

Suicide, suicidal feelings and working in schools

Introduction

Content warning: This entire resource discusses suicide and has some mention of suicidal thoughts and self-harm.

Few people find it easy to discuss grief and loss, particularly in the workplace. This is particularly true when someone dies by suicide.

Schools are, however, communities. If someone connected to that community dies by suicide, pupils and staff alike may benefit from coming together to express their loss. If someone in your school community is having suicidal feelings, the right conversation at the right time, might save their life.



If it feels daunting to talk about suicide, you're worried about a colleague or you are wondering how to create a safe school culture where suicide can be discussed without fear or stigma, this resource is for you. **It provides information on:**

- What is suicide and what are suicidal feelings?
- Why this is important for schools
- What to do if you feel suicidal
- How to get immediate support
- Supporting a colleague
- Advice for Line Managers on having conversations about suicide
- Advice for School Leaders on creating a school culture that supports open conversations about suicide
- Source of support

You may find some of the content in this resource difficult to read. If you can, try to find a safe time and space to consider the contents.

What is suicide and what are suicidal feelings?

Suicide is the act of intentionally taking your own life. Suicidal feelings can mean having thoughts about ending your life or feeling that people would be better off without you. It can also mean thinking about methods of suicide or making plans to take your own life.

Experiencing these feelings can be confusing, overwhelming and terrifying. You may not understand them or why you're having them. Everyone experiences this differently and these feelings may build or change over time or from minute to minute. It's important to remember that, if you do feel this way, it is not likely to be a permanent state. It can change and you can feel differently again.

If you are having suicidal feelings it may feel like one or many of the following:

- Being hopeless about the future
- Feeling trapped in your own life and unable to tolerate it

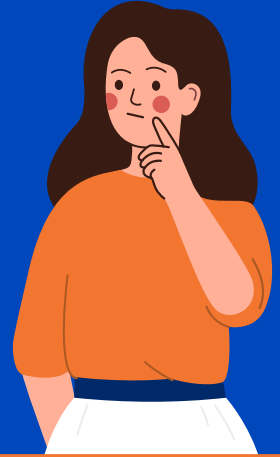
- Feeling unable to influence things around you or make changes
- Feeling incredibly low and unable to experience any joy or meaning
- Being tearful, anxious or overwhelmed by negative or punishing thoughts
- Feelings of desperation
- Being tempted to do risky or reckless things because you don't care what happens to you
- Feeling inadequate and like you're never good enough
- Extreme loneliness and desire to avoid other people
- A sense that everyone would be better off without you

This is not an exhaustive list. Everyone's experience is unique, complex and specific to your own situation.



Why do people feel suicidal?

What causes suicidal feelings, or someone to take their own life, may not always be clear. It may be that feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness have been experienced for some time. The road to those feelings may be long and complicated, and you do not have to understand the specifics of someone's experience to be present and supportive.



Some reasons that people may experience suicidal feelings:

Experiencing bullying or discrimination

Abuse of any kind, at any time in life

Long-term physical pain or illness

Sudden changes in health status

Financial problems

Ongoing stress or anxiety at home or work

The death of a loved one

Leaving an abusive or coercive relationship, community or situation

Big life changes such as redundancy, the end of a relationship or retirement

Loneliness and isolation

Challenges with sexual or gender identity

Pregnancy, birth and parenting related depression or issues

The experience of trauma at any time in life

Effect of addiction on quality of life, or the trauma underpinning that addiction


A loss of identity or breakdown in familiar structures and routine



The biggest risk factor for suicide is a previous suicide attempt. Whatever the reason behind suicidal feelings support is always available to help people overcome these feelings.

Why is this important in schools?

Suicide and suicidal feelings can be experienced by anyone of any age, gender or background. This can be either directly or indirectly through someone they know.

 **1 in 5 of us will experience suicidal feelings in our lifetime.** This can happen at any point in our lives. Employing a diverse and often large staff body will likely mean that most school workforces include people who have been affected by suicide or suicidal feelings.

