

Questions to Help Introduce Difficult Topics

BLACK DOG INSTITUTE



INTRODUCING THE AREA OF DISTRESS AND DEPRESSION:

- *How are you feeling?*
- *How's work? How's the family?*
- *How's your sleep....appetite...any changes?*



SUICIDAL IDEATION:

- *Have you ever felt life wasn't worth living?*
- *What has led you to feel like that?*

RISK OF SUICIDE:

- *Is this unhappy feeling so strong that you wish you were dead?*
- *How often have you had these thoughts?*
- *Has anything happened recently to make you feel like this?*
- *Have you thought about suicide?*
- *Have you got a plan?... thought of what you would do? When would you intend to do this? Where would you do this?*
- *On a scale from one to ten (where one is the lowest and ten is the highest), how strong is your desire to kill yourself?*
- *What would it take to move you down one point on the scale?*
- *What would it take to move you up one point on the scale?*
- *Is the method readily available to you?*
- *Have you thought about harming someone else?*
- *Have you ever tried to kill or harm yourself before?*
- *Did things change as a result of the attempts?*
- *Who could or would you like to support you?*
- *Are there any reasons that would stop you from killing yourself?*
- *If you could look to the future, what do you feel you could look forward to?*

POSSIBLE PSYCHOSIS:

- **Introducing the topic:** *Some people find that when they are stressed, they have unusual experiences.....*
- **Changing the topic, interrupting:** *I'm finding it difficult to follow what you are saying...Can I ask some questions to make it clearer?*
- **Following leads:** *You mentioned that you think you have no money despite money in your bank book... can you explain this?*

ASSESSING RISK:

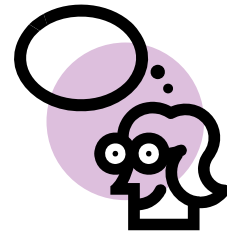
- *Have you been a lot more worried about...?*
- *Have you had any unusual thoughts?*
- *Have you thought that your illness is a punishment?*
- *Have you felt you life was in danger?*





CONTINGENCY PLANNING FOR MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS:

- *Who is at home with you? Are there any people who are dependent on you?*
- *Who can you call on if needed?*
- *What are your plans for the next few days?*
- *What will you do if you become much more distressed?*
- *I would like to notify... crisis team... other clinicians..?*



ENGAGING DISTRESSED PEOPLE:

- ✓ When people are distressed, they are usually very preoccupied and can misunderstand or not recall what has been said. Their attention is focused on their own dilemmas, it is important to 'signal' why you are asking personal questions.
- ✓ Asking a series of questions from a sheet can be easier than just remembering them – it does mean that you don't forget important questions. You can also use a self-report measure. If you use the DMI-10, it does not (by design) ask specific questions about suicidal ideation as it is better to enquire about these in person.
- ✓ It can be useful to write down phrases that are meaningful to the person, that capture the essence of what they are experiencing.
- ✓ Make use of the information sheets and other material in the Tool Kit. It is often easier to go through material again later at home.
- ✓ Make use of the Relapse Signature sheet to plan for crises.
- ✓ Summarise what you have learned: it can be helpful to bring the clinical conversation back 'on track' and to make sure that the messages you are giving are getting through.
- ✓ Ask the person what they are going to tell their significant others about the conversation – this will give you an idea of what they are likely to convey.



References

Parker G, Hilton T, Hadzi-Pavlovic D, Bains J. **Screening for depression in the medically ill: the suggested utility of a cognitive-based approach.** Aust N Z J Psychiatry 2001;35:474-80