

# Using Motivational Interviewing in Suicide Intervention

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WITH SARA KNOX, LISW

## What made you want to learn about suicide intervention?

Nobody has responded yet.

Hang tight! Responses are coming in.

## Check each item that matches your own concerns:

I'm afraid I won't have time to do a suicide intervention.

0%

I don't know how to have the conversation.

0%

I'm afraid that if we talk about death, we'll just put them more into a depressed head-space.

0%

I'm afraid to bring up the question about suicide.

0%

Sometimes people I work with are resistant to help.

0%

I'm not sure what, if anything, helps when someone is thinking about suicide.

0%

I don't know what constitutes a good plan for preventing suicide.

0%

What do you most want to gain today?

Nobody has responded yet.

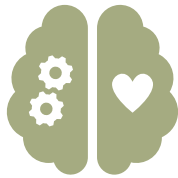
Hang tight! Responses are coming in.

# What to Expect Today

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Summary of Motivational  
Interviewing



Model of suicide  
intervention using MI



Active discussion and  
participation



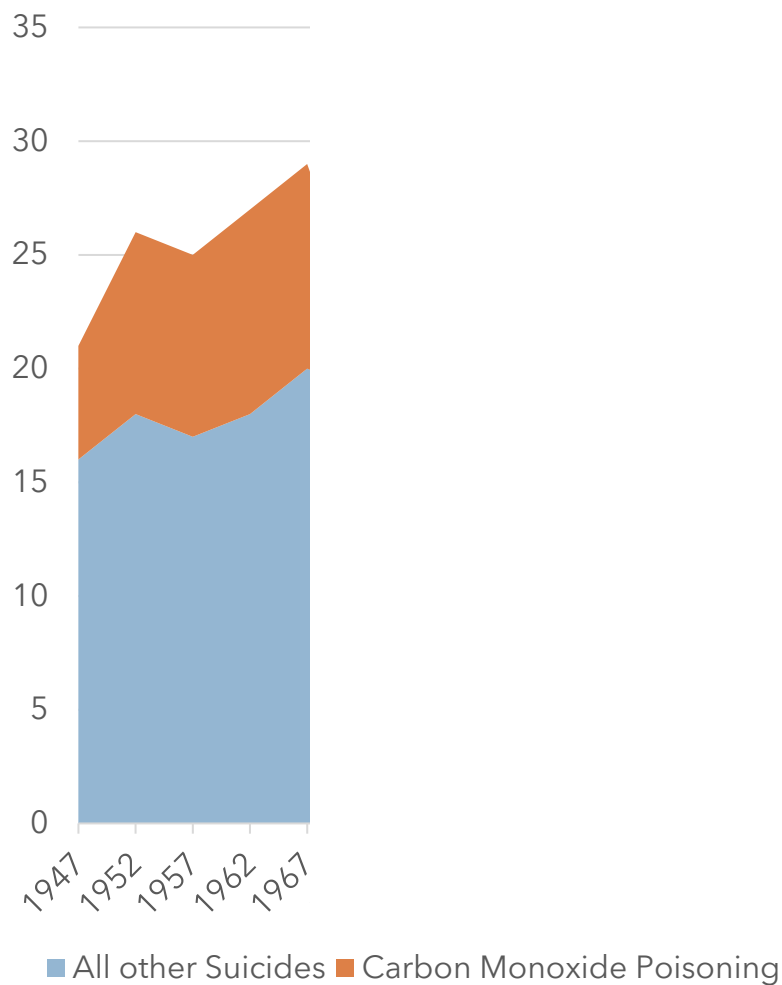
2 real sample  
conversations



Can we make a  
difference with one  
conversation?

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Suicides per 100,000  
people in England & Wales



# British Coal Gas Conversion

Kyla Thomas, David Gunnell, Suicide in England and Wales 1861–2007: a time-trends analysis, *International Journal of Epidemiology*, Volume 39, Issue 6, December 2010, Pages 1464–1475, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ije/dyq094>



# Motivational Interviewing in a nutshell

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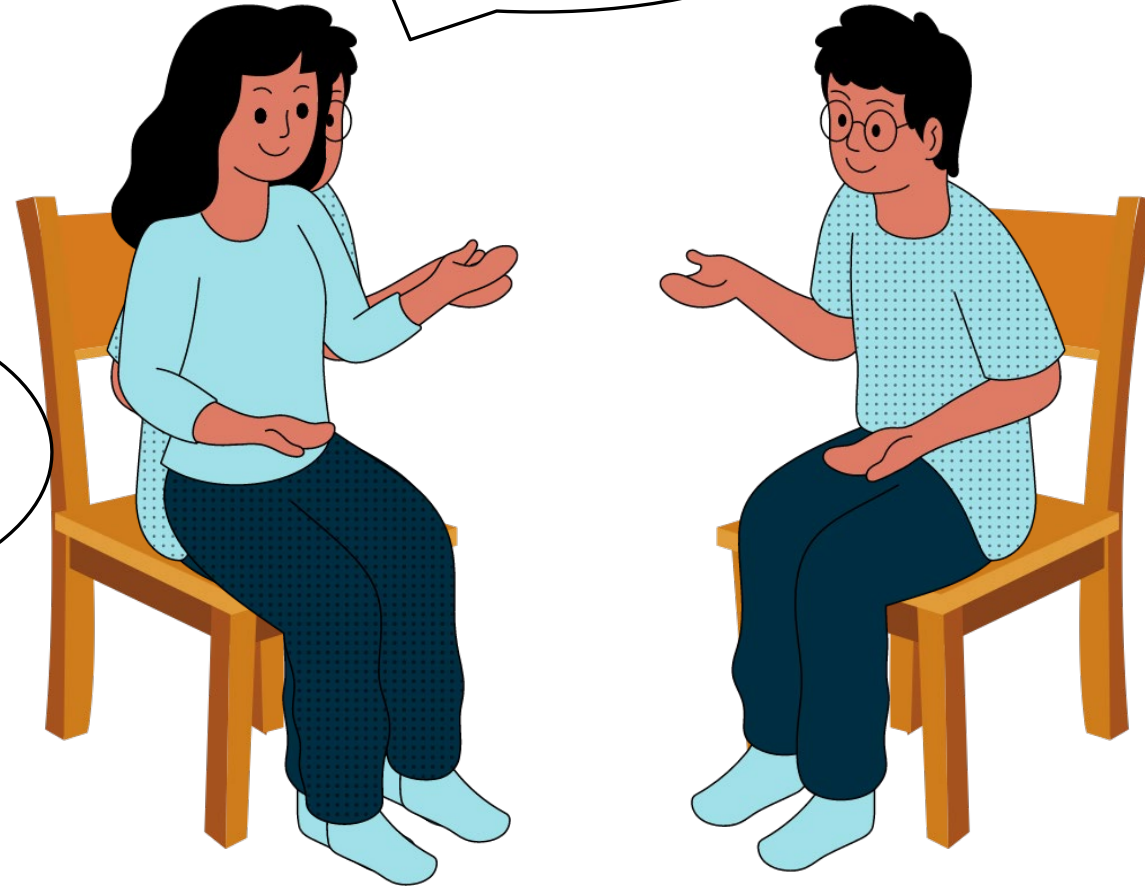
# Life

