhere where there may be risk, then the police may also be sent along with them.

Community mental health teams (CMHTs)

Community mental health teams (CMHTs) support people who have complex or serious mental health problems in the community. They are usually only available during office hours on weekdays.

Your relative may already be in touch with the CMHT. If so, they may have a care coordinator who you can contact if the crisis develops during office hours. If this person is not available, then you can ask to speak to the duty worker. They will be responsible for responding to urgent needs that cannot wait.

If your relative is under the Care Programme Approach (CPA), then they should have a crisis plan which says who to get in touch with or a list of numbers to contact in crisis.

If your relative is not in touch with the CMHT, many teams will only help if their GP has passed their details on (known as a referral).

If you are not sure of the local CMHT's details, you can ask at the GP surgery of the person you are concerned about. This is because these teams are organised by GP catchment area. You can also check the website of the local NHS trust.

GPs

You could take your relative to their GP. Although GPs won't be able to offer direct help in a crisis situation, they may be able to contact other relevant teams, such as the crisis team.

Most GPs have a 24 hour 'out of hours' telephone number that you can contact.

Some GPs will not help unless the patient directly asks for this. This can cause problems if your relative is convinced that they are not unwell due to their mental illness or does not want professional help. If this is

happens, then it might be worth exploring some of the other options for getting professional help.

NHS 111

You can call NHS 111 when you need medical help fast but it's not a 999 emergency. Call 111 if:

- you think your relative needs to go to accident and emergency (A&E) or need help from a crisis team
- you don't know who to call or you don't have a GP to call
- you need health information or reassurance about what to do next.

You can find out more information on www.rethink.org about:

- Crisis teams
- Community Mental Health Teams (CMHTs)
- Care Programme Approach (CPA)
- GPs

[Top](#)

3. The Mental Health Act

The Mental Health Act 1983 is the law which sets out when someone can be admitted, kept and treated in hospital against their wishes. It is commonly known as being 'sectioned'. It only happens if the person is very unwell or is putting their own safety or someone else's at risk. It is sometimes used in crisis situations.

How do I use the Mental Health Act?

If you feel that your relative needs to be taken to hospital under the Mental Health Act, you would need to contact the community mental health team (CMHT) or local adult social services department and ask to speak to a duty Approved Mental Health Professional (AMHP). The AMHP is someone who has had specialist training on the Mental Health Act. They are usually a mental health professional such as a social worker, psychologist or nurse.

If they agree to carry out an assessment, the AMHP and two doctors must agree that your relative needs to be admitted. They would need to be sure that they meet the criteria for this, which is set out in the Mental Health Act.

Anyone can ask for a Mental Health Act assessment. However, the 'nearest relative' has certain rights in relation to the Mental Health Act.

The nearest relative can ask for an assessment to decide if their relative should be detained under the Mental Health Act, and can use this right several times if necessary. If the AMHP decides that admission to

hospital is not necessary, they must give the nearest relative written reasons why not.

Sometimes the team carrying out the assessment may ask the police to attend to make sure everyone is safe.

Should I use the Mental Health Act?

Most people would only use this as a last resort. You may decide that this is the only option to get your relative help. You might find that talking to your relative about their options first might be helpful. For example, they might agree that they need to go into hospital. This is known as being a 'voluntary' patient (meaning they would not be detained in hospital or be 'sectioned'). This could end up being less stressful.

Using the Mental Health Act could have a negative effect on your future relationship. It can also be a stressful experience. However, under certain circumstances it may be the best thing to do and ultimately get your relative the help they need.

There is a template letter at the end of this factsheet which you can use to ask for a Mental Health Act assessment if you are the nearest relative. You can also find out more in our '**Mental Health Act**' and '**Nearest relative**' factsheets which you can download from www.rethink.org.

[Top](#)

4. What if I have problems getting help?

You may find that getting help can sometimes be difficult. It is important to keep trying if you had problems the first time. Sometimes, you may find that you need to try different services before getting the right support for your relative. This can especially be the case if they don't want to get help.

You could think about putting your concerns in writing, and sending these to professionals, as well as sharing them in person or over the phone. This can make it harder for professionals to brush off your concerns, and also gives you a record of what you have said and when. You could send the concerns in a letter or email. Sometimes it can be helpful to send copies to other professionals too (for example, if you send a letter to the community mental health team, you could send a copy of your letter to the GP of relative too).

