



# Sylvia Guest

Professional Member ANLP

## NLP Therapy & Coaching

*Mental Health provider for Te Tai Tokerau PHO  
and working privately with our people in the Far North*

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### Let's talk about Suicide

I'll get straight to the point.

There is only one reason people end their own lives:

**They're in pain.**

Raw, emotional, unbearable pain.

**Then they make a mistake.**

The mistake is: *They believe the only way to end the pain is to end their life.*

### It's time for a new approach

What we're doing as individuals, families, communities and society isn't working often enough or fast enough. So it's pretty obvious, don't you think? **We need to do something different.**

Read part one of my series ***End the Pain – Not the Life*** to start learning the simple things you, and every single one of us, can do to connect with our fellow human beings when they are in pain.

The theme of these articles is to keep it simple – doing the smallest possible action to get the biggest possible result in the shortest possible time – so in each part I'll offer you just three things to do, and tell you about three things it's important NOT to do (and why).

The articles start at the crisis point – intervention – working backwards through dealing with feelings like depression and anxiety, and concluding with tips for becoming emotionally resilient.

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# End the pain - not the life

*A series on suicide intervention and prevention by Sylvia Guest*

## Part One

### Suicide Intervention

While this part is about intervention when you have good reason to believe a person is considering suicide (or they may have told someone, in one way or another, that they're going to kill themselves), these methods can also be used when someone has tried and, thankfully, failed.

### What You Can Do

#### #1 Manage your own emotions

If there's an emergency on a flight, we need to put on our own oxygen mask before we can help anyone else with theirs. Same thing applies here; it's normal to feel confused, angry, or frightened when you're confronted with someone who wants to take their own life, but *this is not about you*. In order to help them, you need to regulate your own emotions.

#### Breathe yourself calm

Heightened emotion flicks the nervous system into fight, flight or freeze mode, shutting down the thinking part of the brain. Getting your system back into balance is the key to thinking clearly and feeling in control.

1. Breathe in quickly, to the count of two, then breathe out as slowly as you can (a count of 6-10 is great). Repeat for a total of four breaths.
2. Take six deep belly breaths, in to the count of 4-6, out to the same count, without pausing between the in and out breath.
3. If you need to, repeat steps 1 and 2 three or four times, until you feel calm, then breathe normally.

When you're ready, put your focus entirely on the other person and be prepared to really see and hear them, with acceptance and compassion.

#### #2 Come right out and say it

The language offered here is carefully chosen to reach more people more of the time, so it's a good idea to treat the wording more like a script than a general concept. *Speak gently, confidently and with compassion.*

##### 1. Acknowledge their pain:

"From here it looks and sounds and feels like you're really hurting – is that what it's been like for you?"

##### 2. Acknowledge their pain again, and introduce some doubt about their planned course of action:

"You know, sometimes when people feel this much pain, they make the mistake of thinking that they need to end their lives, when what they really want is for their pain to stop."

### 3. Gently introduce a new possibility, and offer yourself as a connection:

“So I’m wondering...what if we could find a way, together, to stop all this pain so you *want* to live?”

## #3 Respond to their response

What you do next depends on how they are responding to you. There are of course at least three ways this could go:

- 1. Negative\*:** If their response is along the lines that nothing and no-one could possibly help them in any way, simply acknowledge that, and gently move them forward:  
“I know that’s how you feel right now, but what if it *is* possible? What will it take for you to let me try?”  
\*I have never had a negative response from this approach – and there’s always a first time.
- 2. Positive:** If their response is positive, gently find a way to get them to physically move to a safe place with you, and together, work out the next smallest step to emotional wellness.
- 3. Silence:** If their response is silence, you may be able to guess from their body language/facial expression whether they’ve made the shift to having a glimmer of hope (this could be as small as meeting your eyes, or a slight lift of the head, or something more profound) or they’re retreating further (turning away, making themselves smaller...).

**Whichever way it plays out,** if it’s appropriate to the relationship you have with this person (if it’s not, jump to “shut your mouth”), gauge your moment and do this:

Ask if you can hold them. (“Can I hold you?” is a much more powerful draw than “Do you want a hug?”) However they respond - **shut your mouth.** It’s your heart and your arms that need to be open. Just be with them, and wait. Breathe with them. If they’re crying, cry with them. Somewhere inside you, you will know just what do to next; learn to trust your heart and your gut feelings.

**Then – seek outside help.** If you can’t get the suicidal person to get help, then *you* get help to learn how you can best help them. *See the end of this article for more resources.*

## What NOT to do

I’m not fond of focusing on negatives, but really, we have to know what makes things worse as well as what makes things better.

### #1 Don’t say things like:

- I know how you’re feeling
- I understand what you’re going through

**You don’t!** You can’t. Even if you have had similar things happen to you, or you have done similar things, or been through a similar situation – you are you, and they are them. You have each been shaped by different experiences in life, have been treated differently and treated others differently... the list goes on.

Just accept – you can’t ever really know how someone else is feeling. You can only imagine how you might feel in *whatever your perception is* of their circumstances - and that is a very, very different thing indeed.

**Instead:** Acknowledge that you can only guess how they are feeling or what they are going through, and you'd like the chance to understand better. (We'll talk more about how to handle that in the next article.)

**#2 Don't minimise their pain** by making comparisons with your own or other people's lives and problems. What seems insignificant to one person can be devastating to another, for a whole raft of reasons.

**Instead:** See. Hear. Accept. Love.

### **#3 Don't say things like:**

- You've got nothing to worry about
- Pull yourself together/pull up your socks/ pull yourself up by your bootlaces
- Man up/get a grip/what's wrong with you/why don't you snap out of it

All that will do is make the person feel even more hopeless, helpless, guilty, unloved, misunderstood, useless... you get the idea? If they knew how to change their situation, they would have done it already!

**Instead:** Ask "What do you need right now?" or "Can I sit with you?" and just be with them, expecting nothing.

## **Effective Intervention**

People who are suicidal typically believe they have no control over their lives or their feelings. When death is perceived as the only way to end pain, how and when their death takes place becomes the one thing over which they do have control. With the only perceived options being life *as it is* or death, there is no real choice. Effective intervention introduces a third option – the chance, the hope, the possibility, of life *different to how it is right now*.

## **Resources:**

**For more information or to make an appointment with Sylvia:**

Phone 022 076 3734

Email: [sylvia@morebetter.co.nz](mailto:sylvia@morebetter.co.nz)

[www.morebetter.co.nz](http://www.morebetter.co.nz)

## **Youth Suicide:**

Check out the B.R.A.V.E video – On YouTube search for **Le Va Suicide**, or visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eloUUm2IUMU>

**Suicide Crisis Hotline: 0508 828 865**

**If you believe someone is in immediate danger please dial 111.**