The Future

Connections

Uncertainty about suicide

You should...  
I feel so stuck  
But I want something to change



# Suicide

Hopelessness

Isolation

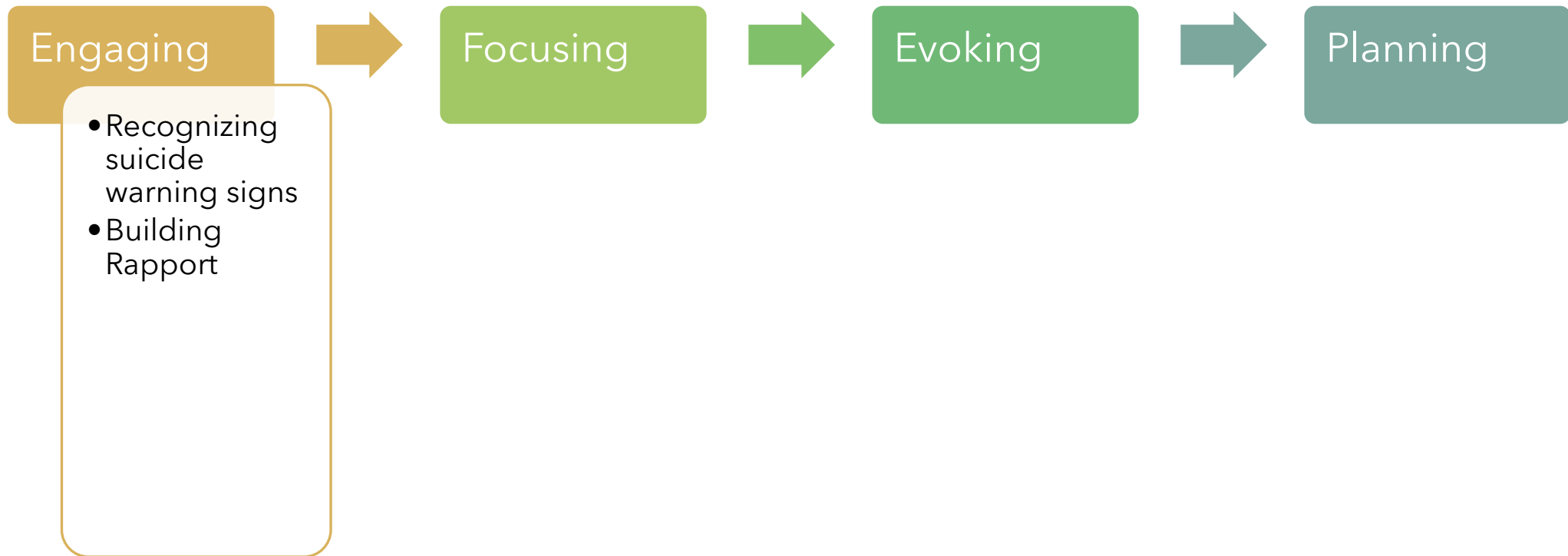
Black & White Thinking

It sounds like you want to find an alternative



# The Method of Motivational Interviewing

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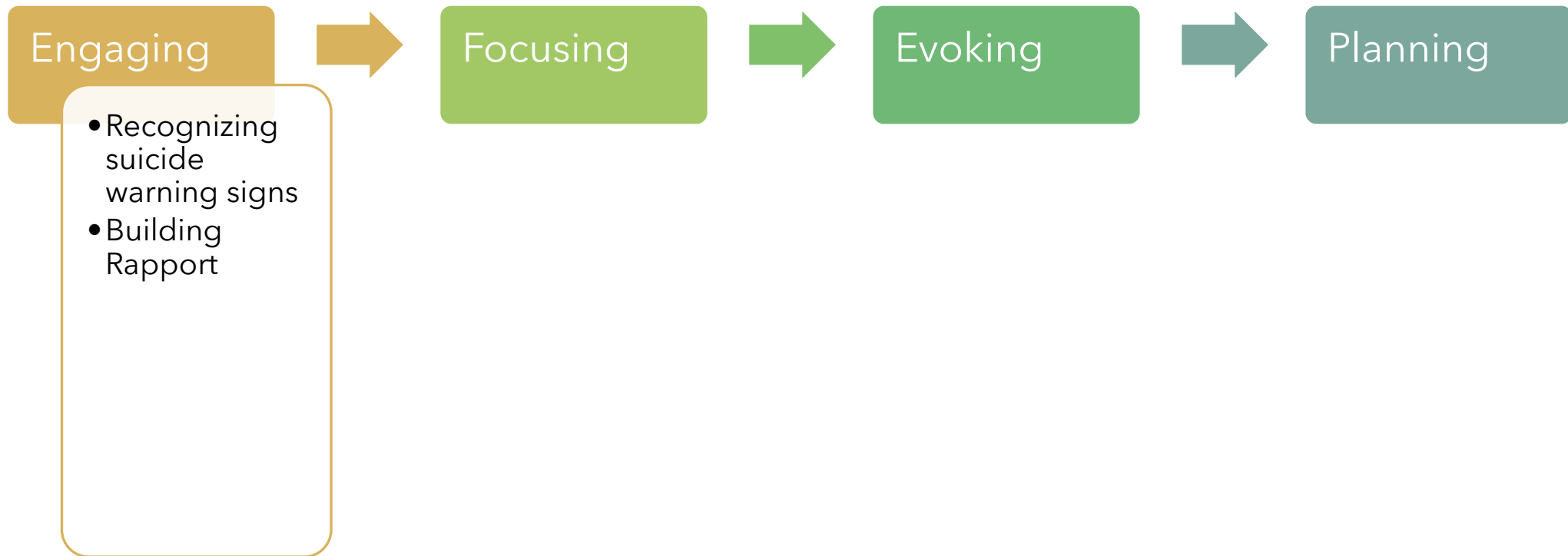
## What is a sign that someone may be thinking about suicide?

Nobody has responded yet.

Hang tight! Responses are coming in.

# The Method of Motivational Interviewing

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# Unconditional Positive Regard

The belief that everyone has inherent worth and potential and is worthy of respect simply because they are a human being.



