


might kill himself  
lack of other coping skills  
- poor self-esteem  
feeling worthless  
- powerlessness  
(involves power  
& control)  
- trying to express  
a need  
- what are they trying  
to get?  
- do they understand seriousness  
+ thinking clearly [drugs  
alcohol  
anaps]



# the little red threat book

Central Australian  
Community Knowledge,  
gathered by the  
Life Promotion Program,  
Mental Health Association  
of Central Australia  
(MHACA)

*This booklet is a compilation  
of the thinking and discussion  
that took place at Campfire In  
The Heart, Alice Springs, at the  
'Suicide as a Threat' community  
workshop in November 2007*



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stick figures

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*Compiled by the Life Promotion Program from workshop notes made by members of the Central Australian community.*

*Compilation & layout: Kristy Schubert  
Cover: Rita Riedel*

*Published by the Life Promotion Program  
C/- Mental Health Association of Central Australia  
65 Hartley Street, Alice Springs. (08) 8950 4600.*

*Workshop held November 2007*

*Draft booklet published February 2008*

*Revised booklet published July 2009*



# Acknowledgements

## Contributors:

*This booklet is a compilation of the thoughts and experiences people have shared on this topic so far.*

*Thank you to everyone who has contributed, including:*

Liz Archer, Katie Allen & Charles Hodgson (Waltja), Cait Ryan (Hidden Valley Community Centre), Susannah Bady, James Teh, Susie Low, Bethany Langdon, Sherman Spencer, Alec & Angelina Tasman, Jessica Hargraves (Yuendumu / Mt Theo), Tanya Jones (Alice Springs Women's Shelter), Phil Hassall (CAYLUS), Adrian Scholtes (Tangentyere Council), Kim Gorey & Anthony Brenhardt (CAAC Youth Team), Anastasia Spathis (CAAC), Antoinette Carrol (ASYASS Youth Justice Project Worker), Joshua Santaspirito & Trevor Galbraith (CAMHS Remote Mental HealthTeam), Vivien Wilson (Teen Challenge), Ben Foley (CAAMA), Rob Loane & Karen Reval (Lifeline), Laurencia Grant & Kristy Schubert (LPP, MHACA).

*Suicidal acts are frantic attempts at improving one's life, not ending it.*

D.J. Mayo, Psychologist

*Suicide may represent the solution to a problem, or a way of achieving a particular outcome.*

Diego De Leo, Lecturer and Psychologist

*People choose suicidal acts when they see them as the best way of ending an unbearable situation or getting the changes they desire.*

World Health Organisation

*Give me freedom or give me death.*

Revolutionary Cry

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ing skills  
m

- escalation: proving point
- maybe a symbol for low emotional resources

↳ "flaring up"

feeling violated but not letting things pass

- need attention but unable to communicate

CONC

- pay
- war

## before you go on: a little note to you

*If you don't feel comfortable, you can walk away from the group. Sit quiet. If you want someone to come with you, just ask them, then tell them if you want to talk or just sit down quietly together.*

[notes from a group on the day]

We hope you get a lot out of reading through this booklet. Sometimes, though, reading about topics like this can bring up a lot of pain. Our bodies respond this way when someone touches a part of us that's still in the process of healing. You might feel like you have a tight chest or pounding heart. You might feel dizzy, nauseous or short of breath. You might feel angry, hurt or teary.

If this happens, know that you'll be okay; you just need time and space to heal some more. When you feel like this it's good to go to a place where you can relax. Let yourself cry or just be. Make use of the people you feel safe with, the things you do that calm you, the places that are healing to be in and the ideas and beliefs that you trust.

Before you go on: a little note to you

It's okay if you don't want to come back to this topic until later. Give yourself whatever time and space you need. It's all part of the journey. Just let someone you trust know what you're going through. Support is one of the most important things along the way.

