

SAMARITANS

# Step by Step

Helping school communities respond to  
and recover from a suspected suicide

Postvention

Information for staff

UK

A death by suspected suicide is a very sad and traumatic event for young people, staff, parents and the wider school community. Such an event can bring up a range of feelings and questions that you may never have experienced before. Suicide is an extremely difficult topic to talk about and deal with, particularly after the suspected suicide of a student or member of staff.

Samaritans has a wealth of experience in supporting people through difficult times. We hope that by sharing what we have learned with you, it may provide you with the knowledge and support you may need to help you and your students cope with what has happened.

When there has been a suicide in the school community, it can throw up all kinds of feelings. Everyone acts or reacts in their own way.

It's important to know that there is no right or wrong way of feeling.

This guidance forms part of Samaritans' Step by Step resources for communities working with and supporting young people. Step by Step is a Samaritans service offering support, resources and practical advice for adults who work with young people and their communities, that have been impacted by an attempted or suspected suicide.

**If you would like to find out more about this service:**

**Email**  
**[stepbystep@samaritans.org](mailto:stepbystep@samaritans.org)**

**Phone**  
**0808 168 2528**

Calls are free from landlines and some mobile providers.

## How you may feel

When someone you know has died by suspected suicide, it can bring up all kinds of thoughts and feelings. Everyone acts or reacts in their own way. It's important to know there is no right or wrong way of feeling.

- Angry
- Disbelief
- Hurt
- Shock
- Betrayed
- Fearful
- Numb
- Tearful
- Confused
- Guilty
- Responsible
- Withdrawn

You may experience one or more of these emotions and that's ok. Feelings vary from person to person.

You may also have lots of questions. That's also common, but often there are no answers. You may have to accept that many questions will always remain unanswered.

At this difficult time it is really important to take care of yourself, seek support and talk to others about how you are feeling. Try and be as kind to yourself as you can and take care of your personal needs.

### Why do people take their own lives?

Suicide is a complex issue, usually with no single cause, and it is therefore not possible, or helpful, to generalise. This can leave others with questions that cannot be answered. People have different levels of resilience and different levels of mental health. Often there is a complex build up of many factors that leave a person with a sense that ending their life is the only way to end the pain. Often it is a result of reaching a point where the person can see no other way to stop the pain. Sadly, most people thinking about suicide don't really want to die but just want the pain they are feeling to stop. In many cases these feelings can change with the right support.

# What can I do?

Talking with other staff and young people about suicide is important at this time as it can help everyone cope with the trauma and grief. Talking to students and listening to their concerns can help highlight students who are having difficulty coping.

You may not know exactly what to say or do – most people don't. You don't need to have ready answers or solutions. Being there for the students and listening to them is often enough.

## How to support others

If you feel unable to listen or support students, that's ok. Let them know where they can go to for support and ensure other staff are keeping an eye on young people you are concerned about.

- Allow them to talk and ask questions.
- Acknowledge what has happened and that it will affect everyone in different ways.
- Give them time to cry when they need to.
- Listen without judging. Let them know you are there for them. They may go over the story time and time again. That's fine – it's part of the healing process.
- Even if they seem to have lots of family and close friends around, they might still need support. It's important that they know they can talk to someone about their grief, so they don't feel alone with it. If you feel unable to listen or support students, that's ok, let them know where they can go to for support and refer any students of concern.
- Maintain a routine and normality, this helps a sense of certainty and safety in students.
- Allow them to talk about the deceased, focusing on the sense of loss and their memories; avoid discussing details of how someone died and any conversations that glorify the death.
- Enable students to talk about suicide, directing conversations toward healthy coping strategies, how to support one another and where to seek help. Keep a strict time limit on this (5–10 minutes) so that students do not dwell or become distressed by a prolonged discussion.

- Dispel any rumours but do not talk about suicide notes.
- Be aware of warning signs and refer or offer support to young people who you feel may at risk.

## 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.

- 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 gives clues about what the person is really most worried about.

## Are there warning signs when someone is suicidal?

**It can be very difficult to tell if someone is feeling suicidal, especially if they find it hard to talk about their feelings.** People in crisis react in different ways. But there may be clues in behaviour changes, such as if someone is unusually withdrawn or animated.

### Other signs that someone may be struggling to cope include:

- talking specifically about taking their own life
- seeing no future for themselves
- giving away their belongings
- seeing no way to resolve their fears or anxieties
- becoming more calm, happy or relaxed (a sense of relief that a plan has been made)
- becoming more isolated from friends and family
- unusual displays of anger or impatience towards friends and family
- being tearful for no obvious reason
- not being able to cope with small everyday events
- increased risk-taking.

If you are concerned about someone in your school or college, encourage them to talk. If someone is talking about having suicidal thoughts and feelings, **always take it seriously.**

### How do I deal with my own grief as well as supporting others?

Take care of yourself; seek and accept support from others. It will be better if the routine of the school can keep going in as normal a way as possible to provide some structure for everyone. So if you can take some time to compose yourself, the best way to proceed may be to brief staff members that are further from the tragedy to keep the day to day timetable running in the background.

### When and how to seek help

It's important not to struggle with difficult emotions on your own. If your feelings become overwhelming or it's difficult to cope with small everyday events, find someone to talk to. No matter how awful things seem, there is always someone you can reach out to. Counsellors, family members, teachers or support staff can be of great help when you are feeling low. If you'd prefer to talk to someone in confidence who is not part of your school or family, you can contact Samaritans. We are there at any time of the day or night to help you. You can also contact us by email or by visiting one of our branches.

# Talking can help

Looking after your emotional health is just as important as looking after your physical health. Everyone faces challenges in their lives and sometimes we all need someone to talk to, to help us cope. There is no shame in asking for help when you feel like coping on your own is too difficult.

## Where else can I go for support and information?

**Breathing Space (Scotland)** is a free, confidential phone and web-based service for people in Scotland experiencing low mood, depression or anxiety: **[breathingspace.scot](http://breathingspace.scot)**

**British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)** can provide information about counsellors in your area: **0870 443 5252, [baccp.co.uk](http://baccp.co.uk)**

**Child Bereavement UK** provides support to families grieving the loss of a child, and advice for professionals working with bereaved families: **01494 568900, [childbereavement.org.uk](http://childbereavement.org.uk)**

**ChildLine** provides support services to children and young people: **0800 1111, [childline.org.uk](http://childline.org.uk)**

**Cruse Bereavement Care** enables bereaved people to understand their grief and cope with their loss. They also offer information, advice, education and training services. **[cruse.org.uk](http://cruse.org.uk), [crusescotland.org.uk](http://crusescotland.org.uk)**

**Help is at Hand** provides people affected by suicide with both emotional and practical support: **[supportaftersuicide.org.uk](http://supportaftersuicide.org.uk)**

**Samaritans** can provide support day or night, 365 days a year to anyone, regardless of background or religion. Whatever you're facing, we're here to listen.

**Tel: 116 123 (this number is free to call) Email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org), [samaritans.org](http://samaritans.org)**

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

**Winston's Wish** provides practical support and guidance to bereaved children, young people and their families: **08452 030405, [winstonswish.org.uk](http://winstonswish.org.uk)**

**Young Minds** offers advice and support to parents worried about their children's emotional or mental wellbeing: **0808 8025544, [youngminds.org.uk](http://youngminds.org.uk)**

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### Visit

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