# Empathy

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It sounds like you feel **betrayed** because your mom is maintaining a relationship with your ex.

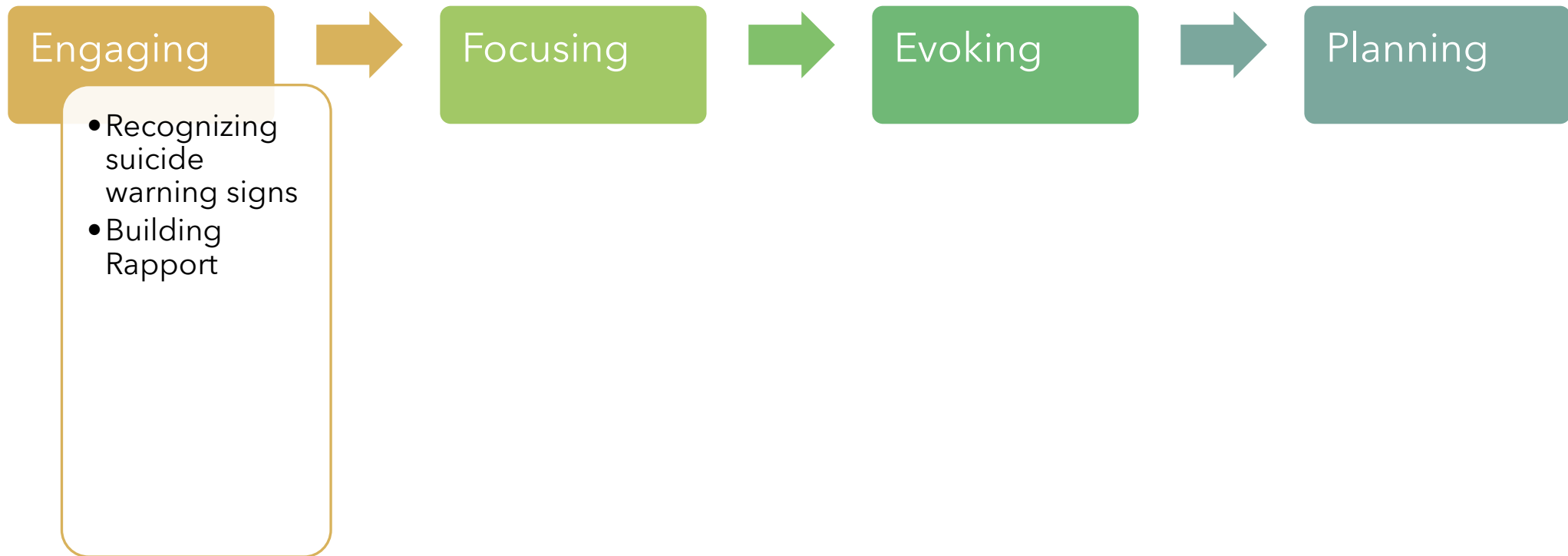
From what you've told me, it makes sense that you feel really **isolated**.

Wow, I can see why you feel **trapped** right now.



# The Method of Motivational Interviewing

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## Should you ask directly about suicide if you think someone is having suicidal thoughts?

No, you might put the idea in their head

0%

No, you might offend them

0%

No, you could hurt the rapport and have them stop talking to you

0%

No, you should ask less directly, like “are you thinking about hurting yourself”