Warm regards,  
Life Promotion ■

## Introduction

### Group Work in Progress

The use of 'suicide as a weapon for threat or manipulation' has been an emerging problem that has troubled many of those who live and work in Central Australia. Despite the prevalence of this issue, there are no resources or information that we are aware of to help us better understand this problem.

*the little red threat book* emerged out of the 'Suicide as a Threat' community workshop held in November 2007. Think of it as a skeleton, pieced together from the dot points people put on butcher's paper on that day.

Over time, we hope this skeleton will be fleshed out with your thoughts, artwork, plans and ideas on this issue. So if any of these come to you, why not jot them down? They'll become part of the next edition of this communal resource.

Thank you, everyone, for the hopes, energy and experiences you've put into this so far.

*The Life Promotion Team* ■



# 1

## What might come out of us meeting together?

This is a challenging issue. It makes us worried. Suicide is more impulsive here, and often fuelled by grog. It might flare up anywhere. And we're worried because it seems to have become really common. Or accepted. It seems like just about every family is affected. It's hard to get services to respond. And we sometimes feel frustrated, you know? Maybe because of that stuff, but maybe just because it's so tiring.

We're worried about copy-cat behaviour and we're worried for the young ones who are growing up with this behaviour all around them. We're also worried about the affect on partners and carers of these people. They are under a lot of pressure, and they're getting stressed and tired out, and sometimes people might blame them, even when it's not their fault.

## 1. What might come out of us meeting together

While we're here together, we can talk about good ways to respond. We've come here to try and understand why this is happening and support each other as we search for solutions. Hopefully we'll feel refreshed! And maybe we'll get more confidence in the way we handle these situations.

We're here because we want to do our jobs better: be better role models, better mothers, better friends, offer better case management, have better critical incident plans, offer more valid ways of listening to or supporting others.

It's good to hear something from outside our closed circuits, you know? Get out of the closed loop. You get to hear about other people's experiences, which is good, because they might have other ways of approaching this stuff. It's good to hear that we're not the only ones struggling with this problem, and it's great to be in a room full of people who are all taking this seriously.

We're all sitting down together to listen to each other's stories and look for insight into this. ■

## 2

### What do we worry for?

*To start this session, we asked people to describe situations where suicide is used as a threat.*

It seems that a common factor is that a person wants something to happen immediately and then, when it doesn't happen the way they want, they react by threatening to kill themselves. What they want is often money or food, but sometimes the trigger is something really unexpected, like being asked to turn down the volume of the stereo.

It feels like the threats have different degrees of 'seriousness'. Sometimes it seems the person hasn't invested much in the threat, and they didn't necessarily say it because they meant it, but more because it's an accepted phrase, sort of like swearing: something to shock people into responding. This is worrying in itself, but not as distressing as the times when the person seems to have lost all sense of perspective and, charged up with anger or jealousy or grog, they react to some situation with intense threats to take their own life.

## 2. What do we worry for?

These variations in intensity make it hard to know how to react. Are we supposed to take everything seriously? Is there a different way to respond to someone who is in their right mind but using the threat to shock or hurt us, than to someone who is blind with alcohol or rage? What happens if we don't take it seriously and something happens? We want to have some kind of consistent plan, but the threats are *inconsistent*, and inconsistency can be very confusing.

As well as differences in the type of trigger and intensity of threat, there are differences in the number of people involved. Sometimes these situations are limited to one person threatening and one being threatened. At other times, whole interconnected groups get involved in issuing threats and feeling the stress of possible consequences.■

# 3

## What do we worry for?

### The one making the threat

*The example we used for this exercise was a young man, so these points are written as 'he', but the person at risk could also be a 'she'.*

## Life, Death & Safety

- ▶ We're worried - that he'll follow through on the threat.
- ▶ We're worried - that he'll feel he has backed himself into a corner and has to follow through for people to take him seriously.
- ▶ We're worried - that he might not understand that hanging puts quick, severe pressure on your neck, spine, air and blood flow in a way that will almost definitely damage your body forever or kill it on the spot.
- ▶ We're worried - that he doesn't understand how quick it is, and that hanging doesn't leave time for people to respond or rescue, nor does it leave time for him to change his mind.

