

# Helping Someone in Distress

**Listen • Acknowledge  
Support • Refer**

How to assist people experiencing mental  
health, alcohol or other drug issues



Government of Western Australia  
Mental Health Commission





---

## The Basics

**Mental health, alcohol and other drug issues are more common than you may think**

- One in five Australians experience mental health issues each year.
- Three million Australians are living with anxiety or depression.
- Suicide is the leading cause of death among Australians aged between 15 and 44.
- 16% of Australians misuse pharmaceuticals or use illicit drugs.
- Of those Australians who drink, over 37% do so at risky levels.

---

## The Good News

**Help is available.** And people who seek help, can, and do, recover.



# Helping someone in distress

If someone is in distress and you believe they are experiencing mental health, alcohol or other drug issues, these tips can help reduce anxiety and risk

- Take them seriously, and be warm and non-judgemental.
- Give them your full attention and don't interrupt when they are speaking.
- Summarise what they have said to show you are listening and to work out what type of help they need. For example, "it sounds like you are feeling XYZ and that you want/plan to XYZ. Have I understood correctly?"
- If they are on the phone, ask if they are safe, and if there is someone with them or close by that they can contact for support.
- Reassure them that there are solutions to problems and that things can get better. Tell them you would like to help them access support.
- Request their name, address and current location. If they are on the phone, write down their phone number if it's available on caller ID. Also record the time and date.
- Discuss the options they have for seeking help and encourage them to make contact with the relevant support services.
- Don't give opinions or advice, agree or disagree with what they are saying, or ask too many questions. Unless you are a qualified professional, you should only provide referral information.
- If you are able to, transfer them directly to a support service without having to hang up.
- If they refuse to get help and you believe it's a crisis, tell them you are concerned about them and that you are going to contact the Mental Health Emergency Response Line or Rurallink for help. For example: "it sounds like things are difficult for you at the moment and I'm concerned for your wellbeing. I'm going to contact a support service and ask how they can help you."

**Listen • Acknowledge • Support • Refer**

# — If approached in person by someone who is aggressive, or who is experiencing psychosis

**If concerned for your own safety, remove yourself, and others, from the area immediately and call 000**

- Discreetly call another member of staff to assist.
- Try to establish some rapport. Speak in a calm, even tone and use their name if you know it.
- Adopt an open, non-aggressive stance – feet hip-width apart, arms at sides and palms facing outwards.
- Don't rush into sudden actions and never approach them from behind without warning.
- Stay at least an arm's length away from them and give them room to breathe. Do not touch them.
- Tell them what you are about to do before you do it – never leave them to guess your intentions. Speak clearly and make one point at a time. Do not overload them with information and don't use jargon.
- Give them time to think before responding to any questions. Consider stepping back to provide a nonverbal cue of no pressure.
- Continue to reassure them about what is happening, but do not be patronising.
- Do not try to contradict or reason logically against a delusion. Discrediting their reality could aggravate them.
- Try to negotiate realistic options to resolve the situation. For example: "I want to help and we can talk about this, but I am having trouble understanding you while you are shouting".
- Explain your position and what you are obliged to do to assist. For example: "I'm concerned about you and want to keep you safe, so I am going to call the police to come and check you are ok."

# Look after yourself

- Set boundaries. Inform them what your role can and can't do.
- Warn them that abusive behaviour is not okay, and that you are within your rights to terminate their call or walk away if they continue to be abusive. Examples:
  - “Can you try and lower your voice a bit please. I’m finding it hard to make out what you are saying.”
  - “I want to help you, but if you continue raising your voice I will have to end this call.”
  - “I’m not able to continue to listen to you because you are swearing/yelling and I’m going to hang up now. Feel free to call back when you are ready to speak to me without swearing/yelling and I will happily help you then.”
- You may benefit from a debriefing session after involvement in a crisis situation. This involves discussing responses to the incident, and emotional, physiological and behavioural reactions. A debrief is usually done with your supervisor or line manager.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help yourself.
- Remember that you are not responsible for the situation or for saving anyone.



# Where to get help in Western Australia

## Life threatening emergencies: Call 000

**Threats to self or others** – ask for Police and tell them if it's a mental health issue. **In the case of physical harm** – ask for an ambulance

## Urgent mental health assistance

### Mental Health Emergency Response Line (MHERL)

For anyone involved in a mental health emergency in the community – both members of the public and health professionals. Callers referred to acute response teams

**Metro:** 1300 555 788 (24/7)

**Peel:** 1800 676 822 (24/7)

**TTY:** 1800 720 101 (24/7)

### Rurallink

Specialist after-hours mental health telephone service for rural communities in Western Australia

1800 552 002 (after hours and weekends.

