

## **DEPRESSION AND BIPOLAR SUPPORT ALLIANCE OF GREATER CHICAGO (DBSA-GC) CRISIS RESPONSE POLICY**

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this policy is to establish procedures for responding to crisis situations involving participants in DBSA Greater Chicago support groups. The policy is designed to protect the safety and well-being of participants, facilitators, and the community while preserving the supportive, peer-led nature of DBSA groups.

DBSA support groups are peer-led and not a substitute for professional mental health care. However, facilitators must be prepared to respond appropriately when a participant experiences a mental health crisis or poses a risk to themselves or others.

### **Guiding Principles**

Crisis responses will be guided by the following principles:

1. **Safety First:** The safety of all participants and facilitators is the highest priority in any crisis situation.
2. **Respect and Compassion:** Participants experiencing crisis will be treated with empathy, dignity, and respect.
3. **Shared Responsibility:** Facilitators guide the process, but crisis support is not the sole responsibility of one individual. The group can provide support while professionals are contacted.
4. **Professional Intervention When Necessary:** Facilitators must contact emergency services or trained professionals when someone appears to be in immediate danger.
5. **Confidentiality with Safety Exceptions:** Confidentiality remains a core DBSA principle; however, confidentiality may be broken when necessary to protect the safety of the participant or others.

### **Scope**

This policy applies to all DBSA Greater Chicago support groups, support group facilitators, chapter leaders/volunteers, and participants attending chapter meetings or activities.

The policy addresses three primary crisis situations:

1. Participant expressing suicidal thoughts or intent
2. Participant threatening harm to others
3. Suicide attempt or death involving a participant, family member, or close contact

### **Facilitator Responsibilities**

Facilitators are responsible for:

- Maintaining a safe environment during meetings
- Recognizing warning signs of crisis
- Responding calmly and appropriately
- Engaging support from the group when appropriate
- Contacting emergency services if needed

- Not promising confidentiality when safety is at risk
- Informing chapter leadership of crisis incidents
- Participating in post-incident review and support

Facilitators are **not expected to act as mental health professionals**.

### **Crisis Response Procedures**

#### **When a Participant Expresses Suicidal Thoughts**

If a participant indicates suicidal thoughts or intentions during a support group meeting, the facilitator should take the following steps:

1. **Remain Calm.** The facilitator should remain calm and grounded, recognizing that panic can escalate the situation.
2. **Assess the Situation.** The facilitator may ask direct questions to determine the seriousness of the situation, such as:
  - Are you thinking about harming yourself?
  - Do you have a plan to do so?
  - Have you taken any steps toward that plan?
 Asking direct questions about suicide does **not increase suicidal behavior** and may help the participant feel supported.
3. **Acknowledge and Validate Feelings.** The facilitator should respond with empathy and avoid judgment. Participants should feel heard and understood.
4. **Engage the Support of the Group.** Facilitators may invite group members to share supportive experiences or messages of recovery and hope. Participants should not leave the meeting alone if they appear to be in crisis.
5. **Do Not Promise Confidentiality.** Facilitators must clearly state that they cannot promise confidentiality if someone is at risk of harm.
6. **Seek Professional Help.** Facilitators should:
  - Ask whether the participant has a crisis plan
  - Ask if a trusted person can be contacted
  - Contact emergency services if necessary
 If the participant appears to be in immediate danger, **call 911 and request a Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) if available.**
7. **Ensure the Participant is Not Alone.** The participant should remain with responsible individuals until professional support arrives.

#### **When a Participant Threatens Harm to Others**

If a participant threatens harm to another person during a meeting, the facilitator should follow these steps:

- 1. Prioritize Safety:** Safety of all participants must come first.
- 2. Calmly Address the Behavior:** The facilitator should clearly state that threatening behavior is not acceptable and ask the participant to stop.
- 3. Attempt De-escalation:** The facilitator may:
  - Invite the participant to speak privately with two facilitators or volunteers
  - Encourage the individual to express what they are feeling
  - Offer supportive listening
  - Facilitators should **never meet alone with a participant who is threatening violence.**
- 4. Engage Group Support:** Remind participants of the support group guidelines and expectations for respectful behavior.
- 5. Call for Help:** If the situation escalates or safety is threatened:
  - Ask two individuals to contact emergency services
  - Call 911 if necessary

### **Suicide Attempt or Death**

When a suicide attempt or death involving a participant occurs, the support group should be given space to process the event.

- 1. If the Participant Attempted Suicide and Is Not Present:** The facilitator should:
  - Respect the participant's privacy
  - Confirm whether the individual is comfortable with the situation being discussed
  - Focus discussion on feelings rather than details of the attempt
  - Remind participants of the confidentiality policy
- 2. If the Participant Who Attempted Suicide Is Present**
  - If the participant is willing, they may share their experience with the group. If they are not comfortable discussing it, that choice must be respected.
  - Group members should focus on offering care, support, and understanding.
- 3. If a Participant Has Died by Suicide:** The facilitator should:
  - Inform the group of the situation with limited factual information
  - Avoid discussing details of the method
  - Allow time for grieving and sharing feelings
  - Encourage participants to seek additional support resources
  - Consider bringing in a grief counselor or professional advisor for a future meeting

Support groups may also choose to acknowledge the loss with gestures such as a card or memorial.

### **Post-Incident Support and Debriefing**

Following any crisis situation:

1. Facilitators and participants should have the opportunity to discuss the experience.
2. The group may review what went well and identify areas for improvement.
3. Facilitators are encouraged to seek personal support if needed.
4. Participants should be encouraged to develop personal crisis plans.

### **Document and Notification**

Following a crisis incident:

- Facilitators should notify chapter leadership as soon as possible.
- Basic documentation of the incident should be recorded.
- Documentation should respect participant confidentiality.

Chapter leaders may determine whether additional follow-up is appropriate.

### **Emergency Contacts**

Emergency resources available to facilitators and participants include:

- **Emergency Services: 911**
- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: 988**
- **Local Crisis Intervention Teams (CIT)** when available

Additional local resources may be maintained by the chapter and shared with facilitators.

### **Policy Review**

This policy should be reviewed periodically by the DBSA Greater Chicago Board of Directors to ensure it remains consistent with DBSA guidance and local community resources.

Effective: 3/17/2026 by DBSA-GC Board of Directors