

# ***SAMARITANS***

## **Understanding suicide**

**March 2010**

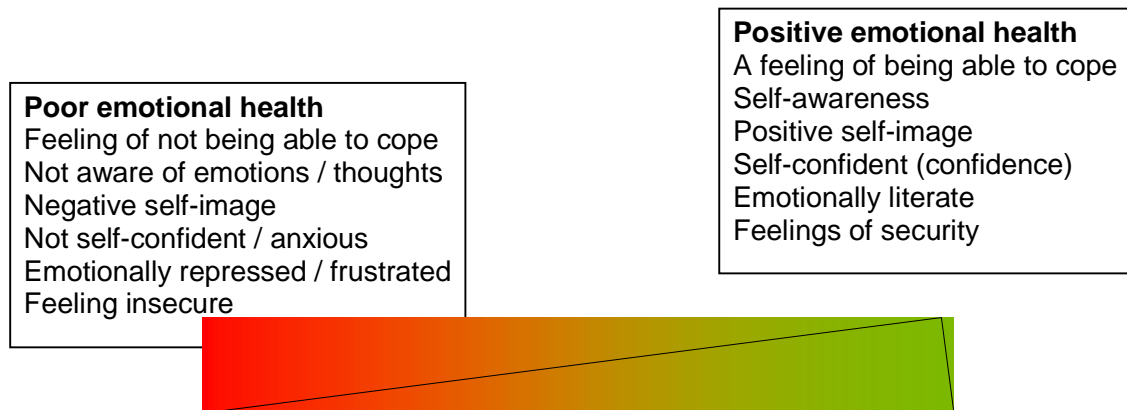
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### **Why do people take their own lives?**

There is no one reason why people take their own lives. It is often as a result of problems building up to the point where the person can see no other way to cope with what they're experiencing. The kinds of problems that might increase the risk of suicide include:

- Recent loss or the break up of a close relationship.
- An actual and/or expected unhappy change in circumstances.
- Painful and/or disabling physical illness.
- Heavy use of, or dependency on alcohol or other drugs.
- History of earlier suicide attempts or self-harming.
- History of suicide in the family.
- Depression.

When someone is feeling low or distressed it may be that a seemingly minor event is the trigger for them attempting to kill themselves.



### **How can you tell if someone is at risk of suicide?**

The way someone behaves when they feel suicidal differs from person to person. However, behaviour which for that person is unusual or atypical, such as being very withdrawn or excessively animated, can be a sign that there is something wrong.

Some people show very positive behaviour such as happiness or relief once they have decided to take their own life. Alternatively, if someone is going through emotional distress, they can feel isolated and will sometimes show anger or impatience towards the people close to them. Low self-esteem, being close to tears and not being able to cope with small everyday events are also signs that someone is struggling to cope with overwhelming feelings.

Physical symptoms of depression and distress also include sleeplessness, loss of appetite or irregular eating, stomach aches, panic attacks, low energy and loss of concentration. Signs that someone is suicidal can include talking of tidying up their affairs or expressing feelings of despair and failure.

It is very difficult to tell if someone is suicidal or depressed, as people in crisis have unique feelings and react in different ways – but think about whether they have experienced any of the problems listed in the previous question.

### **How common is suicide?**

In 2008 there were just over 6,000 deaths by suicide across the UK and Republic of Ireland<sup>1</sup>. In the UK it has been estimated that about 17% of people have felt suicidal at some point in their lives and about 5% have tried to kill themselves<sup>2</sup>.

### **Are there differences between men and women?**

More women than men say they have considered suicide though more men actually take their own lives. There are a range of theories about why more men than women die by suicide. It has been suggested that women talk about how they are feeling far more often than men. Women are also more likely than men to have strong social supports, and to seek psychiatric and other medical support.

There are strong links between alcoholism and substance misuse and suicide. Men are more likely to have problems with alcohol and drugs and this may also offer some explanation. Men are more prone to impulsive or violent behaviour and this also extends to suicidal behaviour.

### **What influence does the media have?**

Research has shown that young people often get their information on suicide from the media, and high profile cases of suicide can sometimes lead to copy cat effects. This is where other people take their own lives using the same method they have seen in the news.

The Press Complaints Commission (PCC) has guidelines on reporting to make sure reporting is not sensationalist. Samaritans has also published its own media guidelines: *Media guidelines – Portrayals of Suicide* available at [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org) which, for example, encourage television, newspaper and radio not to publish details about methods of suicide.

