

Title: **Episode 8. Don't Look Down**

Speakers: Georgie Vestey, Dead Honest & Cathy MacDonald, former Police Crisis Negotiator

Interview Transcription

**Georgie Vestey:** I'm sitting on the edge of this precipice and you come towards me. What is it that you are looking for? What senses are you using to scan me, to assess me?

**Cathy MacDonald:** Every sense will be switched on, I have to say. First, we're looking for emotion, how are you moving? I don't want to give you a fright and I go personally as close as I can to that person before they give me a hint that it's too close, and then I'll step back slightly, because the closer I can be, the more connection we can have. I'm looking for any reaction to that and providing it's not negative, I'll go as close as they'll allow me to be.

**Georgie Vestey:** Cathy MacDonald, who you were just hearing, has spent many years in the police working in crisis intervention. When somebody was threatening to take their life, Cathy was the specialist that they would call in, the one who would crawl along the cliff edge and try and talk them down.

When I started making the second series of Dead Honest, I didn't intend to spend so much time talking about suicide, but it's one of those things that has come up again and again. It made me realise just how prevalent suicide is and that obviously, it must be affecting more and more of us. So, this episode is a bit different, it's not just about Cathy's experience of saving lives and the pressure she faces, it has a more urgent and practical purpose.

I wanted to ask her what we should do if somebody we love is threatening to take their life, how do we approach them; what should we say; what should we not say? I hope this episode is more than just interesting. I hope it's actually really helpful.

We start by discussing the skills you need to persuade someone to choose life over death. I'm Georgie Vestey and this is Dead Honest.

**Cathy MacDonald**: You have to be caring and compassionate and genuinely interested in people. If the care and the compassion isn't there, then of course you can learn skills, but that has to come from the heart, so that would be the first thing.

The second is the skills required and that's down to communication, your desire to understand things and be curious and interested in other people.

**Georgie Vestey**: I can imagine listening is a very strong part of your communication skillset, actually not talking.

**Cathy MacDonald**: That's a massive part. Being able to listen with the other person's opinions in mind, rather than just, how could you say, "Listening to understand, rather than listening to respond". It's the only way that you're going to understand how someone else ticks.

**Georgie Vestey**: I can imagine a component of learning how to listen is being aware of when listening has -- or a lack of listening has failed you. I'm wondering if you can think of times in your professional career when you haven't listened well enough.

**Cathy MacDonald**: Definitely, I mean I could probably give you a list, particularly when I was young in service. We're problem-solvers, we want to help. "Okay, I hear this, this is what you need to do", and we've not spent enough time listening to understand; listening for not only the information, but the emotion, how they feel about it.

**Georgie Vestey**: When were you being called in?

**Cathy MacDonald**: Crisis negotiation, as the name suggests, is when anyone is in personal crisis and that can range from suicide intervention, through to a crime that's gone wrong, perhaps someone goes into steal something in a shop, someone takes action. Before you know it, they're caught in there and they struggle to get out, they don't know how to do it. Someone who is trying to evade arrest, really anywhere that there is a communication barrier is where we would be asked to deploy in a form of a crisis negotiator. Suicide intervention is the biggest one, in a year that would dominate our callings.

**Georgie Vestey**: When you get called to attend a scene where somebody is threatening to take their life, what's going through your head as you're approaching that scene?

**Cathy MacDonald**: Really not making any suppositions, not deciding on what's happened before we get there. Of course, we're briefed in the situation, but really thinking, "Well, what are my first lines going to be? How am I going to quickly try and connect to this person? If they tell me to go away in whatever colourful language they wish, what am I going to reply to that with? If they're silent, what am I going to reply to that with?"

**Georgie Vestey**: How much do you know about the person before you've come to the scene?

**Cathy MacDonald**: It depends. Quite often, at 2:00am in the morning the phone would ring, and it would be, "Okay, we have someone on the bridge, what we know is this, this and this", and they'd give you a summary. Sometimes we know in advance that maybe we have a missing person with suicidal tendencies, so we have time to speak to family, to plan, to research and try and understand what they're about before we get there. It really just depends. Sometimes we simply don't know anything about the person, other than that they're standing in front of us.

**Georgie Vestey**: So you would get to that scene, what is the process? Is there a universal approach or is it very spontaneous?

**Cathy MacDonald**: The first thing is safety. We have to make sure that in respect of where they are, we need to be safe before we can deploy. It is pointless losing a negotiator simply because we've not checked that the environment's safe for us. Quite often we are on a high place. We have one particular place locally and when you walk up to this hill, it goes from just a rounded hill to a complete drop and usually people are sitting with their feet over the edge.