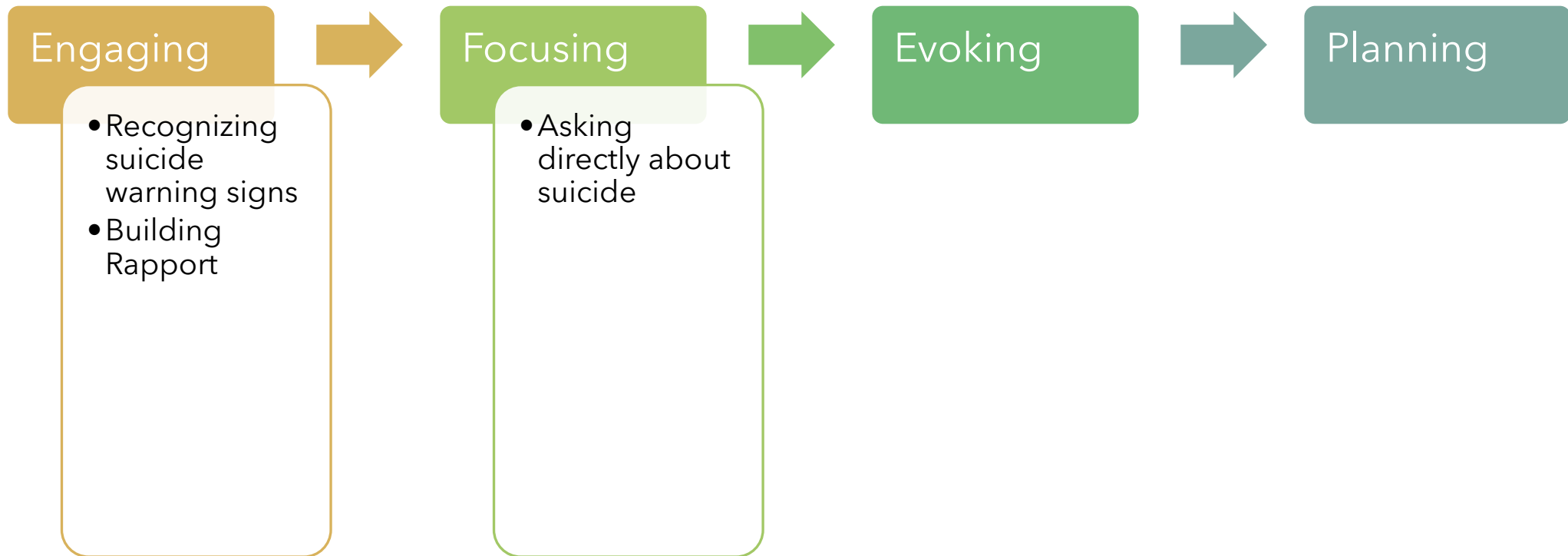
0%

Yes

0%

# The Method of Motivational Interviewing

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# Turning Points

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	Motivational Interviewing	ASIST (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training)
Things we listen for from the client	Change Talk	Turning Points

- Expressing uncertainty
- Expressing ambivalence (words like “but” or “kind of”)
- Connections to other people or animals
- Talk about the future
- Wishes that things were different

# Drawing Out Turning Points

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- What's kept you alive so far?
- What were things like before? What has changed?
- How do you wish things were?
- What would you say to a friend that were in this situation?
- What would be the downside of dying?
- What would have to change to make you willing to stay alive?