### 3. What do we worry for? The one making the threat

## Skills, Knowledge & Thought Processes

- ▶ We're worried - that the person's not thinking straight about how final death really is. Deep down they're probably acting this way because they really want some kind of change, but they've lost hope or understanding of how to make that happen, so now they can only see irrational ways to make changes.
  
- ▶ We're worried - that he *can't* think straight, because anger, jealousy, grog or some other drug has broken down the things that normally keep him safe from dangerous impulses.
  
- ▶ We're worried - that the emotion of the moment has thrown everything out of proportion and he's forgotten everything else. It's like he's taking everything personally, feeling attacked or violated even when everyone is just acting normally. And then he can't let it pass and has to make a point of it, and it escalates out of control.
  
- ▶ We're worried - that this is the only thing he can think of to do when he feels even a little bit angry, jealous or stressed, and because his brain isn't giving him any other options, he'll react this way even about just little things.
  
- ▶ Maybe he thinks he's being manipulated, and he's reacting this way to get power back.

- ▶ We're worried - that he's not thinking of ways to soothe himself or calm himself down.
- ▶ We're worried - that these kinds of thinking patterns are creating too much anxiety and stress, making him see the world as threatening and unsafe and not leaving any room to see things differently, creating health worries.
- ▶ We're worried - that he doesn't have the skills to look inside himself, to recognize his needs or analyse his thought processes so that he could make changes to the way he's doing things.
- ▶ He might have a need he can't express. He might have pain he can't communicate. And if he can't tell us about it, we can't help him. And while we're dealing with the suicide threat, energy gets diverted from dealing with the 'deeper' needs.
- ▶ We're worried - that it will be really hard to change these patterns if he has acquired brain damage, maybe from fights, petrol sniffing, grog (especially if his mother was drinking when she was pregnant), car accidents. With acquired brain damage, he'll have a lot of trouble learning new ways, and we'll have a lot of trouble finding ways to teach him.

### 3. What do we worry for? The one making the threat

## Feelings & Pain

- ▶ Underneath all this, there might be poor self-esteem. The threats might be a reaction to feeling rejected or unloved. It might be coming out of anger about confusing or unjust circumstances. It might be an attempt to reach out in the midst of loneliness.
- ▶ Maybe he's doing this because it's hard to find actions that seem to have any noticeable affect on the world, and this is one of the few ways he's found to make his presence felt, and because these actions meet this need, it becomes a bit like an addiction.
- ▶ Maybe this 'flaring up' is a symbol for really low emotional resources, feeling really stressed, tired or drained.
- ▶ It's hard for us to meet these deep needs when he's doing things that create so much distress and isolation.

## Social Situation & Context

- ▶ These threats might be part of dealing with ongoing loss and grief, which leave us full of shattered fragments that take a long time to heal.

- ▶ It's especially hard when the grief has been there from a young age, because it's a bit like the bones of your spirit have always been shattered, leaving no chance to build the health and muscles that would provide inner stability and strength.
- ▶ It might be part of the process of trying to find stability, or testing others for trust.
- ▶ Or maybe he is floundering when there aren't clear boundaries of discipline, structure or social networks.

## Patterning

- ▶ We're worried about the patterning effect of this. How did this become acceptable and familiar?
- ▶ It seems to be learned from a young age. And because they're seeing it modeled, other kids are learning it.
- ▶ They've found a way to get effective responses and something that has power.
- ▶ We're worried that this weapon is becoming integrated into normal, everyday life.

