



Lock to Live

See Their Stories

Thomas, age 45, has a girlfriend, two teenage kids, and a job – or he did, until he was laid off this week. He’s been angry and anxious. His girlfriend notices the change in his behavior and talks with him about how he’s been feeling. He tells her he’s had thoughts of suicide, and together they decide to go to an Emergency Room. In the ER, they talk with a counselor, and one of the things they discuss is home safety. Thomas’s girlfriend mentions there are guns in the house, but Thomas is uncomfortable moving his collection of firearms out of his home because he’s worried that he won’t get them back. He agrees to let her move the guns into a safe that only she knows the combination to until he’s feeling better.

Gabrielle, age 30, has been very depressed since giving birth to her son. One day when Gabrielle seems really down, her husband asks her if she has had thoughts of suicide. She and her husband, a security guard, choose to make their home safer while she starts medication and therapy. They decide that he’ll keep control of her medications. He’ll lock up his handgun in a lockbox and make sure she doesn’t know the combination. He also decides to give his hunting rifle to his brother for safe-keeping until Gabrielle is feeling better.

Jim’s parents knew that Jim, age 15, had been having a tough time at school. His grades had slipped and he started isolating himself from his friends after some upsetting social media posts about him. But his parents are surprised to get a call from the school social worker who shares that, during a check-in, Jim said he wants to kill himself. They take him to a local ER where the mental health provider and doctor recommend he spend a few days in the hospital. While he’s in the hospital, Jim’s parents lock up all of the medications they have at home and take their five handguns and rifles to a local gun club to store them temporarily. They also discuss what long-term storage option will be best for their family while Jim’s still living with them.

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Mike, age 60, is a veteran who works as a salesman and carries a handgun with him most days. Last week, after 25 years of marriage, his wife left him and filed for divorce. He's been drinking more alcohol than usual and feeling hopeless. He has no family in town, but a friend who served with him in the Marines offers to go with him to the range to store his firearms until he's feeling better. They both agree that it's probably safer for him to not carry his weapon, or have access to it, during this tough time.

Maria, age 50, has seemed sad and withdrawn since the death of her father. Her husband is worried about her, and talks with her and her doctor about getting her into treatment and about how to make the home safer. One thing he's worried about is her insulin – she has diabetes and needs to use it everyday, but he knows that taking too much can be dangerous. He talks about it with Maria and her doctor, and they decide that until she's feeling better, they'll keep only one day's dose of insulin easily available. They lock up the rest of the insulin and other medications in a lock-box, and he keeps the key. Every morning, he only removes the insulin Maria will need that day.

Robert, age 26, lost his job and was evicted the same week, and he's feeling really low. He's staying with his best friend Tom until he can get back on track. Tom lost his sister to suicide, so he recognizes some of the "red flags" in Robert – he's been talking about how hopeless he feels and saying he thinks everyone would be better off without him. Tom talks with Robert and together they go to an ER to get help. While Robert's at the ER, Tom heads home to make his apartment safer: he locks up his firearms and looks for any medications. He finds one bottle of Tylenol and some leftover oxycodone from his surgery the year before, and he takes both of them to a nearby pharmacy for advice on how to get rid of them.

Manuel was really worried about his daughter Sammy, age 17. She said she wants to kill herself. He gave away all of his alcohol and cleaning supplies, and stored many items (knives, razors, ropes, extra charging cables) outside of the home with only a few items in a lock-box. However, he was not sure about what to do with his over-the-counter vitamins and painkillers, since there was no "medication take-back" program nearby. After talking with his doctor, he removed all of the pills from their containers and mixed them with used coffee grounds (but his doctor said kitty litter or dirt would also work). He then put it in a sealed plastic bag and threw it away in their household trash.

Frequently Asked Questions

Safe firearm storage is recommended by the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF).

Q: Why is safe storage so important during crisis?

Storing dangerous items securely when someone is at risk of suicide increases the chance they will survive. It is like holding on to a friend's car key while they are drinking.

Q: Are there other things I should do to make my home safe?

Do a safety check of your home. Lock up or get rid of medications and other unsafe items. If you need to keep some medicine available, ask your doctor or a pharmacist for ways to store it safely

Q: My firearms and medications are already locked up at home. Do I need to make changes if my child is at risk, not me?

