Dear Alice,

My roommate attempted suicide and I found her in the bathroom. She wants to come back to school next semester but I don't think she is better even though she has received professional help. How can I ever trust her again and feel comfortable? I am scared constantly at being alone with her. What do I do? How can I tell her about my fears?

— Scared

Answer

Dear Scared,

Although time has passed and your roommate sought professional help, it's understandable that you may doubt her readiness to make another try at school and question your role and responsibility throughout that process. When you found your roommate, whether you wanted to or not, you entered into her struggles in a very personal way. It may be helpful to learn a little more about suicide before then considering your role and how you might communicate about it with your roommate.

While there are a number of risk factors for suicide, such as a prior suicide attempt, a range of mental health disorders, family histories, and access to lethal means, someone who exhibits warning signs of suicide may be at a higher risk and of more immediate concern. Some behaviors that indicate warning signs of suicide include:

- Talking about wanting to die or wanting to kill themselves
- Talking about feeling empty, hopeless, or having no reason to live,
- Planning or looking for a way to kill themselves
- Talking about significant guilt or shame
- Talking about feeling trapped or feeling that there are no solutions
- Feeling unbearable pain, both physical and emotional
- Withdrawing from friends and family
- Giving away personal possessions
- Saying goodbye to friends and family
Putting affairs in order

List adapted from the National Institute of Mental Health [2].

Keeping some of these warning signs in mind may help you feel better in recognizing the level of concern that is appropriately situated to what you’re observing. Additionally, asking someone directly about suicide doesn’t put the idea in their head. Rather, asking, "Are you thinking of killing yourself?" can be the best way to identify if someone is at risk for suicide.

With this, getting professional help is key for anyone who exhibits warning signs of suicide. While it was probably quite traumatic for both you and your roommate when you found her, it sounds like she did get professional help. Although it doesn’t diminish the intensity of that experience, it’s worth noting that there are treatment options and therapies that have proven effective in reducing suicidal behavior and attempts, so it’s possible that your roommate is well on her path to recovery after some appropriate clinical intervention.

While this may not provide you with a definitive prediction of future likelihood or recurrence, it may help to know that recovery is possible, it happens, and it’s also hard. Often, seeking any type of clinical support around mental health may carry stigma. Whether voluntary or not, adjusting back to life as usual following any type of hospitalization for mental health can feel difficult and laced with a variety of emotions, including shame and embarrassment.

This is where intentionality in how you communicate can be key. It’s understandable that you feel scared and worried and like you don’t want to be put in the same situation again. You’re a roommate, not a clinician, and it’s not your responsibility to act as a mental health professional. Understanding and embracing what your role looks like and means to you is a great place to start.

From a place of understanding, support, and compassion, you may want to ask your roommate a few questions as you discuss a potential transition back to your shared living space:

- How do you feel about transitioning back to school? What are you excited about? What are you worried about?
- Do you have a plan to continue relationships with the mental health professionals you have been working with? Do you plan to start new ones with the mental health professionals at school? What does that transition in care look like and mean for you?
- How might you identify that what you’re feeling is too difficult for you? If you start to identify that in yourself, what’s your plan?
- Are you connected with any other professional support resources at school who will be helping you transition back?

After giving your roommate space to consider some of these logistics of transitioning back to school from a place of support, non-judgement, and concern, you may consider sharing some of your thoughts, feelings, and potential worries. Here it can be especially helpful to stay focused on "I- statements" (such as, "I felt terrified when I found you, and I feel scared and nervous considering the possibility of being in that situation again"). When you focus on how her actions and behaviors made you feel without assigning blame or judgement, it can help give her the opportunity to better engage in conversation while matching your empathy and understanding.
Even after a great conversation, you may still feel uneasy about the situation and perhaps still not want to live together. If that is the case, you may seek out alternate housing options or connect with a student affairs professional to explore any relevant support or policies that may apply for you.

Regardless of how the conversation goes and what you decide moving forward, how would you feel about reaching out for some professional support during these times? You may be wondering why you would go to counseling if it's your roommate that attempted suicide? Well, it's clear that your roommate's mental health has become a source of stress for you. You're on the front lines, and it might help you to get some outside support. Here are a couple of thoughts to consider: In what ways would it help you to talk freely about your discomfort with day-to-day living with your roommate? What would it be like for you to talk openly about your memories in processing the trauma that you experienced from this situation? If you're ready to talk to a mental health professional, a health care provider may be able to provide a referral if needed. If you're a student, your school may have mental health resources available to students.

It's clear that you care about your roommate. You’re both going through some very hard times. It's virtually impossible for anyone to deal with life or death issues alone, and memories of near-death experiences can linger and be difficult to process and move through. For these reasons, it's key for both of you to seek out the support that you need. You already took the first step by writing. Here’s to taking care of yourself and taking next steps that feel right for you.

Alice!

Category:
Emotional Health [3]
Suicide [4]
Relationships [5]
Roommate Rumblings [6]

Related questions

Feeling suicidal... Help! [7]
Support after a suicide on campus [8]
Will I be hospitalized for being depressed? [9]

Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [10]
Medical Services (Morningside) [11]
Counseling Services (CUIMC) [12]
Medical Services (CUIMC) [13]

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