- might kill himself
- lack of other coping skills
- poor self-esteem  
feeling worthless
- powerlessness  
(involves power & control)
- trying to express a need
- what are they trying to get?
- do they understand seriousness  
+ thinking clearly  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{drugs} \\ \text{alcohol} \\ \text{anger} \end{array} \right.$



## 4

### What do we worry for? The one being threatened

*In contrast to the previous chapter, the character we used for this exercise was a grandmother, so these points are written as 'she', but the person could also be a 'he'.*

#### Life, Death & Safety

- ▶ She has a need to be kept safe from experiencing loss and grief.
- ▶ There's a possibility that she's at risk of payback.
- ▶ And there's also a possibility that this situation could lead to ongoing family fighting and more deaths

#### Social Situation

- ▶ Community support often shifts away to the one making the threat. She could be isolated and alone, not sure who she can talk to about it, not sure who could help her or who would understand.

4. What do we worry for? The one being threatened

## Weight of Responsibility

- ▶ She might feel responsible for the other person's emotional state, which is a stressful position to be in.
- ▶ She might feel worried for those other kids, that they might start doing this too.
- ▶ She might be carrying the weight of responsibility of protecting herself, plus the one making the threats, plus the whole family.

## Feelings

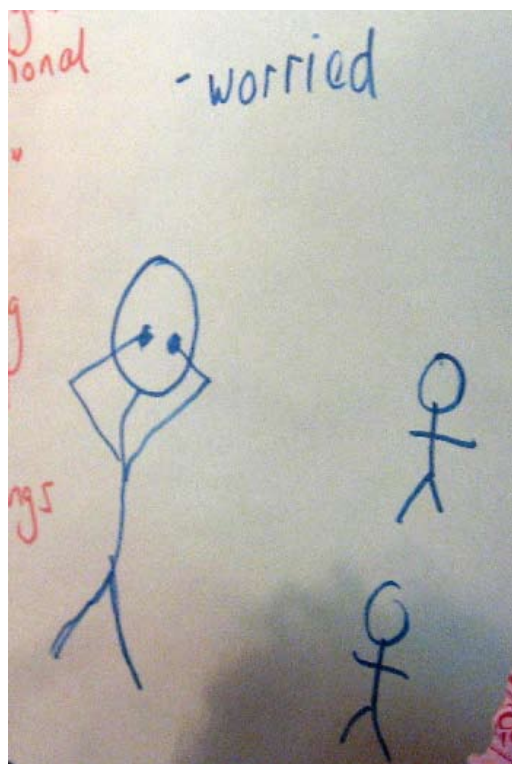
- ▶ She might feel trapped.
- ▶ She might not want to give in to the demand but she also doesn't want to risk death or payback, so it's almost impossible to know what to do.
- ▶ We're worried for the stress she'll be experiencing: the fear and distress in the immediate situations plus the stress of ongoing consequences.
- ▶ This situation might erode her sense of worth, identity and control.

## Skills, Knowledge & Thought Processes

- ▶ Maybe her responses reinforce the behaviour.
- ▶ She's in the middle of a complex and difficult situation, which is stressful in itself, and makes it hard to think clearly or make good decisions.
- ▶ She might not have the information to know what's going on for the person or understand the reasons he's making the threats. The more clearly we understand the reasons, the more clearly we can respond. The more confused we are about the reasons for these threats, the more confused our responses will be.
- ▶ She might not have any confidence in models that are supposed to guide her in responding to difficulties.

## Health

- ▶ This stress might make her physically or emotionally unwell.
- ▶ It might trigger psychosis or psychotic episode or make her feel suicidal herself, becoming part of this cycle. ■



## 5

### How did this happen?

*Although we didn't have much time to discuss this, here are some thoughts that were offered about why this might be happening so often.*

Partly, it might be happening a lot because it has become normalised: acceptable and familiar. It's become a habit and people do it without thinking.

It might come from the limited thought processes of young minds and experiences: they don't know that '*this will pass*'.

Maybe it's part of people trying to cope when they have been experiencing big or fast changes on a deep level. Like those that have taken place since colonisation.

Or changes in the way the family is run and structured.

## 5. How did this happen?

Maybe, people don't know how else they can negotiate for the things they want. This is a skill and maybe they haven't learnt this yet.

It might be that these people do not know how to cope if they don't get what they want.