For us we have to think about, "Where are going to be?" and "How are we going to stay safe?" We deploy with more than one negotiator, because one of our jobs is to keep the other one safe, because when you do enter into conversation with someone, you can creep closer and closer to the point where you're exposing yourself to danger. So number one, what is safe and how do we go about it?

The next one is that we have opening lines we have practised them often and it's usually an introduction, the same as I would do with you, "Hi, I'm Cathy. I can see you're in a really difficult position right now. I'm going to do all I can to help, whatever that may be, but first and foremost I'm here for you and I'm here to listen. What's happened?" and you hope that they start speaking.

Sometimes, it takes a long time before someone trusts you enough; they're in their own bubble, they're quiet and you have to try and gauge it. I fluctuate between speaking and complete silence and thankfully I'm comfortable with silence, it's an exceptionally important part of communication. Giving them space as well is important, so you're not bombarding them with words all the time.

We have a tried and tested approach of course, but it's flexible enough that it has to be tailored to that person individually.

**Georgie Vestey**: How long is the longest intervention that you've had to attend?

**Cathy MacDonald**: Mostly they are around 3 hours, but the longest one definitely we've been overnight and sort of 12 hours.

**Georgie Vestey**: Can you tell me about the very first negotiation that you ever did?

**Cathy MacDonald**: I can. It was an elderly gentleman who was terminally ill with cancer, and he'd made a decision that he was going to end his life in a way that he wished to. We were alerted to it by his wife, and she'd contacted the office to say, "Look, I think he's going to take his life". She gave us a list of the likely places, the beauty spots; and we arrived, and he was in the most beautiful area overlooking a glen, it was just one of these really perfect peaceful places. We got to him before he had taken tablets.

Now, I was actually left there; my colleague went to go and pick up his wife, and I was left there on my own with him. We had a conversation and he explained, he says, "I'm going to die in the next week or two and I'm in so much pain and I don't want to be in a hospital bed, I'm going to be here where I think it's peaceful and I'm making a choice". A big bit for him was taking control, and that ultimately was what he wanted back.

Actually, Georgie, I agreed with him; I think I'd be the same. He asked me to walk away, and I didn't; I stayed where I was. I spoke with him and obviously we said, "Your wife has called us, so maybe the time's right for you, but it's not right for her. Do you really want her to be left feeling that she is to blame, she didn't get her last words in?" My colleague arrived with his wife, and I saw that encounter and the love, the care, the relief that was there was massive.

I thought, "I have to always remember my role, it doesn't matter what I personally believe in, I always have to do all I can to save a life".

**Georgie Vestey**: Are there any cases that you dread?

**Cathy MacDonald**: There's none that I dread, actually. I can't remember I've had a deployment and thinking, "Oh my word, here we go". The most dangerous time is just when you think things are going well, and I used to dread that moment where you thought, "We're just about to break through", so it's moments that I not dreaded, but moments that I thought, "Don't get ahead of yourself. Do not think this is in the bag".

I remember one case and we got a shout one night and it was to this chap who had a firearm, he was intoxicated. I think it had been simply a noise complaint, the police had gone to the door, and he pointed at gun at them and said, "Basically, anybody comes in here, they're going to be shot". He's on his own, if we can play for time, he can sober up a little bit, unfortunately he had a supply of alcohol so that sobering up wasn't going to happen very quickly.

Ultimately, where he wanted is that he wanted to be shot by police. It would be what you call a suicide by cop, so he said, "I've not got the guts to take my own life, but I want you guys to do it for me". I thought, "If you point that gun, then they are in their right to take a shot", and I thought, "but I don't want him to be shot, I don't want my colleagues to have to shoot him".

We managed to work out he had a family and his daughter wanted to join the police, and I thought, "Well, this is perfect because actually...", I said, "I'd like you to imagine for a minute then that it's your daughter that's out there; that's the firearms team and your daughter's part of that. You're going to ask your daughter to shoot you. That is massive".

Now, Georgie, I thought that was a really wise approach and what came back was, "That would be even better. I'm not just shot by police, but I'm shot by my daughter, that would be even better". I thought, "Oh my word, this is not going where I thought", and then I thought, "Other important things in his life, what can I home in on to ask him to divert his thoughts towards?"