Research tells us that those most at risk of taking their own lives are men, and people from LGBTQI+ community. While the reasons behind this are not fully understood, **some possible explanation include:**

FOR MEN

- Society putting pressure on men to 'just get on with things'
- Living in a culture where men can't talk about their feelings or difficulties
- Persistent myths that asking for help 'makes you weak'

FOR THE LGBTQI+ COMMUNITY

- Discrimination and bullying of LGBTQI+ people in homes, schools and workplaces
- Difficult or traumatic experiences of coming out
- Homophobia, biphobia and transphobia

It's essential that schools create psychologically safe environments where anyone who needs some support can ask for it and find it.

With teachers and school staff increasingly discussing mental health issues with pupils, it is important that staff can talk to each other too. Teaching these sensitive topics is vital, but it can also be draining or even triggering. Without the right support structures, harm could be caused to staff without it being detected or understood.



School leaders: Do your staff know how to identify a colleague at risk of suicide, and how to get help them if needed?

Schools have a duty of care towards their employees which includes taking measures to safeguard and support staff's mental and physical health. Self-harm has an impact on both and may indicate unresolved stressors linked to the workplace, such as extreme stress and pressure or conflict with colleagues.



If you are feeling suicidal

If you are feeling suicidal please know you are not alone. Your feelings will eventually change, and there is always help available.

If you're worried you cannot keep yourself safe right now, please call 999 or go to A&E.

Treatment and support is available through a range of services which include:

- Going to your GP (you can take someone with you if you like) - ask for an emergency appointment
- Helplines and listening services (see list at the end of this resource)
- Peer support services (either in person or online)
- Talking therapies with a trained professional to help you understand what lies behind your feelings
- Medication

If you need immediate support and are experiencing a mental health crisis there are also short term crisis services available. This includes local services such as walk-in Samaritan branches (see list below).

Your life matters and there is help available.



Helping yourself immediately:

If you are feeling suicidal and feel you need help immediately here are some ways of accessing support:

Call the Education Support helpline (which gets two calls per day from education staff clinically assessed to be at risk of suicide). The number is free, open 24/7 and offers immediate crisis support. 08000 562 561 Call us. We'll listen.

- **Mind's tools to help you cope right now**, in a crisis: distractions, delays and ways to manage
- **Tell someone how you're feeling**: this could be one of the helplines listed at the bottom of this resource
- **Think in 5 minute intervals**: tell yourself 'I only have to make it through the next five minutes.' Take things minute by minute to try to make things more bearable. Use the tools above
- **Remove anything you could use to harm yourself** or ask someone else to do so
- If you have a **safety or crisis plan** (if you've felt like this before you may have developed one) use it - see what you've told yourself to do to keep yourself safe
- **Soothe yourself** by focusing on your breathing, your senses, or going outside
- **Be kind to yourself** - make a deal with yourself that you won't act on your feelings today

Supporting a colleague you think may be experiencing suicidal thoughts

Observing some of the symptoms or signs that indicate someone in your team may be experiencing suicidal feelings doesn't mean that this is necessarily the case. You can only identify certain patterns that may suggest this is what is happening.

Spotting the warning signs:

Some of the signs you might observe include:

- Talking about being a burden to others
- Talking about not being able to cope and feeling useless
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no purpose
- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs, or dangerous behaviour
- Becoming anxious and agitated
- A loss of concentration, focus and care for work (or anything else)
- Becoming withdrawn and isolated
- Showing extreme mood swings including anger and sadness
- Talking about feeling trapped or in pain
- Talking about wanting to die
- Talking about ending things or not wanting to go on



The Samaritans also have [this resource](#) available for people who think someone they know is not ok.