Sadly, 85% of youths under 18 who died by firearm suicide used a family member's firearm. Medications are the most common method of nonfatal suicide attempts. Your storage methods may be secure generally, but by taking extra precautions right now you can help keep your child safe during this time of heightened risk. Children are often more aware than we know and often times know where and how items are locked up. Check to make sure there are not any unlocked or loaded firearms in your home, any loose medication, alcohol, poisons, or other things that could be dangerous. Change codes or combinations, or make sure keys to storage devices are in a secure location. You can never be too careful when securing these items in your household.

Q: Where can I get home storage devices (trigger & cable locks, lock boxes, gun safes)?

You can find many of these items at gun shops, hardware stores, or sporting goods stores including Bass Pro Shops, Cabela's, Dick's Sporting Goods, Home Depot, Lowes, Target, and Walmart. You can also buy them online. Your local police, sheriff, or VA hospital may also give out locks for free.

Q: Who am I allowed to give my firearms to temporarily?

The person you choose must also be allowed to have a firearm. In the US, a person is not allowed to have a firearm if they have been found guilty of a felony, domestic violence, or if there is a restraining or protection order against them. Make sure to check your local laws for any other restrictions. The person you choose should also store the firearms safely.

Q: How do I find out my local laws?

The NRA has a website about state gun laws: www.nraila.org/gun-laws/. Friends or family who own firearms may also know about laws. A local gun shop, police department, or sheriff can help with the local laws in your state.

Q: How do I know when it is safe for me or my friend/family member to have access to these items again?

That's hard to know. Every person's situation is different. It is important to protect yourself, your friends and family. Remember, limiting your access to these lethal objects temporarily is a choice. If you are unsure, your counselor or doctor may be able to help you decide.

Q: If I store my guns away from home, will I get them back?

How and when you can get your firearms back will depend on the storage option that you choose. Laws and businesses can vary state-to-state. Some may require a background check, others may require you to be there during specific hours. Before you store your firearms somewhere or with someone, you should ask what will need to be done to pick the firearms back up. Have someone you trust help you call ahead and ask questions.

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Q: Where can I get information how to get rid of medicines?

Call your city or county government's household trash and recycling services and your local pharmacy to see if a take-back program is available in your community. Additionally, your doctor or primary care physician may have information to provide you with when discussing safe use and disposal of medicines.

The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, working with state and local law enforcement agencies, periodically sponsors National Prescription Drug Take Back Days <http://www.deadiversion.usdoj.gov>

If no take-back program is available, take your prescription drugs out of their original containers, mix drugs with an undesirable substance (ex: cat litter, used coffee grounds). Put the mixture into a disposable container with a lid or a sealable bag. Place the sealed container with the mixture, and the empty drug containers (with personal information covered or removed), in the trash.

Q: If I decide to store my firearm outside my home, what do I say to someone at a gun shop or other storage facility?

First, have someone you trust help you. This could be a family member, friend, pastor, fellow veteran, neighbor, or any other person you trust. Have this person take the guns to the storage location. But first, call ahead to the facility and ask about their ability to store firearms and any costs. This is a good time to ask what you would need to do to pick them back up. You do not need to tell them why you are looking for firearm storage.

If you choose to store your gun with the police, your local sheriff, or other law enforcement, you will still need to call ahead and ask if they store firearms temporarily. If they do, ask how long they can store firearms for and what you would need to do in order to get them back, including background checks. When you arrive, leave any firearms in the car until you have gone inside and told them you called ahead about temporary firearm storage. Have a trusted friend or family member with you.

Q: I'm worried about someone I care about. How do I talk to them about some of these issues?

These conversations are hard. You may feel like it is not your business to ask. Some people have a hard time talking about how they feel. But, these conversations can save a life. First, let your friend or family member know you care about them. Tell them why you are concerned about their access to firearms during this tough time. They may agree with you. If they do not, explain you would still like to talk about it. Be supportive, calm, and open to listening. Explain that you want to help them get through this difficult time. Ask your friend or family member if you can come up with a plan together to temporarily store their firearms in a different way. Let your friend or family member know you are here to help, and listen to their concerns. Let them know they are not alone and this is just until they feel better. You can use this tool together to explore options for storage.

Q: What if I'm worried someone is about to hurt themselves?

If you're worried about someone, it is ok to ask them if they are having thoughts of suicide, asking will not make them do it or put the thought in their mind. If at any time you feel like your friend or family member is unsafe, take it seriously. Some warning signs are talking about harming or killing themselves, talking about wanting to die, or talking about plans to kill themselves. Follow the suggestions above about telling them that you care and want to help. You can call the suicide prevention lifeline with them (1-800-273-8255), or you can call yourself as a concerned friend or family member to get advice and local resources. Trained counselors are available 24/7, 365 days a year, in English and Spanish.