

Mental Health Crisis

Quick Reference

What Is Mental Health?

Mental health refers to a person's emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how individuals think, feel, act, handle stress, relate to others, and make decisions. Mental health exists on a continuum and can change over time based on life experiences, environment, and available support.

What Is a Mental Health Crisis?

A mental health crisis occurs when a person experiences intense emotional, psychological, or behavioral distress that overwhelms their ability to cope. The individual may struggle to function, think clearly, or remain safe and may require immediate support or intervention.

How to Identify a Person in Crisis

- Emotional signs such as extreme anxiety, panic, despair, anger, or uncontrollable sadness
- Behavioral changes including withdrawal, agitation, impulsive or risky behaviors
- Cognitive signs such as confusion, racing thoughts, or difficulty making decisions
- Verbal cues expressing hopelessness, feeling trapped, or inability to cope
- Functional decline in daily tasks, work, or self-care
- Safety concerns involving risk of harm to self or others

Key Indicators of a Mental Health Crisis

- Intense emotional distress that feels unmanageable
- Difficulty functioning after a major or unexpected life event
- Inability to cope resulting in acute emotional distress
- Risk of serious harm to self or others
- Deterioration in behavior or mental status requiring supervision

What People in Crisis Need


- To feel heard, respected, and supported
- A sense of safety and calm
- Clear and compassionate communication
- Practical assistance and resources
- Connection to appropriate support services

De-Escalation Techniques

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De-escalation techniques are used to reduce tension, promote safety, and help an individual regain emotional control during a mental health crisis. The focus is on calm communication, respect, and maintaining safety for everyone involved.

- Introduce yourself and clearly state your purpose
- Address the individual by their name
- Maintain a safe physical distance and respect personal space
- Speak softly, slowly, and calmly
- Ask clear, simple questions and allow time for processing and response
- Remain kind, calm, and patient
- Be empathetic and non-judgmental
- Be intentional and thoughtful with your responses
- Express a willingness to help and explain your actions and intentions
- Avoid overreacting or escalating the situation
- Reduce stimulation by avoiding crowds, noise, or an audience
- Do not argue, threaten, or become defensive
- Set clear and appropriate boundaries
- Be firm while remaining empathetic
- Allow silence and give time for decision-making
- Stay engaged, observant, and alert
- Seek additional support when needed
- Ask directly: “Are you having thoughts of suicide” if you believe the person may be suicidal.



Need support? Crisis Line Counselors are always available to talk with you, no matter the day or time.

The Harris Center’s Crisis & Access Line:
713-970-7000

National Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: 988 (call or text)