Helping yourself in the longer term:

- Look after your **general wellbeing** as much as possible including your physical health
- Make a safety plan which includes ways you will keep yourself safe in moments of crisis. This might include responses to your dark thoughts, reminders of how to talk to yourself kindly, or soothing activities that can make the edge off intense feelings
- Connect with others. Talking to people and getting support through people you love and trust may help to address the causes of the feelings you're experiencing. It will also help you feel more connected, more joyful and less alone in your life
- Consider what gives your life meaning. Perhaps it's time with family, or a particular research interest or hobby. Maybe it's just being out in nature. If it makes you feel like life makes sense, do more of it. Do it a lot
- Find ways to value yourself. Make plans that excite you, congratulate and reward yourself for victories — big and small! — do things just for you



This resource from the Samaritans

provides lots of practical ways you can also support yourself if you are feeling low or struggling to cope.



Having a conversation:

If you think a colleague might be planning to take their own life, you might decide to talk to them. If you do, prioritise finding a safe, private space and time to speak with them.

Be kind, and be clear that you are concerned. Be curious and make no judgements or assumptions. Make it clear that they have no obligation to share anything with you.

If a colleague discusses suicide or suicidal feelings with you the most important things to remember are:

- **Be supportive** - offer non-judgemental support that you are able to follow through on
- **Listen to the person** - everyone experiences this differently. Listening to individual experiences is essential to being able to support someone properly
- **Respond with open questions** rather than advice or opinions. You probably can't - and don't need to - solve their problems. The best thing to do is offer support via conversation and suggest they get further support

- **Signpost to support** - schools may have policies or support and adjustments already in place in relation to suicide, suicidal feelings and wider mental health problems. If you know of these, point colleagues to them. People can also be signposted to other sources of support (see section at the end of this document)
- **Don't assume anything** - try to understand what they are saying and let them be in control of the conversations and any outcomes from it
- **Offer practical support** - your colleague may need practical help with things like creating a **safety plan**, contacting your GP, or self-care

Remember there are limits to the support you can provide as a friend or colleague. You need to take care of yourself. Give yourself time to rest and process what they've told you or what's happened. It's ok to decide you can't help someone or need to step back for a while. Try to help them create a support network of other colleagues, relatives and mental health professionals who can help them too.

How managers can support individuals:

All managers need to know about suicide and how they can support their staff in relation to suicidal feelings, as part of awareness of mental health problems. Managers should also be aware of the indirect effects of suicidal feelings on people such as spouses, significant others, and close family members/friends of individuals going through suicidal feelings.

If your school has a policy which covers guidance for managers in relation to suicide make sure you know the policy, support available and can signpost staff to this. If your school doesn't have this, you can still provide appropriate support to anyone you manage who is effected by suicide directly or indirectly.

Remember that everyone is different and each person may need something slightly different. If someone talks to you about suicidal feelings you could ask the following questions to find out more and agree ways to support them:

- What do you need?
- What is making this harder for you?
- How can we make work a safe place for you?
- How can we support you?
- Where else can you get support from?
- Are you getting that support?



Other ways you may be able to support staff include:

- Within reasonable limits, try to remove any significant hurdles to them accessing support
- Listen and encourage them to speak with you. Don't ever reference performance or capability procedures - this will only increase anxiety and stress levels. Remind them that they are valued as an individual and that you care about their safety
- Educate yourself on suicide and suicidal feelings, and the reasonable adjustments potentially required, and initiate conversations with staff about this
- Gently and without judgement or blame, offer an occupational therapy assessment
- Create an open culture in your team that encourages conversations about mental health
- Be aware of how suicidal feelings might impact on performance and attendance at work and manage accordingly

***This guide from CIPD* is full of information about managing suicide risk in the workplace and is useful for all school leaders and managers.**

What school leaders can do:

All employers have a duty to minimise or remove workplace health and safety risks.

This includes making sure that workplaces and their practices do not lead to (or exacerbate) poor employee mental health that could result in suicidal feelings. They have a duty to provide support and make changes to help any workers who are experiencing poor mental health or suicidal feelings while doing their job.

It's not always easy for managers or school leaders to know the extent to which suicide affects staff or the school. People understandably may not feel comfortable talking about it.

Normalising conversations about suicide within a wider culture of openness about mental health and *psychological safety*, is an essential step for every school and education workplace.