At other times, contact a local mental health service)

**TTY:** 1800 720 101

## Alcohol and other drugs support

### Alcohol and Drug Support Line

For anyone concerned about their own or another person's alcohol or drug use

08 9442 5000 (24/7)

**Country callers:** 1800 198 024 (24/7)

**[www.mhc.wa.gov.au/](http://www.mhc.wa.gov.au/)**

**[alcoholanddrugssupportline](http://alcoholanddrugssupportline)**

### Parent and Family Drug Support Line

For anyone concerned about a loved one's alcohol or drug use

08 9442 5050 (24/7)

**Country callers:** 1800 653 203 (24/7)

**[www.mhc.wa.gov.au/](http://www.mhc.wa.gov.au/)**

**[parentandfamilydrugssupportline](http://parentandfamilydrugssupportline)**

### Wungening Aboriginal Corporation

Aboriginal alcohol and drug referral service that provides culturally appropriate services

08 9221 1411 (business hours)

**[www.wungening.com.au/](http://www.wungening.com.au/)**

**[alcohol-and-other-drugs-support](http://alcohol-and-other-drugs-support)**

## Mental health support

### Beyondblue

24/7 free counselling

1300 224 636 (24/7)

**[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)**

### Lifeline

In a crisis situation

13 11 14 (24/7)

**[www.lifelinewa.org.au](http://www.lifelinewa.org.au)**

### 13YARN

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander crisis support line for mob who are feeling overwhelmed or having difficulty coping

13Yarn (13 92 76)

**[www.13yarn.org.au](http://www.13yarn.org.au)**

### Suicide Call Back Service

Free telephone, video and online counselling for people 15 years and over, from professional counsellors with specialist skills. Is especially suited to people who are geographically or emotionally isolated

1300 659 467 (24/7)

**[www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au](http://www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au)**

## Mental health support cont'd

### 1800RESPECT

National sexual assault, domestic family violence counselling service

1800 737 732 (24/7)

[www.1800respect.org.au](http://www.1800respect.org.au)

### Crisis Care Helpline

For urgent assistance with child welfare, domestic violence, homelessness and other crisis situations

08 9223 1111 (24/7) or 1800 199 008

#### Translating and interpreting service:

13 14 50

[www.dyhs.org.au](http://www.dyhs.org.au)

### Derbarl Yerrigan Health Service Inc.

Health and medical support for Aboriginal people, including counselling

08 9421 3888 (Mon to Fri: 8:30am – 7pm; Sat: 8:30am – 12pm)

[www.wa.gov.au/service/community-services/community-support/crisis-care](http://www.wa.gov.au/service/community-services/community-support/crisis-care)

### Headspace

Support for young adults aged 12 – 25, and their families. Four core areas: mental health, physical health, work and study support, and alcohol and other drug services

1800 650 890 (7 days: 9am – 12:30am EST)

Telephone and web chat

[www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au)

(details of local headspace centres)

### Kids Helpline

Free qualified counselling service for kids and young people aged five to 25

1800 551 800 (24/7)

[www.kidshelpline.com.au](http://www.kidshelpline.com.au)

### MensLine Australia

Support and information for Australian men with family and relationship concerns emergency

1300 78 99 78 (24/7)

[www.mensline.org.au](http://www.mensline.org.au)

### QLife

Counselling and referral service for people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and/or intersex (LGBTI)

1800 184 527 (7 days: 3pm – 12am)

[www.qlife.org.au](http://www qlife.org.au)

### Wellways Helpline

A peer-led national helpline staffed by trained volunteers with personal experience of mental health issues. Mental health information, support and referrals, for people experiencing mental health issues and their family and friends

1300 111 500 (Mon to Fri: 9am – 9pm EST)

[www.wellways.org/our-services/helpline](http://www.wellways.org/our-services/helpline)

## Alcohol, drug and mental health support

### Here For You

7am – 10pm, 7 days a week

1800here4u (1800 437 348)

[www.mhc.wa.gov.au/here4u](http://www.mhc.wa.gov.au/here4u)

General Practitioners (GPs) can connect people to mental health and alcohol and other drug treatment and recovery resources



Details of further mental health, alcohol or other drug support services can be found at [www.mhc.wa.gov.au/gettinghelp](http://www.mhc.wa.gov.au/gettinghelp)





Government of **Western Australia**  
Mental Health Commission

GPO Box X2299, Perth  
Business Centre WA 6847

Level 1, 1 Nash Street,  
Perth, WA 6000

T (08) 6553 0600  
[mhc.wa.gov.au](http://mhc.wa.gov.au)

 @mentalhealthwa

 @mentalhealthwa

 @mentalhealthwa

 [www.linkedin.com/company/mentalhealthwa](http://www.linkedin.com/company/mentalhealthwa)



© 2022 Mental Health Commission, Government of Western Australia This publication may be copied in whole or part, with acknowledgement to the Commission. Additional copies of this document can be downloaded and printed at [www.mhc.wa.gov.au](http://www.mhc.wa.gov.au). This document can also be made available in alternative formats upon request for those with visual or other impairments.