Maybe the threats rise up when people are frustrated. Like when they are frustrated about not being able to connect properly with a job or some other role.

It's like you can't seem to pull the strings in life to get things to happen, and this is the last string left that you can reach and really pull hard.

Maybe it's a sort of crazed anxiety of losing love, especially if important connections are missing or broken, and it feels like you might be in danger of losing the ones that are left.

Perhaps the threats are violence turned inwards, then radiating out to those who are closest. ■

## 6

### What can we do?

#### For the one making the threat

*We split into groups to write down ideas about what we could do for the two people at risk in these situations.*

*The questions we asked were:*

- ▶ *What are good things to say?*
- ▶ *What are not good things to say?*
- ▶ *Where are good places to go?*
- ▶ *Where are not good places to go?*
- ▶ *Who are good people to sit with?*
- ▶ *Who are not good people to sit with?*

6. What can we do? For the one making the threat

## Remove Danger!

It's really important to think about *danger to you*. So look out for your own safety and don't put yourself at risk.

Then, if you can, remove the danger of a *means for them to kill themselves*, like ropes or hoses.

Another kind of danger is *being alone*. So, if you can, don't let them go off alone or lock themselves in a room. Death by hanging happens really quickly, so you need to make sure someone gets to them quickly, too.

But you don't want to be alone in this either, so ...

## CALL out for help

Call out for help! Call out to someone you trust to go with the person making the threat, and call out to someone else you trust to stay with you.

Here are some ideas about good people to call on ...

## Who you gonna CALL?

- ▶ Someone who's emotionally distant enough not to be blackmailed but who will take the threat seriously, who can prove they really do care but won't give in to demands.

*'We don't know who this person is,' said the group, 'but we decided that those are the characteristics they should have.'*

- ▶ Get support from extended family.

*'Sit down. Cook something to eat. Talk story. Talking story can be a way of changing thinking.'*

- ▶ Support worker together with family member.

*'Family is important to provide support. It's a partnership: support worker with family and vice versa.'*

- ▶ Anyone SAFE.

*'Sometimes, to keep them safe, there might be no one left to call but the police.'*

## How are you going to ACT?

### Acknowledge, Challenge-thinking, Time-to-talk

#### ■ A - is for Acknowledge

*Acknowledge* the feelings they might be having, and that it's okay to feel those things, or perhaps acknowledge your relationship to them, and that you care about them.

- ▶ 'It sounds like you're angry (or jealous or something else), and it's okay to be angry.'
- ▶ or 'You're my nephew, and I care about you.'
- ▶ or even 'I don't want you to die.'

#### ■ C - is for Challenge thinking

*Challenge thinking* is about letting them know that even though it's okay to be feeling this way and you still care about them, it's not okay to use the violence of threats or death that cause people so much pain. It's also about helping them see that death won't solve their problem.

- ▶ 'It's okay to feel angry, but it's not okay to kill yourself.'
- ▶ 'I care about you, but I can't give in to you when you ask this way, so now I have to call someone here to keep you safe.'

- ▶ 'How are you going to feel the respect and attention you're looking for if you are dead? You'll be gone forever.'
  
- ▶ 'Do you really want to go away forever? You'll leave a big hole of pain in your family and friends, who love you very much.'

## ■ T - is for Time-to-talk

How are you going to *talk*? Well, that's probably easier said than done at this point. How can anyone talk properly when things are very fiery and emotional? But the goal is to keep the person safe long enough to get to a time and place where there *can* be some good talking.

### Creating Time-to-talk

- ▶ Go for a drive. Take them to a place where they might calm down.

*'Go for a walk or drive him 'round the community. Only drop him back home when he's really tired. But still watch over him.'*

*'Take him away from the thing that was making him angry.'*

*'Go to a coffee shop.'* (laughter)

*'Or the beach.'* (more laughter)

6. What can we do? For the one making the threat

*'Go to a place that's safe for them but doesn't pander to their suicide or give in to what they're asking for.'*

*'Sometimes the safest place might be the clinic or emergency department, but they often can't keep people very long.'*

*'You need to give the clinic a number to call if the person walks off or is released.'*

- ▶ After he calms down and has a sleep, you can make connections, like with family or support workers. Then you can talk about it more.

