

# Getting help in a crisis

## For carers, friends and relatives

If you care for someone with a mental illness, you may find that there are times when that person's mental illness worsens and needs additional or more urgent help. This might be for someone who is not yet diagnosed with a mental illness or for someone who has a long history of mental illness. This factsheet aims to give you information on who to contact if you feel that the situation has reached crisis and you need immediate help and support.



KEY POINTS

- For most, a mental health crisis is when someone's health deteriorates or worsens to the point where they need urgent help from professional services.
- You and the person you care for may notice early warning signs that that their mental health is worsening. It can be useful to try and get help at this stage to help prevent a possible mental health crisis.
- You could contact the local Community Mental Health Team or local crisis team directly for help. This may be helpful when the team knows the person you are concerned about. If the person is not known to local mental health services, in some areas it may be possible for people to self-refer or for carers and relatives to refer to these teams.
- In some circumstances, it may be appropriate for the Mental Health Act to be used. Someone's 'nearest relative' can request that an assessment under the Mental Health Act is considered for the person you are concerned about. The role of nearest relative is defined under the Mental Health Act.
- It is important to be persistent when trying to get help in a crisis, particularly if it is proving difficult to get that help.

## **This fact sheet provides information on the following:**

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### **1. What do we mean by crisis?**

Having a mental health crisis can mean different things to different people. For most, it is when someone's health deteriorates or worsens to the point where they need urgent help from professional services. A number of things could lead to a crisis, but this could mean having suicidal thoughts or intentions, experiencing an episode of psychosis (where someone is out of touch with their normal reality), or engaging in risky or harmful behaviour that could endanger themselves or others.

You may know better than most when someone you care for or know is getting ill and they are reaching crisis point. Both you and the person you care for may notice early warning signs that their mental health is worsening. It can be useful to try and get help at this stage to help prevent a possible crisis.

Sometimes a crisis can be resolved through someone receiving help from their support network, such as their family or people closest to them. However sometimes it is important for professional services to become involved to help the person get better.

The following sections offer some ideas about where you may be able to get help for you and the person you are worried about.

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### **2. Getting help from professional services**

Professional services can assess people with mental health problems and provide care and treatment. If the person you care about is already involved with mental health services, they may already be aware of some of the problems facing that person.

Professional services can include:

#### *Community Mental Health Teams (CMHTs)*

CMHTs provide services to people living in the community who are experiencing complex or serious mental health problems. The person you care for may already be known to the CMHT. In some areas, if the person is not known to the team, they will only help if the person has been referred by the GP. If you are not sure who the local CMHT is, 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.

If the person is known to the team, 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.

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

### *Crisis teams*

Crisis teams deal with people both known to the mental health services as well as those that are not. The service should be a flexible service available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

As well as crises they act beforehand to prevent a person needing to go into hospital. However, if they do need admission, they can also arrange this. They usually aim to see someone within a few hours of referral. Accessing a crisis team varies between different areas. In most areas, GPs (and out-of-hours GPs), and accident and emergency ward staff can refer. Carers, friends and relatives may be able to make a referral, or the person experiencing the crisis themselves.

There is often a crisis line where you can talk directly to a member of the team. Similarly to CMHTs, these teams are organised by GP catchment area. Therefore if you are not sure of the details of the local crisis team, you can ask at the GP surgery of the person you are concerned about. The Rethink Advice and Information Service could also try to check the details of the local crisis service for you.

### *A&E / Casualty*

If there is a crisis, and the person you care for also requires physical attention (due to self harm, injury or overdose), you can take the person to the A&E or casualty department of the local hospital. You could also go to the A & E department even if the person you care for does not need physical attention, but is in a mental health crisis.

Sometimes A&E staff will be able to call the duty psychiatrist to see someone who is having a mental health crisis. This might result in admission to hospital. Going to an A&E department can involve a long wait in sometimes distressing circumstances.

### *General Practitioners (GPs)*

GPs can refer someone to a psychiatrist or to the local Community Mental Health Team (CMHT), as well as prescribing medication or arranging talking treatments. It may be helpful to ask for a home visit if you live with the person you are worried about. Community psychiatric nurses (CPNs) often work with GP practices and some can be seen on request. If you are in crisis during the night, most GPs have a 24 hour 'out of hours' telephone number. You will not usually be able to talk to a specific GP. Because of this you will need to give them a good description of the

situation, making it clear what you want to happen; for instance, if you want them to come out to visit. Some GPs will not help unless the patient directly requests it. This can cause problems if the person involved is convinced that they are not unwell due to their mental illness or does not want professional intervention.

### *Emergency services (999)*

If the person who is experiencing a crisis 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. They may then get in touch with mental health services such as the crisis team. If the ambulance service is sent to a situation where there may be risk, then the police may also be sent along with them.

### *NHS 111*

You can call NHS 111 when you need medical help fast but it's not a 999 emergency. Depending on the circumstances, NHS 111 may be able to call your GP and emphasise that you are dealing with someone with a mental health crisis and request a home visit. You can telephone them by calling 111 (open 24 hours a day). They could also provide you with the relevant contact details of local mental health services.

More information can be found in our factsheets on '**Crisis teams**', '**Community Mental Health Teams (CMHTs)**' and '**What to expect from your GP**' which are available to download from [www.rethink.org/factsheets](http://www.rethink.org/factsheets) or call 0300 5000 927 and request that a copy is sent to you.

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## **3. Getting help from voluntary organisations**

If someone you know is experiencing a mental health crisis, then you should be able to get support from professional services. If you are getting no luck in asking for help from health professionals sometimes local voluntary groups with links to the mental health services can help.