### **What can be done to prevent a suicide 'cluster'?**

When there is a suicide in a community there can sometimes be the added problem of additional 'imitative' suicides. This is sometimes called 'suicide clusters' or the 'contagion' effect and it has been found to be a particular problem amongst young people.

It is thought that some of the ways in which this 'contagion' takes place include personal communication, media and/or the influence of the internet.

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<sup>1</sup> Samaritans Suicide Statistics 1999-2008

<sup>2</sup> Adult Psychiatric Morbidity in England, 2007: Results of a household survey. The Health and Social Care Information Centre, 2009.

Ways to reduce the risk of contagion include;

- Ensuring that unnecessary attention is not given to the act.
- That information about the death is not presented in such a way that other people might identify with the person who died.
- Avoiding excessive detail about time and method of death.
- Avoiding disclosing the contents of any suicide note.
- Discouraging permanent memorials.
- Not 'romantising' the suicide or making events surrounding it sound melodramatic.

### **How do we reduce suicide?**

#### **Getting support to those who need it**

Samaritans believes that providing someone with the opportunity to frankly and honestly explore difficult feelings, without fear of judgement, can provide relief from distress. By helping people understand their feelings and explore their options we enable them to find their own way forward without taking control away from them. We often work with people who feel they cannot talk to anyone else – either because they don't have someone they trust or because they do not want to worry those around them.

Our phone, email and SMS and face to face support services are available 24/7. This is important as it is often when most services are closed that people struggle to get support.

#### **Improving understanding and reducing stigma**

One thing that can stop someone coming forward and seeking help is the fear that they will be perceived as 'weak' or that people will think there is something 'wrong' with them. This is a case where stigma can literally kill.

Samaritans works with other agencies to try and improve people's understanding of emotional health – the part of our health that is about the way we think and feel. We do this through our work in schools, workplaces, prisons and the media.

### **What should I do if I know someone who is feeling suicidal?**

Talking about feelings can make all the difference between choosing to live or die. Supporting someone in distress can be very difficult for you too. If you're helping someone who feels suicidal please take care of yourself as well.

If someone is talking about suicide always take it seriously. If you feel able to, offer support and encourage them to talk about how they're feeling. Ask direct questions and don't be afraid of frank discussions – to find out more, see our information sheet, *Starting difficult conversations*.

Ask the person how they are feeling and listen to the answer. Remember that it is difficult to support someone who is suicidal on your own- encourage your friend to seek

emotional support and talk to someone they trust- maybe friends, family, medical services, Samaritans.

Contact Samaritans yourself. We may be able to contact the person you are worried about.

### **What should I do if someone I know has died by suicide?**

The death of anyone close can cause immense sadness and grief but a death by suicide is one of the most painful and complicated types of bereavement. It can raise many emotions like disbelief, anger, guilt and sadness. All of these are normal reactions and you need the chance to talk them through with someone you are comfortable with and whom you trust.

A death through suicide delivers a double blow to families – not only do they have to cope with a sudden, often unexpected death, but they also have to deal with the way their relative has died and the fact that there may be media attention surrounding it.

Make sure you share how you are feeling and use the support that's out there.

### **Where can I go for further sources of information?**

#### *Samaritans*

Whatever you're going through, we're here to help 24 hours a day – in confidence and without judging. Visit us in person – find your nearest branch on our website.

Tel: 08457 90 90 90\* (UK) and 1850 60 90 90\* (ROI)  
Write to: Chris, PO Box 90 90, Stirling FK8 2SA

Email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)  
Web: [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

#### *British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy*

Through the BACP you can find information about counsellors in your area. If you want to be referred to a counsellor you may want to discuss this with your GP. See website or send A5 SAE for details of local practitioners.

Address: BACP House, 35–37 Albert Street, Rugby CV21 2SG  
Tel: 0870 443 5252

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

#### *Childline*

Provide support services for children and young people. Phone the free, 24-hour helpline for children and young people in the UK about any problem, at any time - day or night.

Tel: 0800 1111

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

*Cruse Bereavement Care*

Exists to promote the well-being of bereaved people and to enable 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.

Address: Cruse House, 126 Sheen Road, Richmond, Surrey TW9 1UR

Tel: 0870 167 1677

Web: [www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk](http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.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. Staffed by many who have been bereaved by suicide

Address: Centre 88, Saner Street, Hull HU3 2TR

Tel: 0844 561 6855

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

\* Please see our website for latest call charge information.

A full list of references for the facts above can be found on Samaritans website at [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

Samaritans is a registered charity and relies on volunteers and donations to continue its work. If you would like to support Samaritans, please visit [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)