# Affirmations (Strengths)

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You really tried hard

You love your family

You're always there for your friends

That shows growth

It takes courage to be that honest

You have hope

That's a big success

It's not easy to be vulnerable like that



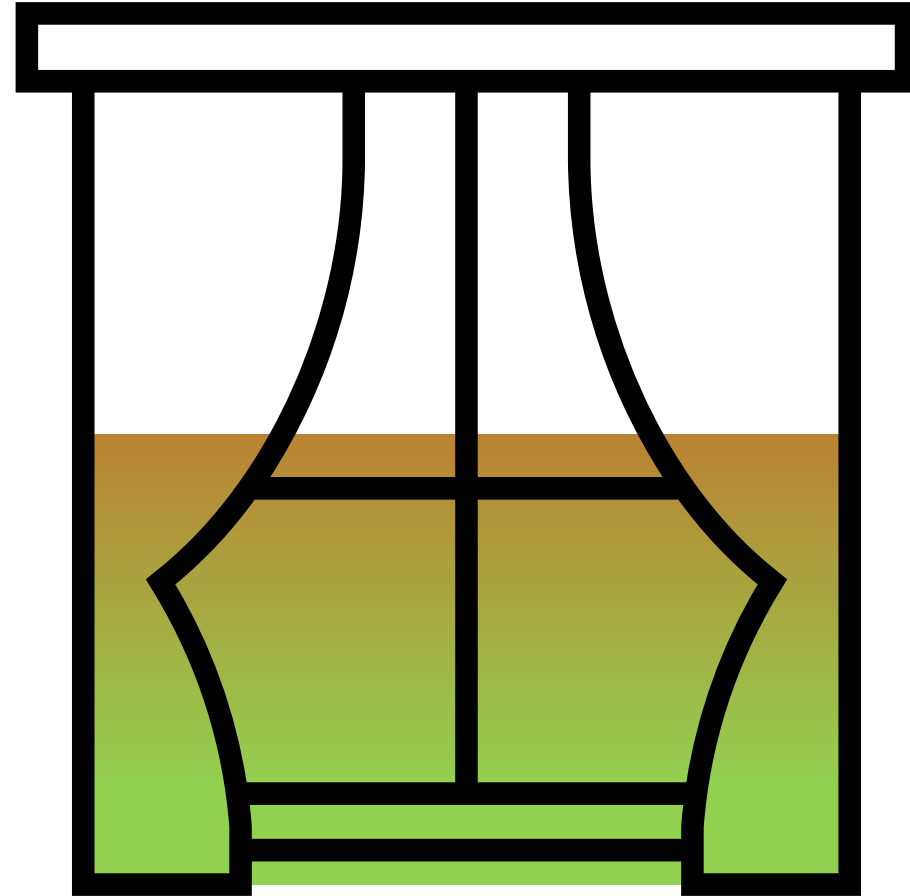
# Wrestling vs. Dancing

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# Window of Tolerance

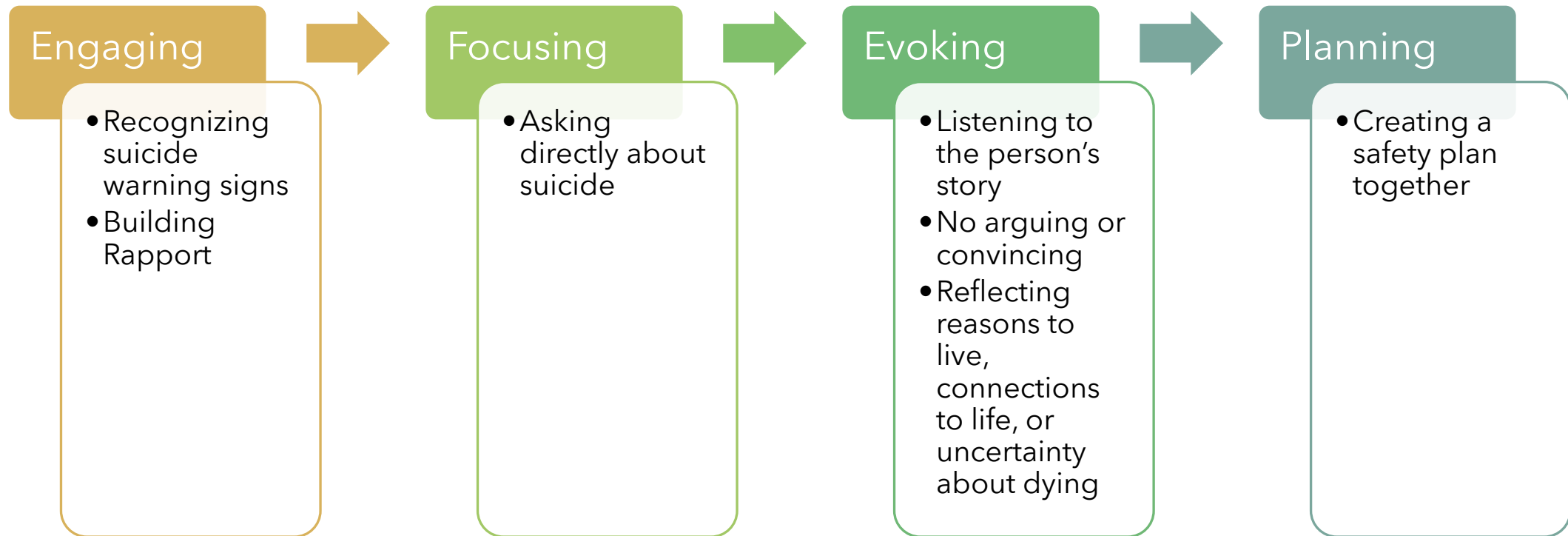
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The “window of tolerance” comes from Dr. Dan Siegel, MD, and describes the range of stress we can experience and still think clearly.



# The Method of Motivational Interviewing

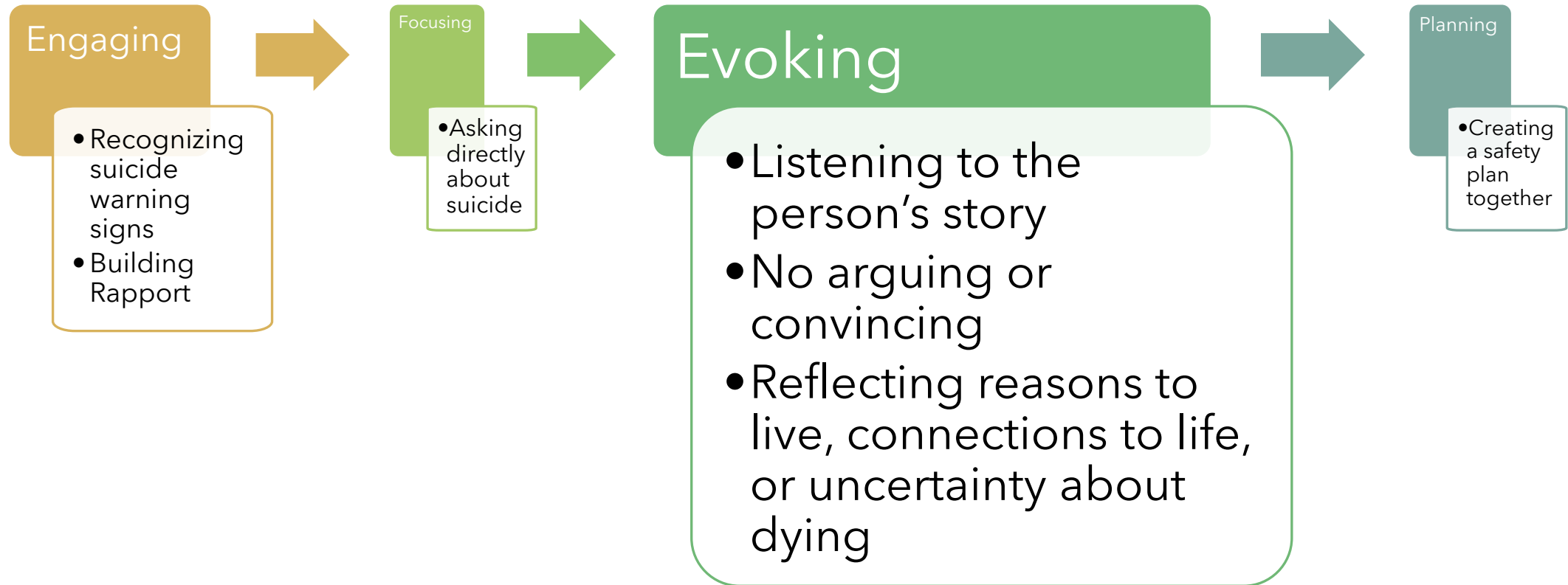
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# The Method of Motivational Interviewing

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How do we know  
that Motivational  
Interviewing  
works?

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# Example 1

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JACOB AND MADISON

Madison: Hello and welcome. What brings you here today?

Jacob: I need help and I don't know where to start

Madison: What kind of help?

