



# HELP WHEN WE NEEDED IT MOST

How to prepare for and  
respond to suicide  
in schools and colleges.

**SAMARITANS**



**Nobody likes to think about a death in school. Yet suicide is a leading cause of death for young people in the UK and ROI. Sadly it is always a possibility that a student, parent or member of staff might choose to take their own life.**

However upsetting this must be, schools play an important role in reducing the likelihood of copycat behaviour and helping recovery by preparing and responding to the situation properly.

This document guides you through the process of preparing for and responding to suicide appropriately and constructively, in order to help rebuild the wellbeing of the school community and reduce the risk of further deaths. We based this guidance on research and best practice concerning suicide response within school communities from across the world.

Every situation is different and Samaritans has been learning from the communities we have supported so that we can share our learning with others. We have specialist knowledge and skills. In the event of a suicide, we can offer support, advice, guidance and local contacts all based on 60 years' experience working towards our vision that fewer people die by suicide.

### **Our Step by Step service aims to:**

- Reach out to high risk people and communities to reduce the risk of further suicide;
- Support a school community to prepare for, respond to and recover from a completed or attempted suicide;
- Provide information and support to help the school community come to terms with what has happened and prevent stigma and isolation in the school community.

**SAMARITANS**  
**STEP BY STEP**

**“I cannot thank Samaritans enough and the Step by Step team, the service is utterly brilliant and they deal with one of the most devastating things that can happen to a school.”**

(Head teacher)

All quotes are from the 2013 evaluation of Samaritans' Step by Step service, carried out by Sherbert Research.





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This guidance forms part of Samaritans' Step by Step service to schools, which offers specially trained volunteers who can assist school leadership teams with their suicide response.

Contact [stepbystep@samaritans.org](mailto:stepbystep@samaritans.org) or **Freephone\*** 0808 168 2528 for further information.

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\*Calls are free from landlines and some mobile providers.

# Step by Step

Samaritans has offered the Step by Step service to schools in the UK since 2010. We are available to offer practical support and advice to schools that have been affected by suicide, suspected suicide or attempted suicide.

Samaritans offers this service in order to support the school community, and reduce the risk of further suicide. Recent research on ‘copycat’ suicides and suicide ‘contagion’ suggest that, in young people especially, exposure to suicide can lead to increased risk of suicidal thoughts. A Canadian study found that the suicide of a schoolmate increased the risk of suicidal thoughts or attempts among young people aged 12-17 years (especially 12-13 year olds) for up to two years following the suicide, and had an impact that was even greater than the suicide of a family member.

Our service is designed to lessen the risk of further suicide by assisting school communities to handle the situation sensitively and responsibly, while returning to normal routines as quickly as possible. This guidance booklet forms part of Samaritans’ Step by Step service to schools, which offers specially trained volunteers who can assist school leadership teams with their suicide response.

As described in a recent evaluation of our service, ‘Step by Step is there to reassure [senior leadership teams] that what they are doing is right for the school and advise them on what they feel works best throughout the incredibly difficult first few weeks.’

Contact our Step by Step service ([stepbystep@samaritans.org](mailto:stepbystep@samaritans.org)) or Freephone\* 0808 168 2528 and we will do all we can to help you deal with a situation you may never have faced before.

Your local authority and other organisations listed at the end of this guidance may also be able to provide emotional support and advice on specific issues.

Samaritans is available round the clock, every day of the year by phone, email, text, letter or face-to-face visits in the branch for anyone who might be struggling to cope. We have provided contact details for support services at the end of this booklet.

We can also assist with raising awareness of emotional health among young people, by offering talks in schools. Contact your local Samaritans branch to find out more .

**“We made decisions in that first week that I don’t think we would have made if we had been supported by Step by Step early on.”**

(Head teacher)

**“Samaritans gave us the confidence to do things the right way.”**

(Head teacher)

\*Calls are free from landlines and some mobile providers.

1 Swanson, S. A., & Colman, I. (2013). Association between exposure to suicide and suicidality outcomes in youth. *CMAJ: Canadian Medical Association Journal = Journal De L’Association Medicale Canadienne*. Date of Electronic Publication: 27 May 2013.