You cannot really negotiate with someone who's intoxicated, the processes don't work, you have to try and get them sober first. In the background I kept thinking, "This could end in tragedy tonight". Eventually, he agreed that an alternative that would work for him, he would agree not to be shot, providing we dragged him out his house and we dragged him through the mud, and we beat him up.

Of course, I had to say, "That can't happen". We were scratching our heads because the normal rules with this, the normal things that people would react to, which is loved ones, which is things that are important to them, which is normal acceptances, was not working with this man.

It took us hours and eventually, he agreed to come out providing he was put to the floor and handcuffed, and I thought, "I think we could work with that one", and that's what happened. I remember being scared on that, because I thought this was one of these cases that we should have been able to help resolve very quickly and he broke all the rules for us. Actually, I think you need that every now and then. Getting him out safe, with nobody with being shot was just the best.

**Georgie Vestey**: What's interesting to me about that story is that it's very much about you getting into the head of another. How do you do that?

**Cathy MacDonald**: It's understanding what's important to them, whether you agree with it or you don't agree with it. When somebody gets you, where someone didn't interrupt and give you the, "What you need to do is..." or the, "Wait till you hear my story"; they simply listened and then you connect, and you can have a healthy conversation, create a gap, create space for them to explore alternatives and they might actually find one that works better for them, and we can help with that.

**Georgie Vestey**: Have you ever had an instance where you haven't brought them back?

**Cathy MacDonald**: Yeah, of course, yeah.

**Georgie Vestey**: Can you tell me about that?

**Cathy MacDonald**: Every negotiator knows that at some point, that might happen, you're going to lose someone. When someone makes a decision that they're going to end their life, all you can hope is that you did everything you could to let them see another route; because ultimately it is a decision they've made and it's horrible, but knowing that I said what I could, I tried to show them a different route with a question, "Are you intending to take your life tonight? If there was another route that you could take that would solve the problems that you have without dying, would you take it?"

The answer usually was, "Yes", but every now and then you'll have somebody who has really worked this out, who's planned it. You'll find that they've given away their possessions, they've put their affairs in order, they've written their letters and they carry it out, they complete, but it is part of our role that we have to be prepared for.

**Georgie Vestey**: You say people would usually choose another route, but I'm curious to know what happens when they don't.

**Cathy MacDonald**: I guess there's a number of ways to look at that. One is what happens to them, what happens to the team and then what happens to the negotiator and in my situation, what happens to me.

I've had two situations in particular that jump to mind and one, the person survived; the other person jumped, and he didn't survive. The bottom line is sometimes people make a decision that the time is up for them, whether we're there or not. I do reflect a lot, it's a very searching time I would say, but at the same token, you have to be quite honest with yourself and say it's not a time to be self-indulgent and think, "Poor me", it's a time to say, "Okay, what did I learn from that and is there anything else I can do differently next time?"

I do know of a couple of negotiators who when they've lost someone, they throw in the towel, it's enough for them and that's it, they can't see them continuing a career within that area and that's absolutely understandable.

**Georgie Vestey**: Is that because of the sense of failure for themselves or because it's just so traumatic to witness?

**Cathy MacDonald**: The one person that I know that handed in their negotiator licence afterwards, I know that they ran to the edge to look, and I think that's probably an image that will remain with them. People can tell you and you can train for it, you can train, "What will it be like? You can discuss it, but until it happens to you, you do not know how you're going to react.

**Georgie Vestey**: Are there times when you were doing a negotiation where the family is present?

**Cathy MacDonald**: Seldom. We have to be very careful. Georgie, if you're standing on the edge and you ask for your partner to be brought up, well why? What's the reason? What's the motivation? Are you going to jump in front of them so that they have a never-ending image of you? Is it somebody that will genuinely help? We will work out, "Is this a good idea?" Occasionally we would bring someone to the scene.

**Georgie Vestey**: I'm very interested by that, because it hadn't occurred to me there might be people you would say, "Do not come to the scene", because I suppose it hadn't occurred to me that somebody may be using that as an opportunity to take their life or threaten that as a way of manipulating somebody else in such an extreme situation. But clearly that is something you have to bear in mind.

**Cathy MacDonald**: I find grandsons and grandmothers seem to be a very good connection and I definitely had a suicide intervention where gran has come to the scene, a lady of wisdom, of great connection to the person and someone that they can lean on, rely on and has seen a lot of the world. That seemed to work well, so there are occasions, but not routinely. We wouldn't have the whole family come up or anyone around them, we'd try and manage that.