Changes that are needed range from strategic, large-scale actions, to smaller, more practical things that can make a big difference to people experiencing suicidal feelings.

Change and improve school culture - make suicidal feelings a whole school issue:

- Raise awareness about suicide, bust the myths, and make it everybody's business. The goal should be to create a workplace where people feel comfortable talking about suicide, can have a safe conversation about it, and feel able to ask for advice and support
- School leaders should use opportunities when speaking with staff more generally to talk about these aims
- Challenge negative stereotypes and stigma around suicide and suicidal feelings
- Demonstrate support for people experiencing mental health problems including suicidal feelings for example, supporting requests for counselling or other emotional support or investing in mental health support resources



Get policies right:

- Write and implement a policy that takes account of suicide. This could be your health and safety policy and / or a mental health and suicide policy and should follow the same consultation process as any other policy. The policy should state what support is available for staff who may need it and how to access it, and provide simple guidance for managers and team leaders. It could be a staff mental health safeguarding policy - you can find guidance on writing one of these [here](#).
- Have champions across the school for this policy who make sure staff are aware of it. Have a senior leader championing it too
- Ensure that any health and safety, sickness absence, performance management, equality and diversity, and occupational health policies link to and fit with the relevant policies
- Ensure that school risk assessments take account

of the needs of people who may be experiencing mental health problems, including suicidal feelings, and ensure adjustments effectively remove or control risks

- Identify adjustments that can be made for all workers as well as individual reasonable adjustments (see below) and include these in policies - for example focusing on whole staff wellbeing initiatives, supporting flexible working, having an actively implemented anti-bullying policy, and ensuring workloads are realistic

Improve awareness and understanding:

- Run training and awareness raising sessions regarding suicide and suicidal feelings across your school e.g. including it in CPD, making sure senior school leaders are visible improving their own awareness
- Provide points of contact who are available for people to go to for suicidal feelings related advice. Ensure at least one of these is a man
- Use the myths and reality tool below to break down barriers and misunderstanding around suicide and suicidal feelings

Appropriate absence and performance management






Manage absence and absence monitoring in a supportive and constructive way which recognises that suicidal feelings is a serious and significant issue that needs addressing as an immediate priority.





More support and information


Call 999 or go to A&E now if someone's life is at risk right now or you do not feel you can keep yourself or someone else safe.


If you are feeling suicidal it is really important to tell someone. If you don't want to tell a colleague, family member or friend, you can contact a confidential helpline or email / text support service. Help and support is available immediately - you don't have to go through this alone. If you are working in a school and want to improve resources and information available to staff about suicide, you may find it useful to publicise and signpost to these support services:


-  **CALM** - online mental health support for men
-  Mind - **helplines** and email support service, **local Minds** which provide face to face services across Wales and England and an online support community called **Side by Side**
-  **National Suicide Prevention Helpline UK** - 0800 689 5652 helpline offering a listening service to anyone with thoughts of suicide, available 24/7
-  **NHS** - information on where to get help for suicidal thoughts within the NHS and using other support services
-  **Papyrus Suicide Prevention** — for people under 35, call 0800 068 41 41 — 9am to midnight every day, text 07860 039967, email pat@papyrus-uk.org


 **Samaritans** - 116 123 (freephone) or email jo@samaritans.org - 24/7 support lines for anyone who needs to talk. You can visit some **Samaritans branches** in person. Samaritans also have a Welsh Language Line on 0808 164 0123 (7pm—11pm daily)

 The Samaritans also have **this resource** for people who think someone they know is not ok.

 **Stay Alive** - an app with help and resources for people who feel suicidal or are supporting someone else.

 **Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide** (SOBS) - helpline 0300 111 5065, emotional and practical support and local groups for anyone bereaved or affected by suicide.

 **SOS Silence of Suicide** — for everyone, call 0300 1020 505 — 4pm to midnight every day, email support@sossilenceofsuicide.org

 **Switchboard** - provides support and information to LGBTIQ+ people via a confidential helpline, instant messaging and email service.