2 Sherbert Research (2013). Full report: Step by Step Evaluation.

# Creating a response plan

Although a school can be affected by many challenging incidents, including sickness and accidental death, it is suicide that presents the unique risk of potentially being the trigger for another suicide.

The key to coping with a crisis is to plan. It is particularly important that the school responds to a suicide within 48 hours. This is necessary to maintain the structure and order of the school routine, while facilitating the expression of grief, and reducing the risk of imitative suicide.

Schools with crisis plans in place are best equipped to deal with a suicide when it happens. Good planning for the aftermath of suicide makes it easier for people to respond effectively at a time when resilience may be low.

A postvention<sup>1</sup> protocol is an agreed approach to responding to a suicide. In a school setting, this protocol should ideally:

- be a written protocol, developed in advance of a suicide;
- include working with the local community;
- involve the formation and training of a postvention team – be clear about who will do what;
- include procedures for notifying staff, parents and young people about a suicide;
- include guidelines on how to inform the school community and handle the media;
- identify appropriate postvention services and facilities;
- include procedures for recognising ‘at risk’ individuals (including staff) and identifying where people would be referred;
- include an evaluation of the effectiveness of the postvention and any follow-up protocol.

It is good practice that the whole school community would be aware of essential information included in such planning, including who to tell, what to say and what not to say, and who is vulnerable.

**“They helped to point out pathways, when you couldn’t see the wood for the trees.”**

(Teacher)

1 Postvention “is the term given to activities and programmes that are intended to assist those who have been bereaved by suicide to cope with what has happened. Suicide prevention and postvention are closely related in that postvention can also prevent further deaths.” (p.3, New Zealand Ministry of Youth Development, ‘Guidance for community organisations involved in suicide postvention’, 2005)

## Breaking the news

Samaritans' Step by Step service can work with you to consider the ways in which a school may become aware of a suicide, and how to respond to these to prevent rumour and misinformation and to consider the best actions to take in such cases.

- Establish the facts before acting on news of a suicide. Contact the police or the family as soon as you can to confirm the death and whether or not it is being treated as suicide. Be aware that it is likely to be many months before an inquest (or fatal accident inquiry in Scotland) is held, and that in many cases narrative verdicts may mean that the death is not officially recorded as suicide. It is important to note that there may be a great deal of speculation within the school community, and that schools often have to act on the basis that the death is being **treated** as suicide.
- Notify the school (or local authority) incident management team. It is important to act quickly, while at the same time preparing the school leadership team and administration for continuous enquiries once the death is made known.
- Breaking the news to young people can be extremely difficult. Tell staff first and give them time to take in the news before addressing students. Make sure that staff know where and to whom they can turn for emotional support.
- Best practice suggests that, where possible, it is better to break the news to students in small groups or classes.
- When breaking the news it is important to be factual but to avoid excessive detail about the suicidal act itself. Rumours may be circulating and people may ask directly but try not to disclose details about the method used, whether there was a suicide note, or its contents.
- Consider preparing a statement for staff to use to ensure consistency across the school.
- Consider providing immediate counselling or emotional support to students and staff at the school. This may be arranged by the local authority.
- Try to strike a balance between sensitivity to those who are grieving and in shock, on the one hand, and the need to maintain the school routine, on the other. It may be helpful to set aside a room where students can go if they are upset.

**“They dealt with our shock and eased our pain.”**

(Head teacher)

**“They anticipated what we needed as we were caught up in the hysteria of what had happened.”**

(Head teacher)



## Handling the media

Dealing with the media can add to what is an already stressful situation. We advise you to appoint a single media spokesperson for the school and discourage other students and staff from making public comments.

The media spokesperson should prepare a statement for the media, and not deviate from it. Avoid giving details of the suicide method or any suicide note, or giving simple 'explanations' of the suicide such as '*...was stressed about exam results*'.