Jacob: I'm very anxious and I don't want to be alive. I feel like I'm trapped

Madison: That sounds very overwhelming

Jacob: I know I could get better if I tried but it's just so hard. I get overwhelmed so easy. I had to quit my job because they would take me off a certain job and the stress of it was consuming me

Madison: I see. that sounds like it was really hard on you

Jacob: Now my girlfriend is leaving me

Madison: It sounds like you're dealing with a lot. Is there anything that helps you feel better?

Jacob: My girlfriend but I was too much for her to handle and she gave up on us

Madison: I'm sorry. Do you have other support?

Jacob: I don't talk to anyone. Too anxious for friends. Too anxious for people but I don't want to be. I went to the hospital for this in the past and recently but they just give you drugs and send you on your way

Madison: What are your thoughts on talking to a therapist? Or are you close with your family?

Jacob: I'd like to but I don't have insurance. My girlfriend applied for me but they never got back with me and it's been weeks. I've been getting migraines from all the stress

Madison: Have you looked at any mental health organizations for help?

Jacob: Yes but too anxious to go. Plus without the insurance I could never afford it. I won't be able to afford any meds I'm prescribed or anything

Madison: What do you think would be helpful for you at this point?

Jacob: I have no idea that's why I'm here

Madison: What are your thoughts on contacting your insurance to get some coverage? I feel like that would open up a lot of doors for you to get help

Jacob: I don't know who to call and even if I did I don't have a phone. Or a car to get places. I'm just so tired

Madison: You can just google insurance in your area, and maybe someone could drive you? Usually you just call and they have you fill things out online to get the insurance started

Jacob: My ex applied for me and I never heard back

Madison: You could try again or try a different company, I feel like what you want is to get help and by getting insurance it would open up a lot of doors for you. Or try calling and seeing what the status on it is

Jacob: She did it only says accepted. I can't do things on my own anymore

Madison: If it says accepted then they should have sent you a card and you should have insurance

Jacob: I never received any card or confirmation

Madison: You might have to give them a call to see why. Do you know which company? If not you could ask your ex and see and give them a call, just google the number

Jacob: It's hard for me to talk to people. It was through job and family services

Madison: Are you close with family?

Jacob: No. I pushed them all away

Madison: What do you think about reaching out to them and telling them how you feel?

Jacob: My mom is friends with my ex. I said I was over it but idk anymore

Madison: You are feeling anxious and betrayed which makes it hard to deal with your situation. Has anything worked before to help you feel less anxious?

Jacob: Weed but I can't afford it. I've been on medication but both kinds they gave me made feel worse

Madison: What do you enjoy doing for fun?

Jacob: I don't enjoy doing anything anymore music used to be my go to but I just stopped liking it

Madison: What do you think would help you?

Jacob: I don't think I can be

Madison: I think everyone can, including you

Jacob: I don't know what it would be. If my girlfriend wasn't leaving me I could do it. She said she still loves me and needs to work on herself because she struggles with depression too and I begged and begged for her to give us another chance but she made up her mind and is moving in with her mom

Madison: Why do you think you can't do it without her? Maybe this is just for now and maybe she will change her mind in the future?

Jacob: I'm sure that's true but I can't help the way I feel. I don't want to give up on us because I think we can make it work

Madison: What are your plans for after this chat?

Jacob: Cry/sleep

Madison: What are your thoughts about listening to some music? Have tried meditating before to ease anxiety? There's this app called Oak that guides you through it and it's free

Jacob: I know this isn't me. There has to be something causing me to feel this way but the doctors said there isn't

Madison: So many people struggle with anxiety, I'm surprised they said that. For some people it's genetic and for some people it's based on life experiences

Jacob: I was surprised as well I told them I was thinking about suicide but since I didn't have a plan to do it they wouldn't keep me



Madison: Do you have a plan now? I noticed you put thoughts of suicide within the last 24 hours

Jacob: Thousands of ways to do it but I promised I wouldn't and I'm trying really hard to keep it

Madison: That's good. So you are safe for now?

Jacob: Yes but I don't know how much longer I can keep that promise

Madison: Do you think you want to talk to someone?

Jacob: I would go the hospital right now if I thought it would help. It's almost as if you don't actually try to kill yourself they don't care

Madison: that's why i asked if you wanted to talk to a therapist because it's a lot more helpful

Jacob: But there are so many steps to take to make that happen and I need help now. Not tomorrow not a week from now

Madison: How can I be most helpful to you right now? ... Are you there?

Jacob: Yes I'm sorry I was texting my mom no progress unfortunately. I'm sorry to have wasted your time

Madison: You didn't waste my time at all. Please come back to chat with us whenever you need.

Does the helper  
affect how often  
turning points show up?

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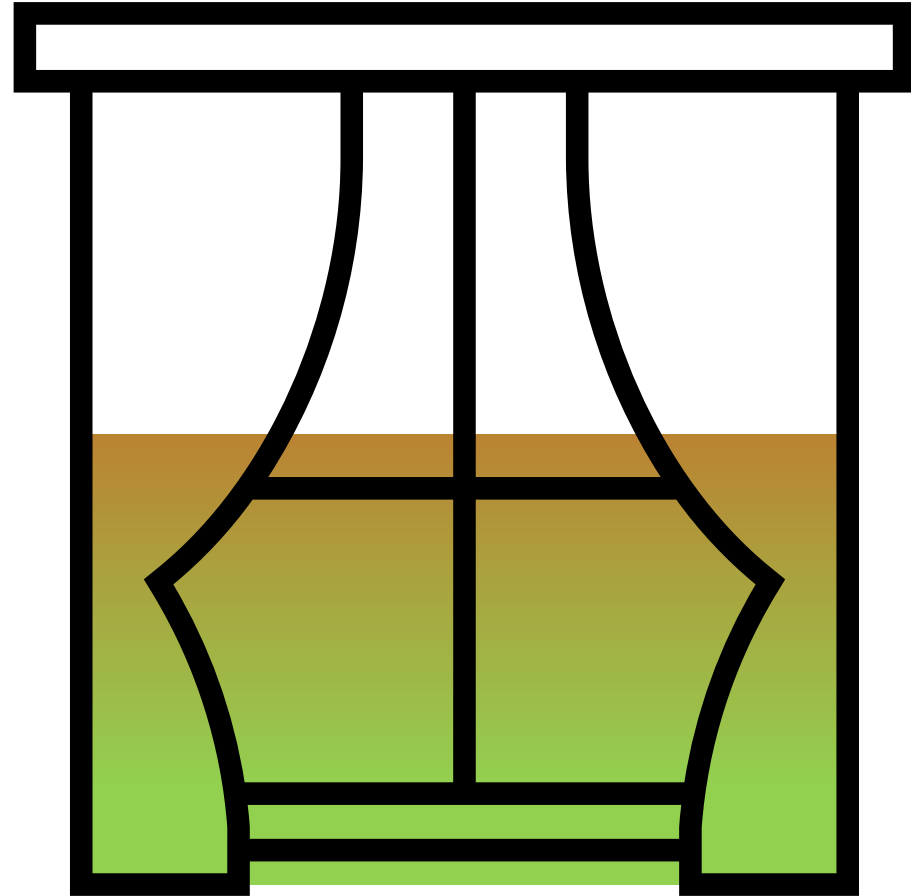
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# Window of Tolerance

