

SAMARITANS

Step by Step

Helping school communities respond to
and recover from a suspected suicide

Postvention

Memorials

UK

Temporary memorials

Following any death, there is a natural wish to pay tribute to the person who has died. Following a death by suspected suicide, there is a need for careful planning and management of any memorial in the school, college or elsewhere.

Memorials should be handled with great care and sensitivity. It is important to acknowledge the desire for the memorial but also to recognise the potential risk of glamorising or sensationalising a death that is rumoured or known to be by suicide. This can unintentionally increase the risk of others taking their own lives.

This guidance forms part of Samaritans' Step by Step service, which offers specially trained volunteers who can assist schools, colleges and other youth settings with their response to a suspected suicide. Step by Step has a dedicated email and phone number, see below.

We aim to respond to you within 24 hours.

Call
0808 168 2528

Calls are free from landlines and some mobile providers.

Email
stepbystep@samaritans.org

Further information:
Visit
[samaritans.org/stepbystep](https://www.samaritans.org/stepbystep)

Some people will want to leave flowers, messages or other mementos. The school or college can take partial control of this by choosing the place where a memorial is sited. Placement of any flowers or memorials needs careful consideration. Temporary memorials should not be placed at the location of the death, or in a place that is very public. Everyone should feel able to visit the memorial site by choice and not have to see it if they do not wish to. All memorials should be monitored by a member of staff for messages of concern or inappropriate items or comments. This will also enable staff to support students and move them on gently after a time. Deciding when to remove the temporary memorial is always difficult, as it carries the risk of evoking a negative reaction. One way to mitigate this risk is for a senior staff member to discuss the removal of items in the memorial with close friends of the person who has died, before the flowers, mementos and messages fade or become damaged. These can be gathered and sent to the family.

To encourage a healthy grieving process within the community, some practitioners have recommended a policy of allowing temporary memorials for no more than two weeks, or removing them soon after the funeral or memorial service. It is important to communicate clearly the wishes of the family and when the memorial will be removed. Any further tributes should then be taken down at the end of each day.

Vulnerable people may be at risk of interpreting any memorial, or recognition eg, a posthumous award, as giving positive attention to suicide and presenting suicide as a viable choice for dealing with problems. Bear this in mind when planning memorials.

Social media and online memorials

Institutions cannot control online memorials and other social networking activity following a suspected suicide. However, staff and students should be warned about the risks of inappropriate messages, warning signs to look out for, what to do if you are concerned about a post or message and the benefits or risks of online memorials. Social media and the internet enable messages to reach a huge audience immediately. It may be that students, parents and staff first hear news of a possible suicide through social media. Social media has advantages and disadvantages as a way of communicating following a death. People increasingly use online resources and social networking sites in their daily lives, and this may be a way in which some people feel most comfortable in discussing their thoughts and feelings. The period following a suspected suicide is one that can involve a great deal of trauma and confusion. There is no right or wrong way for people to react. Some may be more willing to talk than others about the death, some may prefer to discuss their feelings outside of the school or college community.

Social media is now the commonplace location of an online memorial after the death of a person. It is very common for RIP pages to be set up following the death of a student or staff member. These can be a helpful place to share memories, support one another and share details of funerals. Bereaved families have found that it can be a way of keeping in touch with the deceased's friends. Most of these are established by a friend and are unmoderated (meaning there are no controls over what is posted), which makes them effectively unmanageable. While these memorial sites seem to be an important part of the grieving process for many, and a focal point for both grief and support, they can also attract inappropriate comments. These could include accusations, blame and deliberately inflammatory comments which can evoke very strong reactions, far beyond the virtual world. It is helpful if the team responsible for social channels can monitor these. More information can be found here:

**[facebook.com/
help/1506822589577997](https://www.facebook.com/help/1506822589577997)**

While controlling or closing these sites is almost impossible and would likely be counterproductive, some have had success in mitigating these risks by asking an appropriate group of students, to offer support to the site's founder in reviewing and moderating any material posted to the site. In doing so, inappropriately-worded comments or direct accusations can be referred back to the person posting them and more appropriate wording or approach can be used. This can also help identify and respond to those who could be at risk themselves and offer guidance with sources and offers of support.

Some points for consideration to enable a safe response to a suicide and reduce the risk of contagion are:

- educate the community on safe messaging and using social networks responsibly
- send out messages signposting to support both in and out of the school or college
- send out supportive messages to the community emphasising inclusion
- provide links to online resources about coping strategies, self-help and encourage help seeking behaviour
- set up a memorial page that is monitored by students or support staff.

Final thoughts

To monitor social media online communities for:

- messages of concern from students
- rumour or speculation
- details of the method of suicide
- messages that suggest suicide was a positive outcome
- suggestions as to why someone took their own life
- messages that indicate someone identifies closely with the deceased
- offensive comments.

To encourage students to:

- send positive supportive messages
- not collude with rumours
- report any concerns with friend's posts or messages to staff
- report any impromptu gatherings to support staff.

There is further information about supporting someone online available from Samaritans at [samaritans.org](https://www.samaritans.org)

You should always be mindful that many conversations take place in private spaces such as WhatsApp and it is not possible to monitor everything. However, it is important to be aware of the toll that reading online posts and comments about the death can have on the team taking responsibility for this. Support should be available and offered to these members of staff. Warnings should also be given to students about the potential toll that reading posts and comments about the death can have on their emotional state and wellbeing.

Samaritans can provide support day or night, 365 days a year. Whatever you're facing, we're here to listen.

Tel: 116 123 (this number is free to call)

**Email: jo@samaritans.org
[samaritans.org](https://www.samaritans.org)**

Please note these are the main Samaritans contact details and not for the Step by Step or Schools service.

There is a delicate balance between celebrating and protecting the memory of the person who has died and supporting friends and family in their feelings after the event. For many young people, this could be their first close experience of death or sudden death and they may not know how they should respond. Staff are often looked to for examples of how to respond appropriately at such a time. They can reduce students' anxiety by helping them recognise that there is no right or wrong way to grieve and that talking openly can help. It's important to reassure people that what they are feeling is normal.

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 and have agreed to this. If the death is rumoured to be a suicide but the family does not want

this disclosed, the Lead member of staff should talk to the family about this. It is essential to respect families wishes but possible to explain that students are already talking about the death as suicide, and that talking openly about suicide to students as well as discussing how the death has impacted them, the importance of seeking support and where to get help, can help to keep students safe. If the family want the death explained as accidental or unexplained, the organisation can simply state that the family has requested details are not shared. Staff can still take the opportunity to talk about suicidal thoughts and feelings without referring to the death being by suicide. Addressing the topic of suicide in a responsible way plays a key part in the prevention of further suicides.

Further information about Samaritans

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

SAMARITANS

Contact Step by Step

Email

stepbystep@samaritans.org

Call

0808 168 2528

Calls are free from landlines
and some mobile providers.

Visit

samaritans.org/stepbystep

