LIFESTYLE
INTERVENTIONS

PHRASE CARDS FOR FAMILIES

What to Say, and What Not to Say

Words that help, and words that make it worse, when someone you love is in crisis.

Print and keep nearby

Made to be scanned

From **Lifestyle Interventions** · Los Angeles, California · (866) 826-0985 · lifestyleinterventions.com

READ THIS FIRST

Before you say anything

STOP AND CALL, DO NOT KEEP READING

If someone is in immediate danger, call 911. Tell the dispatcher clearly that this is a mental health crisis, and describe what you have seen rather than what you fear.

If they are talking about not wanting to be here, or about ending their life, call or text 988. The Suicide and Crisis Lifeline is confidential, available at any hour, and carries no cost to the caller. Do not leave them alone, and do not promise to keep it secret.

Los Angeles County residents can reach the Department of Mental Health ACCESS line on 800-854-7771. That line can dispatch a mobile crisis team, which is often a better fit than a patrol response.

If you are past that point, here is what this is.

These are phrase cards, not a guide. I have written them to be scanned in a hurry, because families rarely have a quiet evening to prepare. Find the situation you are in, read the two columns, and put it down.

Three rules that matter more than any phrase

1

Not while they are intoxicated

Very little said to someone who has been drinking or using heavily is remembered or acted on. Wait for a sober window, even a short one.

2

Describe, do not diagnose

"You did not remember Thursday" is harder to argue with than "you are an addict". The label starts a fight about the word.

3

Say less than you want to

The instinct in crisis is to say everything at once. One clear point lands. Five points become an argument.

ONE THING TO LET GO OF

There is no perfect sentence. Families often freeze because they are waiting to find the right words. Showing up calmly and saying something imperfect is better than saying nothing while you look for the ideal phrasing.

These cards are not therapy, medical advice or legal advice, and they do not promise any outcome. If someone is unwell, they still need professional care.

PHRASE CARDS

When the conversation starts

Opening the subject at all

SAY SOMETHING LIKE

- "I want to talk about something, and I am not here to have a fight."
- "I have been worried for a while and I have not said so."
- "Can I tell you what I have noticed?"

TRY NOT TO SAY

- "We need to talk." It reads as an ambush before you begin.
- "Everyone has noticed." It turns one conversation into a pile-on.
- "I have been meaning to say this for months." It invites a fight about why you waited.

Naming your intention first lowers the temperature. Most people brace for an attack the moment a serious conversation opens.

They deny there is a problem

SAY SOMETHING LIKE

- "I am not asking you to agree with me. I am telling you what I saw."
- "You may be right. I still want you to see someone."
- "I am not going to argue about the word."

TRY NOT TO SAY

- "You are in denial." It is a diagnosis and it will be rejected.
- "How can you not see it?" It asks them to lose the argument.
- Listing evidence like a case. It makes them a defendant.

You do not need them to accept a label. You need them to accept a next step. Those are different, and the second is easier.

They get angry

SAY SOMETHING LIKE

- "I am not going to shout. I will come back to this."
- "I can hear you are angry. I still love you."
- "I am going to stop now. This matters too much to do badly."

TRY NOT TO SAY

- "Calm down." It has never once worked.
- "This is exactly what I mean." It uses their reaction as evidence.
- Anything said back at the same volume.

Anger often means something landed. Leaving the conversation calmly is not losing it. It keeps the door open for tomorrow.

PHRASE CARDS

When they push back

They say they will handle it on their own

SAY SOMETHING LIKE

- "I would like that. What would that look like this week?"
- "What will be different this time?"
- "I will support that. I would still like someone else involved."

TRY NOT TO SAY

- "You have said that before." True, and it ends the conversation.
- "I will believe it when I see it."
- Nothing at all. Silent agreement becomes a deadline nobody set.

Treat it as a starting point rather than a resolution. Agree in advance what you will both do if it does not hold, while the goodwill is still there.

They ask for money

SAY SOMETHING LIKE

- "I am not going to give you cash. I will pay for treatment."
- "I will pay that bill directly, not to you."
- "The answer is no, and I love you."

TRY NOT TO SAY

- "This is the last time." Only say it if it is.
- "What do you need it for?" You will get an answer you cannot check.
- "Ask your father." It moves the problem, it does not solve it.

Refuse the problem and fund the solution in the same breath. It is the clearest way to show this is not about withdrawing love.

They threaten to cut contact

SAY SOMETHING LIKE

- "I hope you do not. My door stays open either way."
- "I am not going to change my mind to stop you leaving."
- "I will still be here when you want to talk."