Applies to helpers as well!



A photograph of two men in athletic tank tops. The man on the left is wearing a red tank top and has his arms around the man on the right. The man on the right is wearing a blue tank top and has his eyes closed, appearing to be in a state of relaxation or pain. The background is dark, and the lighting is dramatic, highlighting the men's muscles.

# “Righting” or “Fixing” Reflex

It's natural to want to fix things,  
but it's also counterproductive.

# Example 2

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ALEX AND BRIANNA

Brianna: Hi there, welcome. My name's Brianna. What can I call you?

Alex: Hi, it'll take me a minute or two to fully explain what brought me here. But it's in regards to a disinterest in life, financial trouble, and suicide... to an extent. I don't plan on doing anything drastic at the moment

Brianna: Ok that's soothing to hear that you are safe for the moment. Please take your time. No rush my friend!

Alex: so im 21 and I've had a VERY difficult time enjoying the transition adulthood. I honestly hate being an adult. I left a job back in May this year and I still haven't found anything that I believe would work for me with jobs. I'm completely broke and I'm more likely than not gonna get evicted from my apartment soon. I've talked to countless people and none of them have said anything that'd help me personally. It's honest to god starting to feel like suicide is my only option. I'm not saying it is, it's just starting to feel like it is. Because I owe so much money to people and on my bills, I feel like it's too daunting to fix all of this on my own

Brianna: First of all, thanks so much for sharing. I know it's not easy to reach out with issues that carry so much weight--so kudos to you for trying to get down to the root of your problem. You feel stuck, trapped. Making that transition is never easy, although many make it seem like it should be smooth. Life hits hard, and it always comes in waves. But it sounds like you are very in tune with your situation.

Alex: I'm honest to god tired of all of it. I don't want to die, but part of me is ready to just call it quits on life. I do appreciate your empathy

Brianna: Being 21 is an interesting job. Demanding to say the least. You're expected to have all the answers, often times without the life experience to back it up. I can definitely understand how it takes a toll--mentally and emotionally. Just know you're making total sense to me, and I am completely on your side in this moment. I must ask, have you considered how you would carry out suicide if you were to act on these thoughts?

Alex: I've Never actually planned how I'd kill myself, and I hopefully never will plan to, but I'd probably use a gun to... you know. It seems quick and painless. I do hope you believe me when I say I don't have any weapons on me. Never bought one in my life

Brianna: I trust you. I really do feel your pain. We don't differ all that much in age and I can attest to some of the pain you're feeling, though I would never say I can understand exactly what you're going through. I do know these subject matters don't clear up overnight.

Brianna: If I may ask, what keeps you going despite these dark thoughts? Where do you draw your perseverance from?

Alex: 2 things, videogames and my fear of death. I don't have any video games to play, I'm just hopeful I can start playing again soon. With death, it's something I fear so, so much. I'm not religious whatsoever ever, but if there really is an afterlife, I'm scared of being in hell

Brianna: Videogames can be a great outlet. Makes me glad we live in the age we do. So you would say that you are more driven away from suicide due to your fear of death rather than your hope for life. Though that's a terrifying thought, it's more common than people like to think. You are not alone. It sounds like you're in despair, but you know deep down that you have a why. Is that fair to say?

Alex: you're for sure spot on with that. I do sincerely appreciate your empathy. It is making me feel a little better, though I would say my dark thoughts are overpowering the optimism

Brianna: The world just needs to stop when you're in pain like this. But it doesn't. You are doing your best, you are human. Do you feel like there are things that help distract you from these thoughts? Or do you find any other suitable coping mechanisms that help push the dark away? Any light through the hellish backdrop?

Alex: I don't know what to do. I kinda don't want to continue on anymore. I think I put myself in a hole way too deep to get out of. I mean, I know what I need to do, I'm just too overwhelmed and scared to do it. I pretty much had to sell everything I had that helped me cope

Brianna: I think you're stronger than you give yourself credit for. We're always fast to blame ourselves and we are always our worst critics. The beautiful thing is you have time to work with. It may seem daunting at first, but this is a day-by-day effort. Change isn't linear, but it comes in small steps. Did you have to sell some videogames?

Alex: Heh. I don't have time at all. Yes, I did have to. Just for the sake of getting in more income without a job

Brianna: That's understandable and completely reasonable. Do you find any pleasure in your job?

Alex: Nor at all. I do regret leaving though, I really do. I hated the work, but the pay was fantastic

Brianna: Ah I see. I've had a job or two like that. If I may ask, if things were to be slightly better (just slightly) what would that look like?