### Use phrases like:

*A suicide*

*Die by suicide*

*Take one's own life*

*A suicide attempt*

*A completed suicide*

*Person at risk of suicide*

*Help prevent suicide*

### Avoid phrases like:

*A successful suicide attempt*

*An unsuccessful/failed suicide attempt*

*Commit suicide*

*Suicide victim*

*Just a cry for help*

*Suicide-prone person*

Samaritans has published guidelines for the media, to ensure that reporting of suicide is sensitive and responsible. Samaritans' media team can help support you and the family in handling the media during a crisis situation.

Contact the press team (including out of hours) on: **+44 (0)7943 809 162**.

## Contacting the school community

If a suicide has affected the school community you will need to consider how to inform them. The Samaritans Step by Step service can advise and assist with this.

### Parents/carers and all staff need to know:

- In brief what has happened (see 'Breaking the news' on page 8).
- What support the school is putting in place.
- What actions the school will take with regards to funerals and memorials.
- Where to find further information about suicide and grief.
- Where to access support for themselves.
- What to do if they are worried about someone else.

## Communicating sensitively and appropriately about suicide

### Information provided to the school community in the immediate aftermath of suicide should include and reinforce:

- facts (not rumours);
- an understanding that death is permanent;
- an exploration of normal and wide-ranging reactions to suicide (expressions of anger and guilt are entirely normal);
- an understanding that, with support, people can cope;
- an understanding that fleeting thoughts of suicide are not unusual;
- an awareness of suicidal warning signs and resources available to help;
- an understanding of funeral expectations.

### When discussing any suicide that has occurred, it is strongly recommended that the information given:

- is factually correct but does not include detail of the suicidal act itself;
- does not romanticise, glorify or vilify the death;
- does not include details of any suicide note;
- does not include speculation over the motive for suicide.

**“When parents asked things that were, on the face of it, nonsensical, Samaritans answered them very calmly and never made parents feel they were asking stupid questions.”**

(Head teacher)

# Identifying and supporting vulnerable students

Those affected by suicide are themselves at increased risk of serious upset and may potentially be at greater risk of taking their own life. School staff should be asked to identify any young people who are vulnerable, and efforts should be made to provide additional support or referral to specialist services.

Suicide is a complex issue, usually with no single cause, and it is therefore not possible to generalise. However, there is some evidence to suggest that people who have previously experienced bereavement or undergone a personal crisis, people with mental health problems, and people in marginal groups may be more vulnerable. Teachers who know the students best should be alert to any students who are excessively upset or disturbed by the death. These young people should be offered appropriate support without delay.

**“I asked them the most bizarre questions because the kids had asked me bizarre things and they responded so well. I was really impressed with the way they spoke to us.”**

(Teacher)

**“One thing that we did that made a big difference was a card to take home, which had the school mobile phone number on it. If they wanted to talk to someone they knew, they could, which was a really great idea and we received a few calls as half term was three weeks after the suicide.”**

(Teacher)

# Starting difficult conversations

## If you're worried about a young person, try to get them to talk to you.

- Often people want to talk, but won't speak until someone asks how they are. Try asking open questions, like *'What happened about...'*, *'Tell me about...'*, *'How do you feel about...'*
- Repeat back what they say to show you understand and ask more questions.
- Focus on their feelings instead of trying to solve the problem - it can be of more help and shows you care.
- Respect what they tell you. Sometimes it's easy to want to try and fix a young person's problems, or give them advice. Try and let them make their own decisions.

## How do I start a conversation with someone I'm concerned about?

You might feel that you don't know how to help someone, because you don't know what to tell them or how to solve their problems. You don't need to be an expert. In fact, sometimes people who think they have the answers to a problem are less helpful.

Don't forget that every person is different, so that what worked for one will not always work for another.

## Find a good time and place

**Ask gentle questions, and listen with care.** Ask them how they feel.

If you're gentle and calm it's ok to bring up the subject of self-harm or suicide.

**The more open the question the better.** Questions that help someone talk through their problems instead of being able to say 'yes' or 'no' are the most useful.

Questions such as:

- 🕒 **When** – 'When did you realise?'
- 📍 **Where** – 'Where did that happen?'
- 🗨️ **What** – 'What else happened?'
- 👉 **How** – 'How did that feel?'
- 🤔 **Why** – be careful with this one as it can make someone defensive. 'What made you choose that?' or 'What were you thinking about at the time?' are more effective.