TRY NOT TO SAY

- "Fine, go then." Said in the moment, hard to take back.
- Reversing the limit to keep them. It teaches that threats work.
- "You are just like your father." Never useful, always remembered.

This is the moment families most often fold. Holding the limit while keeping warmth is difficult and it is the whole skill.

PHRASE CARDS

The harder moments

They are ashamed, or crying

SAY SOMETHING LIKE

- "You are not a bad person. This is not a character problem."
- "I am not disappointed in you. I am worried about you."
- "You do not have to explain it to me right now."

TRY NOT TO SAY

- "Look what you are doing to your mother."
- "You should be ashamed." Shame drives the behaviour further underground.
- Rushing to reassure so the moment ends. Let it sit.

Shame is usually already doing more work than you realise. Adding to it tends to produce secrecy rather than change.

They blame you, or the family

SAY SOMETHING LIKE

- "You may be right about some of that. I still want you to get help."
- "We can talk about my part properly, another day."
- "I am not going to defend myself right now."

TRY NOT TO SAY

- Defending yourself point by point. The subject has now changed.
- "After everything I have done for you."
- "That is not what happened." Even when it is not.

Accepting a piece of it costs you nothing and removes the argument they were hoping to have. The subject stays where you put it.

They talk about not wanting to be here

SAY SOMETHING LIKE

- "I am glad you told me. I am not going anywhere."
- "Can we call 988 together, right now?"
- "I am going to stay with you."

TRY NOT TO SAY

- "You do not mean that." It teaches them not to tell you again.
- "Think about your family." It adds guilt to despair.
- "I promise I will not tell anyone." Never promise this.

Take it seriously every time. Stay with them, and call or text 988 together. If there is immediate danger, call 911. This is the one card where you stop managing and start getting help.

KEEP THIS PAGE VISIBLE

The short version

If you only remember one page, make it this one.

Phrases that nearly always help

- "I love you and that is not changing."
- "I am not here to have a fight."
- "Here is what I noticed."
- "I am not going to argue about the word."
- "The answer is no, and I love you."
- "I will help you get there."
- "I am not going anywhere."
- "I am going to stop now and come back to this."

Phrases that nearly always hurt

- "Calm down."
- "You are in denial."
- "After everything I have done for you."
- "This is the last time." (unless it is)
- "Look what you are doing to this family."
- "You are just like your father."
- "Everyone has noticed."
- "I promise I will not tell anyone."

If you can only do three things

Wait for a sober moment. Say one thing, not five. Leave the door open when you go.

AFTER THE CONVERSATION

Write down what was said while it is fresh, including what they agreed to. Tell one other person in the family what happened. Expect to feel worse before you feel better. That is normal and it is not a sign you did it wrong.

IF IT WENT BADLY

A conversation that ends in an argument is not a failed relationship, and a refusal is not the end of the process. What decides things is usually whether the family stays consistent afterwards, not how well any single conversation went.

TRUSTED RESOURCES

Where to turn for help

Emergency: call 911

For immediate danger, or a medical or psychiatric emergency.

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline: call or text 988

Confidential support at any hour, at no cost to the caller. Chat at 988lifeline.org.

LA County DMH ACCESS Line: 800-854-7771

County mental health support, able to dispatch a mobile crisis team.

SAMHSA National Helpline: 1-800-662-4357

Confidential information and referrals to treatment and support services.

Al-Anon and Nar-Anon Family Groups

Meetings for families affected by another person's drinking or drug use. Open to parents, partners and siblings.

I am Chris Howard, founder of Lifestyle Interventions in Los Angeles. I hold the CADC-III and CCMI-M credentials, and I work with families navigating mental health and substance use crises.

My services include Crisis Interventions, Family Support Services, and Mentoring and Recovery Support. I do not operate a treatment facility and I do not take referral fees.

If the conversation keeps going the same way

At some point most families have said everything they can think of. That is usually when a prepared conversation, with everyone aligned and treatment arranged in advance, does what another private attempt cannot.

1

I listen to what is happening.

2

I tell you honestly what I think would help.

3

You decide the next step, at your pace.

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These phrase cards are for educational purposes only and are not medical, legal or clinical advice. They do not replace evaluation or treatment by a licensed professional, they do not diagnose any condition, and they do not promise any outcome. If you or someone you love is in crisis, call 911, or call or text 988. © 2026 Lifestyle Interventions. All rights reserved.