Alex: Slightly, I honestly don't know. All I can think of are major events/changes

Brianna: That seems like a testament to your ability to initiate action. What kind of major changes did you have in mind?

Alex: I don't have any plans. I just want things to go back to the way they were before I left my job. Like I said earlier, I partially just want to call it quits on life as an adult.

Brianna: I see. Man I can see your frustration. Life doesn't have a magical switch, where one instance you're young and then the next you're an adult. Life just pours more on the table. Some have it easier, that much is true. I can see why you'd want to call it quits. What I admire most about what you're doing, as I said earlier, is that you are trying your best to be proactive. You're strong Alex, you are fully capable--I mean that. Do you have anyone close to you that takes the time to listen and reflect on these problems with you?

Alex: Not really. I've driven them all nuts with my constant complaining

Brianna: Well then I'm glad you're here with me. Do you mind if we go through a little technique that I've implemented in my own life whenever I'm dealing with raw stress and depression? It may sound cheesy, but some swear by it.

Alex: Sure

Brianna: Alright. First of all, is there any music that you find soothing? Any tune(s) that make you feel at ease?

Alex: It doesn't help me completely, but slow piano/jazz style music does somewhat put me at ease.

Brianna: So here's the method: put on the slow piano/jazz music at a light volume and sit or lay in a comfortable position. When you're comfortable I want you to think of all the separate things that have you feeling down: thoughts of your job, your finances... I want you to envision them as bubbles floating around right before you. And over time I want you to see the bubbles float around, eventually drifting further and further away from you until you can no longer see them. When you can no longer see any bubbles I want you to continue sitting/laying in a relaxed position and just be with yourself for a few moments. Feel your body in time and space, sit still and feel comfortable in your body.

\*They pause while Alex tries it.



Alex: Your strategy is actually quiet fantastic. Sometimes I end up fantasizing myself on a beach, watching the sunset with the music playing in the background

Brianna: Alex, that's fantastic to hear! Thanks for taking the time to do the little exercise, man it can really be soothing. How did you feel once all the bubbles had cleared?

Alex: Definitely more relaxed, but I still had other thoughts lingering in the back of my head.

Brianna: Absolutely. I just want you to feel a glimmer of the sensation of being in control and not being plagued by the dark thoughts. Even if it's only for a few moments. Did you feel in control at any point? Relaxed, but maybe slightly empowered?

Alex: Yeah, honestly

Brianna: Great. Like I said, it's not a cure-all, but a great tool to have in your arsenal. Do you feel any better since the chat has started?

Alex: Somewhat. I won't lie and say I'm a lot better, but I do GREATLY appreciate your help. You're honestly one of the better people I've spoken to on here in a while

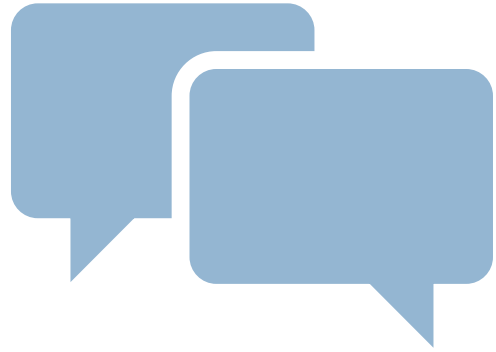
Brianna: Hey man, I'm here to help. I will never judge you and always do my absolute to help you feel better, even if it's only slightly and for a while. What does the rest of your day look like?

Alex: Uneventful. I mean, I won't literally do nothing. It'll probably be a mix of entertaining myself through YouTube videos and researching more on my stress/depression and some things to deal with it

Brianna: Got it. Same here with the Youtube haha. I would love it if you contacted us again in the future if you're feeling stuck.

Alex: I certainly will. I do have to log off, but I do sincerely appreciate your help. You have a good evening!

Brianna: You too my good sir! Thanks so much for chatting Alex!



# Comparing these Conversations...

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## Safety Plans Work

There is hope.



1. Write 3 warning signs that a crisis may be developing.

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2. Write 3 internal coping strategies that can take your mind off your problems.

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3. Who/What are 3 people or places that provide distraction?  
(Write name/place and phone numbers)

\_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

4. Who can you ask for help? (Write names and phone numbers)

\_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

5. Professionals or agencies you can contact during a crisis:

Clinician: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_  
Local Urgent Care or Emergency Department:  
Address \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_  
Call or text 988 or chat 988lifeline.org

6. Write out a plan to make your environment safer.  
(Write 2 things)

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Modified from Stanley & Brown (2021)

PEP22-08-03-007

# Safety Plan

- Stanley & Brown Safety Plan is commonly used
- Available for free from <https://www.samhsa.gov/resource>

## If you have ever had thoughts of suicide, what helped you?

Having a caring person listen to your feelings

0

Having someone stay with you until you calmed down

0

Having someone check in to see how you're doing

0

Talking to a crisis line

0

Getting rid of lethal means (such as pills, firearms, weapons)

0

External distractions (such as going somewhere, being around people)

0

Coping strategies (such as prayer/meditation, journaling, exercise)

0

Learning more about your mental health

0

Staying at a hospital

0

# Most Important Evidence- Based Parts of a Safety Plan

## 6. Write out a plan to make your environment safer.

(Write 2 things)

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### Remove lethal means

- If the person has a plan or has firearms in the home, work with them to temporarily remove them from the home

### Follow-up Call

- Offer to call the person the next day to check in

# Real World

What experiences have you had where this approach would be helpful?





The good times and the bad times both will pass. It will pass. It will get easier. But the fact that it will get easier does not mean that it doesn't hurt now.

And when people try to minimize your pain they are doing you a disservice. And when you try to minimize your own pain you're doing yourself a disservice. Don't do that. The truth is that it hurts because it's real.

**It hurts because it mattered.**

And that's an important thing to acknowledge to yourself. But that doesn't mean that it won't end, that it won't get better. Because it will.

~John Green