**Georgie Vestey**: I'm mindful that suicide is an issue that we have a lot of uncomfortable feelings about discussing as a society. Yet it's become so prevalent that it's not unlikely that we either will come into contact with a work colleague, family member, friend where this is an issue. I wonder what would your advice be to us if we were to face a situation where somebody was expressing their desire to end their life? How should we approach them?



**Cathy MacDonald**: Have a conversation. Quite often we just feel awkward, we don't know how to approach that, but especially if they've said, "This is my thoughts". Open your ears, do not give your opinion, do not be judgemental. Please avoid ever saying something like, "You don't want to do that", "That's silly", "Don't do something stupid", they're really unhelpful phrases, because if someone is at the point where they're considering taking their own life, well actually they don't need someone else telling them they're stupid. This is not the case; it actually takes a lot of thought, a lot of planning and sometimes courage, if you think of it.

Now, using open questions and they're the ones that basically say, "Tell me about that", "Would it help to explain how you feel?" "Can you describe what a typical day is like for you?" Encourage them to think of solutions. "Is there another way?" You may get a line that somebody says, "I've thought of everything. I've tried everything". Appropriate reply is, "Tell me about each one of them then. Two brains are better than one; maybe between us, allow me to help and see whether I can help with anything", but make sure they feel in charge and see where that goes.

There's a lot of help online and thankfully suicide used to be a completely unspoken thing, but now it's okay to share that you have been depressed or anxious. It's getting easier, we're not there completely yet, so if you Google, you will come up with a whole load of supporting agencies and that's from Samaritans to Breathing Space. NHS, irrespective of where you are in the country, if you go to NHS Suicide Intervention, they will give you a number of links. There are real experts out there, whether it's GP, NHS, or an independent charity.

**Georgie Vestey**: One of the things I think that people are very frightened of is if I say, "Are you thinking of taking your life?" that you're somehow planting that idea in their head and if they subsequently take their lives, you're responsible. How do you respond to that?

**Cathy MacDonald**: Bringing the subject up will not plant a seed, in fact it will probably be a massive relief, because you're maybe even the first person who's even mentioned it. I would pick my words carefully, for example I had someone who said to me, "I feel that bad and I've gone to a really dark place". Now, I could easily

have just come out and said, "Do you mean suicide?" For me that's just a bit too abrupt, so I explain what that means to me and then I ask if that's the same.

So, I said, "Well, when you mentioned 'dark place'", ie I've listened to you because I've used exactly the same words back to you that you used to me. "When you mentioned 'the dark place', what that means to me is as dark as suicide? Taking your own life, is that what it means to you?" They can either agree or say, "Well, no, not quite that", but either way you have got the start of a conversation.

So, be appropriately curious, say, "Well, what that does actually mean?" Label the emotion that you see in them. "I get the feeling this is a really painful thing for you to share with me, so thank you for that. I'm all ears".

By asking about suicide I promise you, you won't plant a seed; just do it, you'll be a massive help.

**Georgie Vestey**: When you look back on your work with people who have wanted to take their lives, what are the cases that will stay with you?

**Cathy MacDonald**: There was one where I was really scared actually, that jumps to mind, and it was a young lad, and he was on the wrong side of the bridge, and he started running. Now, Georgie, there's only, I don't know, a lip of maybe 6, 8 inches maximum and he was running down that, and I thought, "He's going to go, he's going to fall. Even if he decides that he's not going to take his own life, he's going to fall here". I remember that scared me quite a bit.

He was intoxicated and I felt for him, he'd just had such an unfortunate lifestyle at that point that he had no control over, and he wanted out of it. He didn't want to lead the life that he had, and he started, he took his shirt off. He had a mountain bike as well, which he grabbed and threw into the water and when people start throwing away and disposing of their personal belongings, it's not a good sign.

I do remember thinking, "I don't want to see you go, come on", and we got him back. That was a massive relief. Your job is to save a life. Do what you can to give them, even just one more day. Let them make a new decision tomorrow.

[Georgie Vestey](#): My thanks to Cathy MacDonald who, since leaving the Police, now offers her expertise more widely. You can find a link to her organisation on the episode show notes and also links to other useful websites.

If you or anyone you know has been affected by the issues we've discussed and would like further support, then please call The Samaritans. You can reach them in the UK on 116 123. If you find the episode useful, then please share it with others, we need to talk about suicide, we really need to talk about suicide.

I'm Georgie Vestey and this is Dead Honest.



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