## Find out how they feel

**Revealing their innermost emotions – anger, sadness, fear, hope, jealousy, despair and so on – can be a huge relief.**

It sometimes also give clues about what the person is really most worried about.

## Check that they know where to get help

Useful questions you might ask them include:

- 🗨️ 'Who else have you talked to about this?'
- 🗨️ 'What do you think about getting some help?'
- 🗨️ 'Would you like me to come with you?'

If you say something that appears to cause more upset, don't panic:

- 👂 show you are listening;
- 👤 look after yourself, and talk to someone too.

## Memorials

**This is a difficult issue that needs to be carefully managed, taking account of the wide range of feelings that are likely to be displayed.**

It is natural to want to pay tribute to those who have died. However, it is important not to sensationalise or glamorise suicide as that may act as a trigger for anyone who is deeply affected. School managers should set a time limit for memorials [about two weeks]. They may offer to forward cards and other tribute material to the family afterwards. Permanent memorials following a suicide are generally to be discouraged.

Schools cannot control online memorials and other social networking activity following a suicide. However, students should be warned about the risks of online memorials – their comments may become public/published without their permission, online memorials can attract negative and hurtful comment and anything that romanticises suicide can be harmful to those who are vulnerable. Schools could consider establishing an online memorial on their own website, which they can then moderate and remove after an agreed time.

## Funerals

**The nature of the student's death should not by itself encourage greater attendance at the funeral than it would for any other tragic death at the school.**

We recommend that parents or guardians accompany students who want to attend.

Those who don't attend should have normal classes to go to.

If appropriate, engage the faith leader prior to the funeral to suggest that eulogies should be fitting and do not sensationalise what has happened.

## Responding to suspected suicide

It can take many months for an inquest (or fatal accident inquiry in Scotland) to be held, and in many cases unexplained deaths are not given a verdict of suicide. Schools and authorities often have to act on whether an unexplained death is being treated as suicide.

In some cases, where there is an ongoing investigation or where the family does not want the cause of death to be disclosed (or reported as suicide), it can be challenging for a school to decide how to proceed.

In this situation, schools should state that the nature and cause of death are still being determined and that additional information will be forthcoming.

Acknowledge that there are rumours (which are often inaccurate), and remind students that rumours can be deeply hurtful, distressing and unfair to the deceased person, their family and their friends.

If there is an ongoing investigation, schools should check with local police before speaking about the death with students who may need to be interviewed by the authorities.

## If the family does not want the nature or cause of death to be disclosed

While the fact that someone has died may be disclosed immediately, information about the nature and cause of death should not be disclosed until the family has been consulted. If the death has been declared a suicide but the family does not want this disclosed, someone from the school who has a good relationship with the family should contact them. They should explain that students are already talking about the death, and that having adults in the school community talk to students about suicide and its causes can help keep students safe.

If the family refuses to permit disclosure, schools can simply state that the family has requested that information is not shared. Schools can still take the opportunity to acknowledge rumours about suicide, and to address the topic of suicide in a responsible way to assist other young people who may be depressed or suicidal.

In addition, it is suggested that mental health professionals should be working alongside the school in helping to meet the immediate counselling needs of affected students.

## Responding to attempted suicide

While suicide is the second most common cause of death among young people aged 10–24, most suicide attempts do not result in death.<sup>2</sup>

Young people may return to school following a suicide attempt, and schools should not underestimate the impact of this on other students.

**It is imperative that anyone who has attempted suicide is appropriately referred to and cared for by mental health professionals. Mental health professionals will be able to work alongside the school in the following key areas:**

- Planning support for a student who has attempted suicide.
- Helping meet the immediate counselling needs of affected students.
- Identifying other vulnerable young people.