It is helpful to include clear and specific examples of the concerns you have. You could highlight concerning thoughts or behaviour that your relative is showing. If there is any risk (to the person themselves such as self harm or suicide, or to other people) then make this clear in your written concerns.

If you are still finding it difficult to get help, or you are not happy with the help you have got, you can make a formal complaint. All GP surgeries, hospitals and mental health services have a complaints procedure.

Sometimes when family or friends share concerns about their relative, professionals may share this information directly with this person. This can affect relationships and trust. When sharing concerns verbally or in writing, you could ask for any information you share to be kept confidential and used as sensitively as possible. You could explain that this is necessary to protect your relationship.

Sometimes, you may have information that professional services will not have (perhaps because your relative will not share how they are feeling with mental health services). If this is the case, you could highlight that there is a risk that your relative would stop talking to you if your information is not used as sensitively as possible.

You can read more in our **'Complaints – NHS or social services'** and **'Confidentiality and information sharing'** factsheets. You can download these for free from www.rethink.org.

[Top](#)

5. How do I get help for myself?

Caring for someone with a mental illness can often be difficult. There will be times when you will need support for yourself, especially if your relative is going through a crisis or emergency.

You may find that carer support groups or services could be helpful. They offer a chance to meet others to share mutual support, information and suggestions. Many people consider other carers the real 'experts' who can offer tips and ideas on how to deal with situations.

You could also ask your local council's social services department for a 'carer's assessment'. You would then be assessed to see if you need services for yourself, which could include respite care.

You can read more about how to support someone and try and get them help in the following factsheets:

- Are you worried about someone's mental health?
- Carers assessments
- Dealing with unusual thoughts and behaviours
- Supporting someone with a mental illness
- Suicidal thoughts – how to support someone

You can download these from www.rethink.org. Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask for the information to be sent to you.



**Example standard letter for nearest relative to ask for
Mental Health Act assessment**

Your name
Your address
Date

Approved Mental Health Professional
Community Mental Health Team

Dear Sir/Madam

Re.....

of
.....
.....

I am the nearest relative of this person and I believe they are no longer able to cope. They are showing signs of behaviour that are worrying me and other people.

[Give details of your relative's behaviour which is causing alarm. List as much of the worrying behaviour as possible.]

I am asking for an approved mental health professional (AMHP) to assess this person as soon as possible, with a view to applying for them to be admitted to hospital.

Should the AMHP decide that admission to hospital is not the most appropriate action, I would like the reasons in writing and to speak with the AMHP to discuss alternative appropriate care and treatment for them.

I am making this request section 13 (4) of the Mental Health Act 1983 (as amended in 2007).

Yours faithfully

Your name

© Rethink Mental Illness 2014

Last updated November 2014

Next update November 2016

Version 6



This factsheet is available in large print.

Rethink Mental Illness Advice Service

Phone 0300 5000 927

Monday to Friday, 9:30am to 4pm
(excluding bank holidays)

Email advice@rethink.org

Did this help?

We'd love to know if this information helped you.

Drop us a line at: feedback@rethink.org

or write to us at Rethink Mental Illness:

RAIS
PO Box 17106
Birmingham B9 9LL

or call us on 0300 5000 927.

We're open 9:30am to 4pm
Monday to Friday (excluding bank holidays)



Leading the way to a better quality of life for everyone affected by severe mental illness.

For further information on Rethink Mental Illness
Phone 0121 522 7007
Email info@rethink.org



[facebook.com/rethinkcharity](https://www.facebook.com/rethinkcharity)



twitter.com/rethink_



www.rethink.org

Need more help?

Go to www.rethink.org for information on symptoms, treatments, money and benefits and your rights.

Don't have access to the web?

Call us on 0121 522 7007. We are open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, and we will send you the information you need in the post.

Need to talk to an adviser?

If you need practical advice, call us on 0300 5000 927 between 9:30am to 4pm, Monday to Friday. Our specialist advisers can help you with queries like how to apply for benefits, get access to care or make a complaint.

Can you help us to keep going?

We can only help people because of donations from people like you. If you can donate please go to www.rethink.org/donate or call 0121 522 7007 to make a gift. We are very grateful for all our donors' generous support.



Rethink Mental Illness is a partner in:

