

# Taking action on **social media** to **prevent suicide**



A Guide For **Social Media** Professionals



**AQPS**

Association québécoise  
de prévention du suicide

## Statistics



In Quebec, **three people** take their own lives every day.



According to data from Institut national de santé publique du Québec, **over 3,600 hospitalizations are related to attempted suicide** each year, which is equivalent to **more than 10 hospitalizations per day**.



The suicide rate is **three times higher among men** than women.

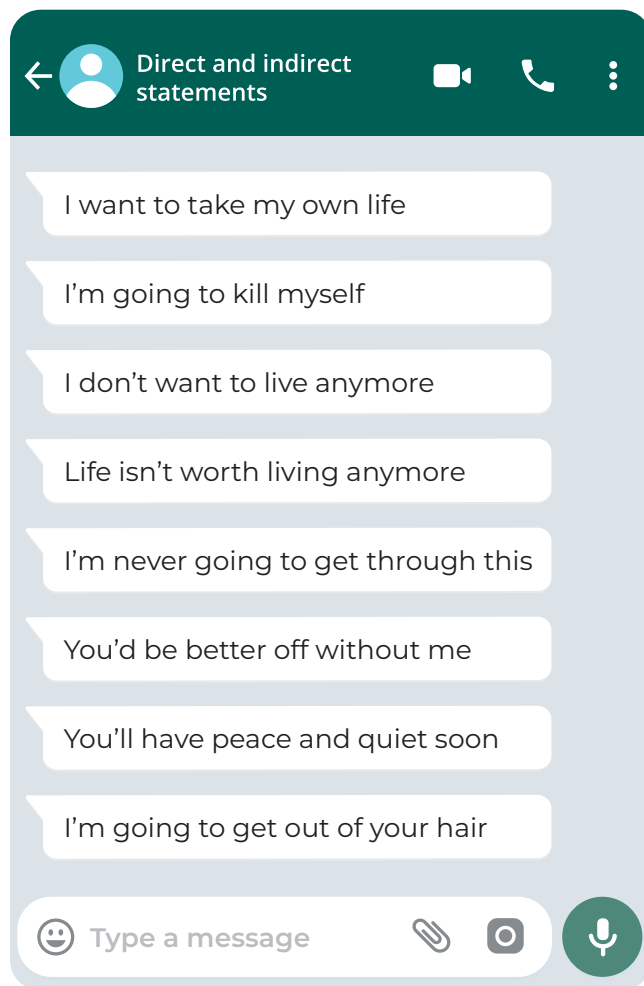
Given the prominence of social media, some people use it to address their suicidal thoughts, whether it's to seek help or talk about their distress. **All forms of seeking help are valid and should be taken equally seriously.** What should you do if you encounter this in your work on social media?

Association québécoise de prévention du suicide (AQPS) has written this guide to help you better identify and, above all, better help people in distress you encounter online. We think we can reduce suicide rates by creating a strong human safety net both in and out of digital spaces.

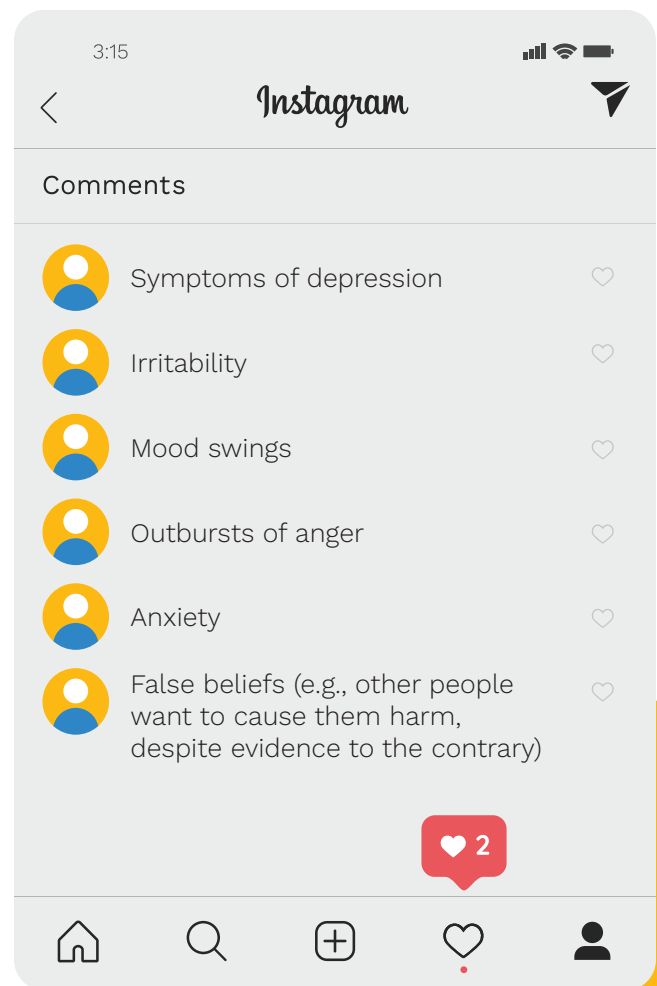
# Recognizing Distress

People with suicidal thoughts usually show warning signs that they're at risk of committing suicide, although the signs are sometimes hard to identify. Here are some examples:

## Direct and indirect statements

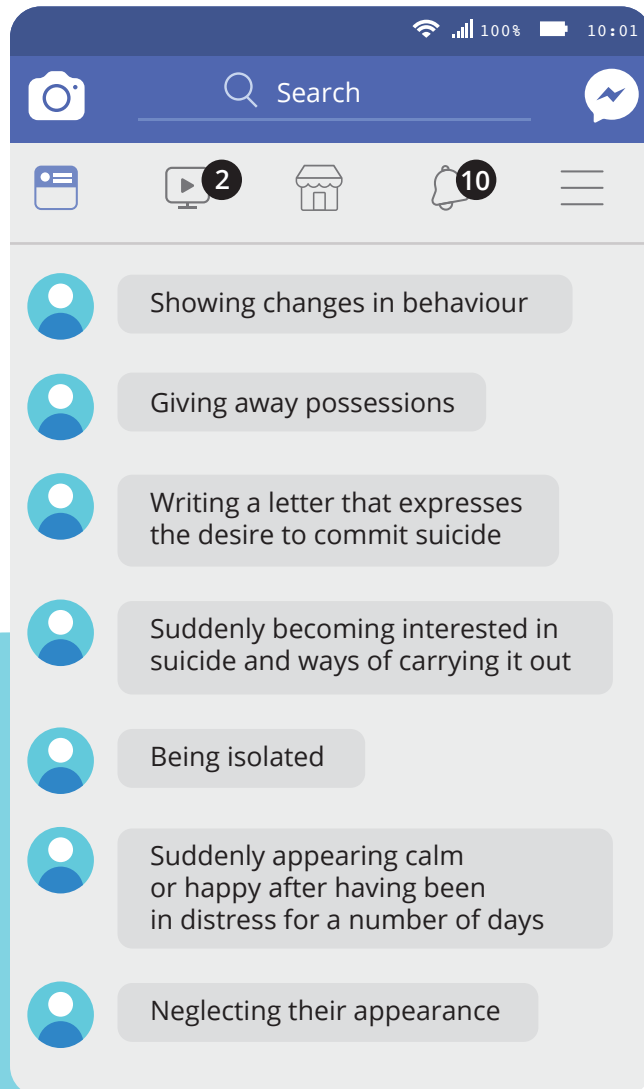


## Emotional signs

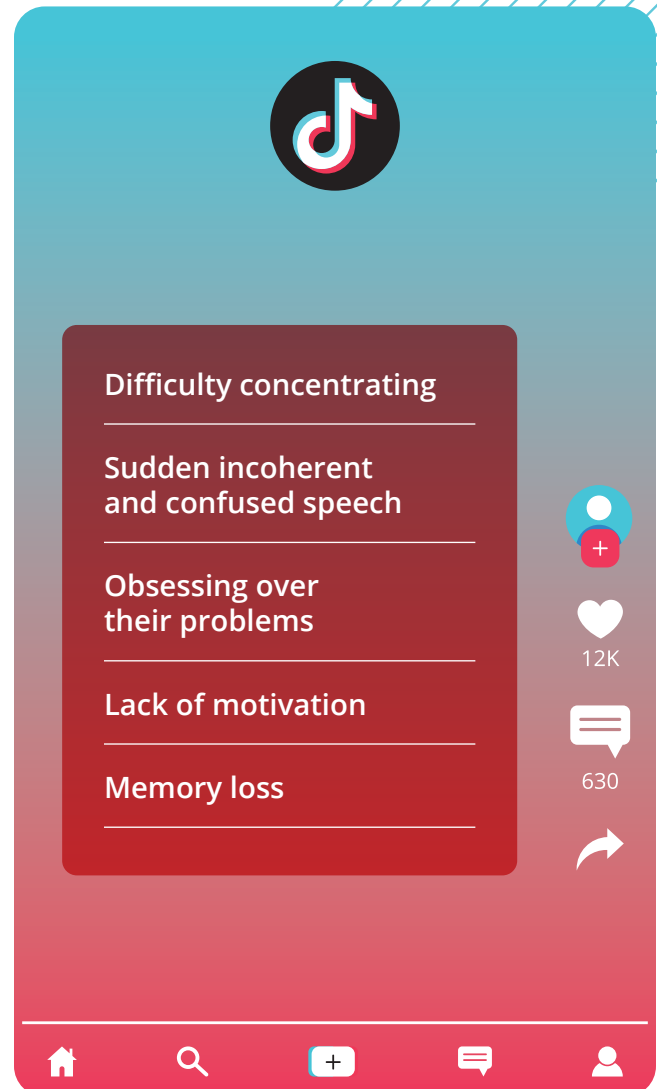


# Recognizing Distress

## Behavioural signs



## Cognitive signs



# Identifying Distress Online

Behind your screen, you don't have access to all the possible clues for analyzing an individual's distress level. Here are some examples of what you might notice online that should be of concern to you:



## Melancholy or disillusionment with society

- *You can't trust anyone in this world anymore.*
- *There's no way out. As soon as you want to pick yourself up, someone's there to bring you down.*

## Desperation in the person's words

- *I've tried everything and nothing works. I don't see how it can get better.*
- *I feel like nothing is possible anymore.*



## Feelings of loneliness

- *Even though I have 525 friends on Facebook, I feel lonely every single day.*
- *I haven't seen anyone for weeks.*

## Comments tinged with anger or aggression

- *You bunch of morons. Never mind, I'll solve my own problems.*
- *Everyone's so stupid. This is a bunch of crap. I'm on my own in this battle.*



## Direct or indirect comments

- *I'm fed up (...) tired of (...).*
- *Tonight it'll be too late. You won't hear from me anymore.*
- *I can't take it anymore. It has to stop.*

You might run into other hurdles online:

- The person may leave the platform at any time.
- You may see the message some time after it's posted.
- The anonymity that the web provides may have greatly reduced the distressed person's inhibition.

Even if that makes you feel powerless, it's still important to take action. Having a response plan in place beforehand ensures that you'll do the best you can in a stressful situation. Here are some tips on how to create one for your organization.

# Responding to Distress

You can do two things: reply under the public comment the person left you and write to them privately if you can.

In a public comment, it's important to:

- Show that you're concerned about the situation
- Tell the person you'll send them a private message
- Take the opportunity to encourage other users who read the discussion to seek help
- Share the resources available 24/7 across Quebec

Here is a sample public reply:



Maude, we're concerned about your situation. We'll send you a private message. We'd like to take this opportunity to tell everyone that if you need help for yourself or a loved one, you can contact professional suicide prevention counsellors in English or French 24/7, no matter where you are in Quebec:

Phone: 1-866-277-3553

Text: 1-855-957-5353

Chat, information, and tools: [suicide.ca](https://suicide.ca)

Or:



We're worried about you. We'll try to contact you privately. Thinking about suicide or worried about a loved one?

Counsellors are available 24/7 across Quebec to help you.

Phone: 1-866-277-3553

Text: 1-855-957-5353

Chat, information, and tools: [suicide.ca](https://suicide.ca)

If you can't contact the person privately:

- Quickly return to the public page to reply to the person's message by asking them to contact you privately, write to you somewhere else (e.g., email), or contact a help resource directly.
- Provide help resources.



Maude, I can't send you a private message. Can you send me one?

# Interacting With a Person in Distress

When talking to the person in private:

- Say how you feel (concerned).
- Ask if they need help.
- Ask if they're alone and what their situation is.
- Encourage them to contact a help service.

Here is a sample private reply:



Hello, we're worried about you. If you're thinking about suicide, there's specialized help available. You don't need to know exactly what to say or how to say it. Simply expressing your pain can be a great relief. If you're thinking about suicide, don't stay alone. You can contact a suicide prevention counsellor at any time. **It's never too early or too late.** Here are some resources available across Quebec 24/7. They're professional, bilingual, confidential, and free:

- Phone: 1-866-277-3553
- Text: 1-855-957-5353
- To chat or find relevant information: [suicide.ca](https://suicide.ca)

Here are some quick points to help you systematize actions when you encounter someone in distress in order to create consistent responses that make you and the brand or organization you represent comfortable.

1

## POST A REPLY ON THE PUBLIC PAGE

- Say that you're concerned.
  - Indicate that you'll try to contact the person.
  - Inform users of help resources.
- \*If necessary, hide the post (if it's concerning or may affect other vulnerable people).

2

## TRY TO CONTACT THE PERSON PRIVATELY

- Let the person know that you take the situation seriously.
- Ask the person if they're alone and what their situation is.
- Offer the person support.
- Encourage the person to ask for help and inform them of the resources available.

1. If the person has been clear about their distress, remove the "if" and instead encourage them to seek help directly. Example: "Hello, we're worried about you. Specialized resources are available to help you. (Keep the rest of the message the same.)"

If the person says something that makes you worried about their safety or if they don't reply to your messages, call 911 immediately.



It's too late. I'm done now.

Stay within your limits at all times, don't stay alone, and pass the baton to a specialized counsellor. If you need guidance during your intervention or want to talk about it afterwards, you can call 1-866-277-3553 or go to [suicide.ca](https://suicide.ca).

## Remember

- You're not a counsellor. You can try to defuse the situation and encourage the person in distress to ask for help, but the goal is to refer them to the appropriate resources.
- If you need support when or after you intervene, you can call 1-866-277-3553 or go to [suicide.ca](https://suicide.ca) to talk to a qualified counsellor.
- Focus on 24/7 help resources when someone is thinking about suicide. The 1-866-277-3553 hotline, 1-865-957-5353 text line, and chat service via [suicide.ca](https://suicide.ca) are available in English and French across Quebec 24/7.
- Use "we" rather than "I" to make discussions less personal, and make sure you're not left alone with distressing messages. You can even sign your messages on behalf of the organization, e.g., The XX Team. This practice protects support people and avoids person-to-person confidences.
- Ideally, hide or delete unsafe messages naming ways to commit suicide that are very violent, graphic, etc. They could make other users vulnerable.

### APART FROM DIRECT INTERVENTION

- Plan how your organization wants to respond if a suicidal person contacts you on social media—or through other means. Depending on the size of your organization and its needs, consider what type of policy would be appropriate to put in place and what type of guide can be written to standardize, facilitate, and make your response effective.
- Raise awareness throughout the year. Take advantage of theme days or weeks to talk about your commitment to mental health (Suicide Prevention Week, World Suicide Prevention Day, etc.). Post help resources and join the various movements dedicated to mental health and suicide prevention.
- Be sensitive to content that may expose users to distress. It has been shown that being overexposed can make some people vulnerable.
- Talk about ways we can protect ourselves and promote them (taking care of yourself, taking a break from the web space, asking for help, having healthy lifestyle habits, etc.).



## For influencers and content creators who would like to share their own experience with suicidal thoughts

Sharing an experience in your life that led you to have suicidal thoughts can be helpful both for people currently experiencing this kind of distress and for you on a personal level. Your message can bring hope to people who are vulnerable by showing them it's possible to get through a difficult time if they talk about it and find the help they need.

That said, it's important to take care of yourself and respect your own limits as you continue your journey.

Before posting your story on your platforms, it's a good idea to think about the possible fallout and your ability and/or desire to deal with it. You could receive numerous personal stories, even requests for help, in response to your post.

Being exposed to so much distress can be overwhelming. If you have a team, consider asking them for help in managing the messages you may receive.

We encourage you to draft a general response in advance that you can modify as needed. The important thing to remember is that it's not your role to take responsibility for the situation, but rather to share information or raise awareness about suicide prevention resources.

### Sample message:



Thank you for sharing and for trusting me. Maybe it would be helpful to talk about what you're going through with a specialized counsellor. They are professionals and they're available at any time to listen to you and support you through this really tough time. You can reach them by calling 1-866-277-3553, texting 1-855-957-5353, or visiting [suicide.ca](https://suicide.ca). My heart goes out to you. I totally understand what you're going through.

**If you're upset by a message or worried about the person who sent it, don't hesitate to contact a counsellor. They can provide you with support or step in to help deal with the situation.**

**Lastly, if you're experiencing a case that's troubling you, talk about it. Counsellors are available on the 1-866-277-3553 hotline, the 1-865-957-5353 text line, and [suicide.ca](https://suicide.ca) to listen to you.**

## Sources

Levesque, P., Mishara, B., and Perron, P. A. (2021). *Le suicide au Québec: 1981 à 2018 – Mise à jour 2021*. Québec: Bureau d'information et d'études en santé des populations, Institut national de santé publique du Québec, 51 pages.

Séguin, M., Roy, F., and Boilar, T. (2020). *Programme de postvention: être prêt à agir à la suite d'un suicide*. Québec: Association québécoise de prévention du suicide.

[Reconnaître les signes | Aider | Association québécoise de prévention du suicide \(aqps.info\)](#)

[How to intervene if someone needs help in a crisis – jeunessejecoute.ca](#)





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