If a school is informed of an attempted suicide that took place away from the school or the attempt occurred without the awareness of other students, there is a small possibility that the spread of information may be contained. If complete containment of information is a real possibility, it should be discussed with the family as soon as possible. In such circumstances, any communication with staff, students and parents will be on a “need to know basis” only, in consultation with the young person, their family and appropriate mental health professionals

If the details of the attempted suicide are already known in the school population, schools may understandably be anxious about addressing this. Advice should be sought from the mental health professionals caring for the young person as they may be able to provide considerable assistance. It is essential that a support plan is developed and approved by an identified staff member (the school counsellor if the school has one), the student, the family and the mental health professionals before the student returns to school.

**When meeting with the young person’s family, critical areas for sensitive discussion are:**

- What information is provided to which sections of the school community.
- The support plan for their child’s return to school.
- The support for any siblings in the school.
- Liaison with the mental health professional.

<sup>2</sup> The World Health Organisation states that “...suicide attempts... are up to 20 times more frequent than completed suicide.” [www.who.int/mental\\_health/prevention/suicide/suicideprevent/en](http://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide/suicideprevent/en) downloaded 3 December 2012.



## Further Information about Samaritans

For further information and support either about suicide or developing a critical incident plan that includes suicide, please contact us.

✉ [stepbystep@samaritans.org](mailto:stepbystep@samaritans.org)

☎ Freephone\* 0808 168 2528

🌐 [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

### Samaritans can assist schools by offering:

- ◉ Assistance and advice about dealing with suicide or unexplained death.
- ◉ Schools talks to raise awareness of emotional health issues among young people.
- ◉ Information from our website.

\*Calls are free from landlines and some mobile providers.

## Other sources of support

### British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

Through the BACP you can find information about counsellors in your area.

[www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)

### ChildLine

Provides support services for children and young people. Phone the free, 24-hour helpline for children and young people in the UK about any problem.

**Tel: 0800 1111**

[www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

### Choose Life: The National Strategy and Action Plan to prevent suicide in Scotland

[www.chooselife.net](http://www.chooselife.net)

### Cruse Bereavement Care

Promotes the well being of bereaved people and enables anyone bereaved by death to understand their grief and cope with their loss. The organisation provides support and offers information, advice, education and training services.

[www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk](http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk)

### Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland

[www.crusescotland.org.uk](http://www.crusescotland.org.uk)

### NAPEP UK: Local Authorities Educational Psychology Services Crisis Response Team Network

A support network for peers involved in Local Authority Educational Psychology Services that offer support to school communities following a traumatic incident. The network shares information, discusses best practice and provides the opportunity to respond to large scale cross border incidents in a co-ordinated way.

[www.napep.org](http://www.napep.org)

### Selfharm.co.uk

Selfharm.co.uk is a project dedicated to supporting young people impacted by self-harm, providing a safe space to talk, ask any questions and to be honest about what's going on in their lives.

[www.selfharm.co.uk](http://www.selfharm.co.uk)

### Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SOBS)

Aims to provide a safe, confidential environment in which bereaved people can share their experiences and feelings, so giving and gaining support from each other. It is staffed by many who have been bereaved by suicide.

[www.uk-sobs.org.uk](http://www.uk-sobs.org.uk)

### Winston's Wish

Winston's Wish is the largest provider of services to bereaved children, young people and their families in the UK. They have lots of information and support available for children who are bereaved through suicide.

[www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk)

### YoungMinds

YoungMinds is the UK's leading national charity committed to improving the mental health and emotional well-being of all children and young people.

[www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)



**Someone to talk to** – people contact us when things are getting to them. They don't have to be suicidal.

**We're always here** – round the clock, every single day of the year.

**A safe place** – as volunteers we're ordinary people, and keep all our conversations private.

**People can be themselves** – whoever they are, however they feel, whatever life's done to them.

**We're a charity** – it's the public's kind donations that keep our helpline open.

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Patron: HRH The Prince of Wales. Founded in 1953 by the late Prebendary Dr Chad Varah CH CBE. A charity registered in England and Wales no. 219432, in Scotland no. SC040604 and no. SC009843, and in Ireland no. CHY11880. Incorporated in England and Wales in 1963 as a company limited by guarantee no. 757372, and in Ireland no. 450 409.

\* Please see our website for latest call charges.

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## FOR EMOTIONAL SUPPORT



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