*'Do something that makes him happy. Just ask them gently. You can listen to them. Get their story.'*

*'Remind them about their family. People they care about. You can ask them, "What are the troubles in your life?"'*

*'Ask them simple questions. Get them to think about what they are doing. Like, "How are you feeling when you say you want to kill yourself?" or "What are the things that make you feel this way?" Help them break it down, so they can see the process of when they do this, identifying emotional states and suicidal triggers.'*

*'You can help them think about other things they can do when they feel this way again.'*

## Good connections to make

Part of making 'time-to-talk' is finding the right connections: people who can talk about this stuff after the crisis has calmed down.

Here are some ideas:

- ▶ Someone the person already has connections with.
- ▶ Good uncle, good family. Someone the young person has respect for.
- ▶ Get someone from the other side of the family to talk to the person about the threat.
- ▶ Someone who can help build coping mechanisms and help them talk about their strengths.
- ▶ Connect with a mental health worker or someone who can follow up separately with the person making the threat & the one being threatened.
- ▶ Someone who can talk to the whole community about suicide.

## 6. What can we do? For the one making the threat

### Unhelpful talk

Here are some things about what would be *unhelpful* to say in a crisis:

- ▶ ‘Go for it.’
- ▶ ‘Make my day.’
- ▶ ‘Go ahead.’
- ▶ ‘I dare you.’
- ▶ ‘Here’s the rope.’
- ▶ ‘Tell me when you’re done.’
- ▶ Giving them a challenge so they feel they have to prove it, like, ‘You don’t really mean it’ or ‘I don’t believe you.’
- ▶ Saying something dismissive, like, ‘It can’t be that bad’ or ‘You always say that.’
- ▶ Saying something that might make them feel more angry or alone, like, ‘Who’s it going to hurt?’ or ‘No one cares.’

*It’s understandable to feel frustrated or angry, but take a breath so you don’t say things you’ll regret and you can stay firm, calm and kind instead.*

## Summary: For the one making the threat

### Danger!

- ▶ Look out for your safety and their safety.
- ▶ Don't let them go off alone and don't stay alone yourself.
- ▶ Get dangerous things away from them.

### Who you gonna CALL?

- ▶ Call out to someone you trust to go with them.
- ▶ Call out to someone else you trust to stay with you.

### How you gonna ACT?

- ▶ *Acknowledge* that their feelings are valid and their relationship is valued.
- ▶ *Challenge thinking* that this is a good way to express feelings or find a solution. This thinking is not okay.
- ▶ *Time-to-talk*: make space to talk through calming activities, sleep and connections. ■



# 7

## **What can we do? For the one being threatened**

*'Don't forget about this person!  
She, and maybe her extended family,  
will need support too.'*

[one group's butcher's paper]

This is a painful and stressful situation.

We don't have all the answers, but here are some of the ideas that came out of the workshop that day ...

### **Remove danger!**

In the crisis situation, the first priority is everyone's safety, so the first steps are similar for both parties.

Look out for your own safety, and do what you can to disarm weapons that might be used against yourself or the person making the threat.

## 7. What can we do? For the one being threatened

### Call for help

If you can, call on someone who can mediate the crisis situation. That might be:

- ▶ one person who can come to the crisis situation and protect both people's needs and safety without taking sides
- ▶ or two people, one to go with the one making the threat and one to go with the person being threatened.

### Some things you can do

- ▶ Get to a safe place.

*'Good places to take them are Tali's house, the Safe House, Mt Theo office, their parents' place (but ask if that's safe first), a mentor's place, an appropriate support service or ANYWHERE SAFE.'*

*'Bad places are the perpetrator's place, the pub, wrong family, Centrelink, a drug dealer's house and, well, anywhere not listed in SAFE PLACES.'*

- ▶ Give her space to calm down and talk if she wants to.