Sometimes staff from a service run by a recognised voluntary organisation can access services more easily than you can alone. Day centre staff have day to day contact with the mental health services and their recommendation that someone is unwell and needs assessment may be accepted more from them.

Alternatively, national voluntary organisations may be able to advise you or recommend someone who can help you locally. The Rethink Advice and Information Service may be able to inform you of who to contact in your area.

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#### 4. Using the Mental Health Act

The Mental Health Act 1983 gives the nearest relative of someone who is mentally ill the right to request that an Approved Mental Health Professional (AMHP) considers application for admission to hospital. The nearest relative is determined by a formula set out in the Act.

If the AMHP and two doctors agree that admission is necessary, then the person can be 'sectioned' and taken to hospital and admitted without their consent. The police may be called when someone is sectioned, to ensure the safety of everyone involved. If the AMHP decides that admission to hospital is not necessary, s/he must provide written reasons why not to the nearest relative.

This nearest relative's right can be used several times if necessary. Please find a template letter at the end of this factsheet which you could use for requesting that a Mental Health Act assessment is carried out, as a nearest relative.

Most people would only use this as a last resort. It could have a negative effect on your future relationship with your relative. However, under certain circumstances it may be the best thing to do and ultimately help your relative.

For further information on the option of using the Mental Health Act, please see our factsheets '**Nearest Relative**' and '**Detention under the Mental Health Act**', which are available to download from [www.rethink.org/factsheets](http://www.rethink.org/factsheets) or by call 0300 5000 927 and request that a copy is sent to you.

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#### 5. Problems with getting help

You may find that getting help can sometimes be difficult. It is important to be persistent in trying to get help if someone you know is experiencing a mental health crisis. In some instances you may find that you need to try different services before getting help.

It can be helpful to put your concerns in writing as well as sharing them verbally. 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, email or fax. Sometimes it can be helpful to send copies to other professionals too (for example, if you send a letter to the CMHT, you could send a copy of your letter to the GP of the person you care for too).

It is helpful to include clear and specific examples of the concerns you have. You could highlight concerning thoughts or behaviour that the person you care for 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 denied help or the help you receive is inadequate you can make a formal complaint. All GP surgeries, hospitals and mental health services have a complaints procedure. Note down why the help that has been offered is insufficient and what you would like to happen.

If your requests for help have not led to appropriate help and support being provided, then another option may be to speak to a community care solicitor. A solicitor could advise if there are any legal remedies to the situation. To look for a community care solicitor, you can search on the Community Legal Advice website <http://legaladviserfinder.justice.gov.uk/AdviserSearch.do> or contact the Community Legal Advice line on 0845 345 4 345 (open Monday to Friday 9am to 8pm, Saturday 9am to 12.30pm). The Rethink Advice & Information Service can also help to look for a community care solicitor in your area.

Sometimes when family or friends share concerns about the person they care for, professionals may share this information directly with this person. This can have an understandable impact on relationships and trust. When sharing concerns verbally or in writing, you could request that any information you share is 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 the person you care for will not share how they are feeling with mental health services). If this is the case, you could highlight that there could be a risk that the person you care for would stop confiding in you if your information is not used as sensitively as possible and professional services are not getting this information themselves.

For more information, please see our factsheets on '**Complaining about the NHS or Social Services**', '**How to get legal advice and assistance**' and '**Confidentiality and information sharing-for carers, friends and family**' which are available to download from [www.rethink.org/factsheets](http://www.rethink.org/factsheets) or call 0300 5000 927 and request that a copy is sent to you.

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## **6. Getting help for yourself**

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

Carer support services and groups offer a vital source of support for many carers across the UK. They can provide an opportunity to meet others to share mutual support, information and advice.

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, which could include respite care.

Further information, including where to find local carers services and how to get a carers assessment, can be found in our factsheets '**Supporting someone with a mental illness**' and '**Carers' Assessments**', which are available to download from [www.rethink.org/factsheets](http://www.rethink.org/factsheets) or call 0300 5000 927 and request that a copy is sent to you.

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**Example Standard Letter for Nearest Relative to  
Require Assessment by Social Services  
Department**

Your name  
Your address  
Date

Approved Mental Health Professional  
Community Mental Health Team

Dear Sir/Madam

Re.....

of .....  
.....  
.....

I am the nearest relative of the above-named who I believe is no longer able to manage effectively and whose behaviour is causing myself and others grave alarm

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

I request that an approved mental health professional be directed as soon as possible to assess the case with a view to making an application for his admission to hospital. Should the AMHP decide that hospitalisation is not yet the most appropriate form of treatment, I would like the reasons in writing and an interview with the said AMHP to discuss alternative appropriate care and treatment for *my relative*.

This request is made under Section 13 (4) of the Mental Health Act 1983 (as amended in 2007).

Yours faithfully

The content of this product is available in Large Print (16 point). Please call 0300 5000 927.

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## Rethink Advice & Information Service

**Phone 0300 5000 927**

**Monday to Friday, 10am to 1pm**

**Email [advice@rethink.org](mailto:advice@rethink.org)**

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The Rethink Advice & Information Service welcomes your feedback on whether this information was helpful to you. You can provide feedback in the following ways:

**By email:** [feedback@rethink.org](mailto:feedback@rethink.org)

**By post:**

Rethink Advice & Information Service  
Rethink Mental Illness  
89 Albert Embankment  
London SE1 7TP

**By telephone:** 0300 5000 927



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

For further information  
on Rethink Mental Illness  
Phone 0300 5000 927  
Email [info@rethink.org](mailto:info@rethink.org)

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