Tips for Crisis Phone Calls (Emotion Dysregulation)

1. Assess reason for call briefly
2. **Validate** distress (emotions, not maladaptive behaviours)
3. Agree on purpose for call (i.e. getting through the evening - focus on a present problem, nothing too broad)
4. Brief chain of events (just enough to understand current distress & situation)
5. **Validate** (emotions again, as well as any adaptive behaviours)
6. Collaborative problem solving and brief coping skill plan
7. Agreement to try skills/plan & agreement on further contact if needed



Opening Statements

"I can hear you are really upset/distressed/angry. I want to help. Can you tell me what's happening for you?"

"I want to help with what you're going through, and I need you to speak a bit slower so I can."

"I understand you feel like killing yourself AND I'm glad you have called to get some help with this. Can you tell me what's been happening so we can figure out what's next together?"

"It's hard for any person to talk about what's happening when they are feeling so upset. Are you able to take a moment to breathe with me on the phone?"

"What you're saying sounds really important, so I need you to slow down and take a breath so I can help."

Basic Assessment Questions

Only ask enough that it makes sense to you (and be aware of risk of course), so you can validate accurately and problem solve effectively – check your understanding before proceeding…

- What things have been going on today?
- Are there other difficult things you have faced today?
- What are the strongest feelings right now? When did you start feeling like this?
- When did you start thinking of killing yourself/when did the urge increase?
- What was happening at the time?
- What thoughts were you having about that? And what else did you think?
- Where are you/who is with you/what's happening right now?

Helpful Statements

Part of you must want to keep fighting despite feeling very angry/sad/hopeless

It is hard to see the big picture when emotions are high

Let's take things one step at a time

I'm glad that you called / I want to help / I'm here to support you

You have been to dark places before and survived; you can get through this time too

Let's focus on getting through just this next hour/minute

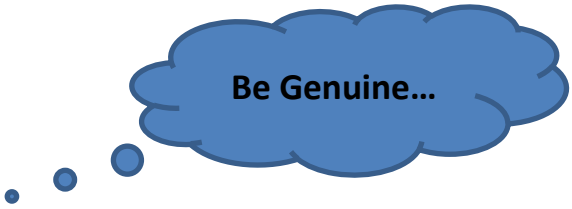
When we are very distressed, everything seems hopeless AND there is always a way forward.

You called me so there must be a small part of you that does want to live, can we try and work with that? This is really big stuff, we need a plan of how you might cope with the rest of today - can we talk about that?



Validating Statements

- … I can hear that you are really distressed.
- … That sounds very difficult.
- … Anyone would find that challenging.
- … It makes sense that you are feeling upset.
- … You sound anxious/sad/upset/hopeless right now?
- … Feeling sad/hopeless/scared makes sense given…
- … It's a really difficult situation.
- … I can understand that.
- … That would be very upsetting.
- … How frustrating!
- … It makes sense that you want all this pain to end, and it's natural for the mind to go there - but suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem, can we work on finding another solution for now? What would you tell your best friend to do?



A few good skills for calming emotions…

Grounding (good for trauma): I'm going to help you focus right now, can you tell me about where you are, who's there with you, is this a safe place? Can you name 4 things you can see around you? How about 3 things you can feel, e.g. against your skin, hands or feet? And 2 sounds? Are there any smells? (repeat as needed)

Breathing: Let's take a few breaths, I'm going to count and you try to breathe with me… Breathe in 1 – 2 – 3 …pause… Breathe out 3 – 2 – 1 …pause…, and in (repeat a couple of times, slow down counting backwards to lengthen exhalation)

TIPP body chemistry for intense emotions: Change **T**emperature by dipping face in very cold water up to temples (hold breath). Do **I**ntense exercise (talk through what). Do **P**ace breathing and/or **P**rogressive muscle relaxation.

Wise Mind (if in DBT): If you take a step back, what does Wise Mind tell you to do in this situation?

Opposite Action: To change emotions sometimes we have to do the opposite to what we feel like. Right now you feel like withdrawing/doing nothing – what could you do to connect/get a little bit active right now? (e.g. do something calming/soothing for anger/anxiety, something active for depression/hopelessness/sadness. Use music and available activities)

Mindful Distractions: Practice any activity as mindfully as possible, slow down and keep bringing your attention back, try to focus on your senses. Remind yourself to stay in the present, only this moment.

Phone Call Agreement

_____ is available _____ on this number: _____.
If you can't get through immediately leave a message and you will get a call back at first opportunity.

Reasons and goals for phone calls:

1. Practice asking for help before you hurt yourself / in more effective ways
   - *call before you engage in any harmful behaviours* to get coaching on how to cope
   - before you are so distressed that it is difficult to benefit from a call
   - practice / get feedback on asking for help in ways that are likely to get you helpful responses
2. Coaching: An important reason to call is to generalise the skills you are learning to everyday life. It's important to learn to practice skills in all situations.
   - when you're having trouble using your skills
   - when you think you might need to be using other skills
3. Repair relationship with therapist, call -
   - if you're feeling angry, hurt, misunderstood, confused or otherwise worried about a situation with your therapist
   - if something is going on for you / between you that may get in the way of you attending the next appointment to talk about it

What to expect from phone coaching calls:

- You are expected to call **before** you engage in impulsive or self-destructive behaviours. Calling afterwards is not helpful. Should you call after self-harming you will be directed to get medical assistance as needed, and a chain analysis will need to be done in the next session.
- In general expect calls to go like this:
  - Coaching calls are often around 15 mins. Your therapist may tell you how much time they have.
  - Describe the situation briefly and how you feel about it, try to name emotions.
  - Review any skills you've already tried.
  - Discuss other skills and ideas that might help.
  - Decide on a plan / what to try.
  - If needed plan a follow up phone call.
- Phone coaching calls are not the time for in depth analysis of crisis situations. They are to assist you in getting through the crisis, then analysing and problem solving can be done together in the next session.
- If the crisis situation is after hours you can either 1) write down your thoughts and feelings (you can use an 'observe & describe' sheet) and practice distress tolerance skills until you are able to phone for skills coaching next; or 2) call the Mental Health Line who can be given a copy of a crisis plan/ skills that are helpful to talk through.

Texting:

Texting can be used for three reasons:

1. Practical reasons, e.g. to say you're running late, or need to change an appointment etc.
2. To request a phone call for skills coaching
3. To report something positive, e.g. a skill you've been practicing, so your therapist can reinforce you quickly ☺

Please note that other text messages will not be responded to. Your therapist will check their phone when possible. The phone is often left at work and will not be checked after hours. Also note that your therapist could be off sick and will not see your message, so if you do not understand why you haven't heard back, please call reception instead.