*'Find out if someone is with the boy, so she can stop worrying.'*

*'Make a cup of tea. Give her some reassurance. Let her know she's not responsible for anyone else's actions. Maybe let her sleep.'*

*'Ask gentle questions. "Are you all right?" or "What happened?" Listen to her story.'*

*'Help her see the strong things she did in the situation: how she stood up for the things she values.'*

*'Ask, "How can I support you?"'*

*'Ask if she has any family she can talk to for support. Link her to strong family and strong people in the community, and talk about the strengths within herself.'*

*'Make a safety plan: she might be at risk of payback. Other family might be at risk of payback, too.'*

*'Let family, ALL FAMILY, know what happened, so she feels better and less worried that people will hold her responsible.'*

7. What can we do? For the one being threatened

## Later & Longer term

After a crisis, things like busyness, relief or maybe shame can take over and make it hard to bring the matter up to talk about it again.

But people have recognised how important it is to talk more. Here are some of the things that were said:

*'When they're in a safe place and have time to talk, help identify key issues and triggers.'*

*'Meet with the whole family. Talk with the boy. Ask about reasons why. Encourage communication. Talk together about the troubles in life as well as the triggers and issues, and make a plan together about how to deal with the situation if it comes up again.'*

*'Link to other services, like Life Promotion, Congress Youth Team, Waltja, Hidden Valley Community Centre, Tangentyere, Lifeline.'*

*'Give access to information and education about this problem. And make sure there is a way to communicate that this is happening.'*

## **Summary: For the one being threatened**

### **Remove danger**

- ▶ If it's safe for you to do so, remove the danger for the one making the threat.
- ▶ If you can't do that safely, remove yourself from the dangerous situation.

### **Call for help**

- ▶ Call out to someone you trust to go with them and call out to someone else you trust to stay with you.

### **Go to a safe place, tell safe people, make a safe plan**

- ▶ Get to a place where you'll be safe and calm.
- ▶ Tell safe people what's happening. Let them know you've reached your limits of keeping the other person safe and that they'll need to come on board and help you both out.
- ▶ Make a safe plan for if the threat happens again and for if payback becomes a worry. ■



# 8

## Where to from here?

### Your thoughts, artwork, plans & ideas

Hopefully this booklet has sparked more thoughts for you -

- ▶ Maybe you see something more clearly now or can communicate it a little better than before ...
  
- ▶ Maybe you can put some of these ideas into paintings, or a drawing of some kind ...
  
- ▶ Maybe you can see how to make these plans even better, or write them up so that they fit better for where you are ...

So here's some room to write about the problem of suicide threats, paint a story about this, plan a way to deal with this or write about some of your thoughts ...

8. Where to from here? Your thoughts, artwork, plans & ideas

the little red threat book

8. Where to from here? Your thoughts, artwork, plans & ideas

the little red threat book

8. Where to from here? Your thoughts, artwork, plans & ideas



It causes us a lot of distress when suicide is used as a threat. For seemingly small demands, lives are put in the balance, and the strain of living in this unstable world wears people out, tears at relationships and damages the safety of those who are trying to care.

In a community workshop in November 2007, we asked, 'When does this happen? What do we worry for? and What can we do?' The answers revealed deep and thoughtful community knowledge and refreshed our energy to deal with the problem of *when suicide is used as a threat*.

*It's great to be in a room where everyone's taking this seriously.*

Susanna Bady, DV Worker, Yuendumu

*We're all sitting down together to listen to each other's stories and find out what we can do about this problem.*

Written on butcher's paper



The Life Promotion Program (LPP) receives funding from the NT Government but is part of a non-profit community organisation, the Mental Health Association of Central Australia (MHACA) based in Alice Springs. LPP uses advocacy, health promotion, training delivery, networking and resource development to address the problem of suicidal behaviour in Central Australia.