

## **Samaritans and the economic climate**

### **1) If the country is going into recession what will the impact be on people's mental and emotional health?**

Research shows that economic cycles give a clear indication of suicide trends, and recessions have been shown to be accompanied by an increase in suicide rates (1).

This is not only because more people become unemployed and are therefore more psychologically vulnerable, but also because those in employment feel threatened too. The fear of losing one's job or pressures caused by a downturn in business, demotion and pension plan cutbacks can be bad for mental health and therefore increase suicide risk.

### **2) Does Samaritans think that there is going to be an increase in suicides as a result of the current financial climate?**

Yes, there is an increased risk of suicides. Falling stock prices, increased bankruptcies and housing insecurities (including evictions, anticipated loss of a home (2) and higher interest rates (3)) are all associated with increased suicide risk. Studies also show that being in debt is associated with mental health problems and suicidal thoughts and may contribute to someone actually taking their own lives (4).

Research shows too that people who are unemployed are two-three times more likely to die by suicide than people in employment (5), with unemployed men more at risk than unemployed women (6). Unemployment can result in poorer mental health, such as anxiety and depression, lowered self-esteem and feelings of hopelessness – all of which increase the likelihood that someone will think that life is not worth living.

### **3) How can Samaritans help?**

Whilst the current climate means that there is an increased risk of suicides, this need not be inevitable. Samaritans is urging anyone with financial or work worries, or debt concerns, to seek support rather than letting problems get out of control. Samaritans is a confidential emotional support service available 24:7 for anyone in any type of distress or despair. For specific financial advice, people should contact a financial support service such as the Citizens Advice Bureau.

A recent survey of 462 people who contacted Samaritans shows that 74 per cent of suicidal people felt that getting in touch with the service helped them take a decision not to end their own lives and 70 per cent of people felt that speaking to a Samaritans volunteer helped them cope with the problems they were facing (7).

### **4) Is there generally a rise in suicides at Christmas regardless of the credit crunch?**

Suicide increases directly after the Christmas period with a peak in suicides on New Year's Day. (7a) High expectations for the New Year, and a sense of anticlimax and despair when problems do not disappear overnight, increase the potential for stress and anxiety in the January 'hangover period' after the celebrations. Many people will feel without hope at the beginning of a new year and this can lead to suicidal thoughts and feelings of despair.

## **5) Which groups of people are at increased risk of suicide in these times of economic uncertainty?**

The people most at risk of suicide at this time are those who are experiencing financial problems – either people who were already suffering from poverty prior to the credit crunch and are now struggling further with rising costs of living, those who have recently lost their jobs or who have been unemployed for some time, those who are affected by a downturn in business, those who are in low-status occupations and those with existing mental health problems. (8).

People who depend on clients for their livelihood are also at risk (9) as well as people in single-person households, those experiencing relationship breakdowns, or those who are isolated and without strong social networks (10).

## **6) Is suicide still such a big problem? Aren't suicide rates decreasing?**

The trend in suicide rates is downward in England, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland but not in Wales and Northern Ireland. However, there are still nearly 6,000 suicides a year across the UK and Republic of Ireland (11). Even one death is too many, carrying a huge cost for society, with devastating emotional effects for family and friends left behind, that last for many years.

The World Health Organisation estimates that around one million people worldwide die by suicide every year. For every person who does take their own life there are about 20 more people who make an attempt (12).

Suicide is a leading cause of death in young people in the UK and ranks among the three leading causes of death in those aged 15-44 internationally (13). It is predicted that, by 2030, self-inflicted injuries will rise to become the 12<sup>th</sup> leading cause of death across all age groups around the world (14).

## **7) What can the effects of redundancy be?**

A negative life change such as redundancy comes with a whole raft of implications. There are the obvious knock-on effects financially but there can also be feelings of low self-esteem and guilt at what someone perceives as their failure to provide for their family.

Such a lot of time is spent at work that it can become part of our identities. When that is taken away it can shake people more than they thought it would. There may also be feelings of guilt for those who do not get made redundant. People may lose colleagues who are friends or simply feel very sad at what is happening around them so it's important not to forget those who are left in the workplace.

## **8) Will there be more marriage/ relationship breakdowns as a result of the financial crisis?**

Financial insecurity and uncertainty about the future may place relationships under greater pressure and this in turn may create more distress. Financial difficulty can contribute to the breakdown of even the strongest relationships with friends and family. Those who are under economic strain may experience more marital/ relationship problems than usual and may rely more heavily on alcohol and drugs as a coping mechanism. It is well established that excessive alcohol consumption and drug misuse can increase suicide risk (15).

## **9) How will families as a whole be affected?**

The effects of unemployment can reach beyond the individual. Family members of someone who is out of work can be at increased risk of suicide because of financial hardship or relationship strain as a result of the loss of employment of their relative (16). Even if family members are employed the fear of losing one's job and pressures caused by a downturn in business, demotion or pension plan cutbacks can be bad for their mental health and increase suicide risk, therefore placing extra strain upon the family unit.

## **10) What kind of work issues are exacerbating pressures for people?**

A number of work related factors can contribute to individuals' emotional pressure and enhance suicidal feelings. Unemployment, demotion, anticipated loss of a job, pension plan cutbacks, sales declines in a small business and people being forced to take pay cuts have all been found to be contributory factors to people being at increased risk of suicide (17).

## **11) What support is available for people?**

In times of financial crisis Samaritans is more important than ever. We support people with financial problems by listening in confidence and giving a safe arena to discuss thoughts, feelings and problems, without fear of being judged, in order to help people alleviate feelings of distress and despair – including those which may lead to suicide.

Samaritans doesn't offer advice to people with financial or debt problems but we do discuss options with people who contact us. Samaritans believes that, given the time and space to work problems or difficulties through in confidence, people can develop an inner strength and perspective to find their own way forward.

## **12) How can people safeguard their mental and emotional health in these times of economic uncertainty?**

Samaritans is encouraging people to actively seek help if they feel debt and financial worries are becoming a problem and starting to feel insurmountable. People should talk to their GPs if they feel they are not coping or contact Samaritans on 08457 90 90 90 for round-the-clock confidential emotional support if they feel they can't share problems with family, friends, colleagues or their GP.

## **13) Are there things that people can look out for that might indicate family, friends and colleagues are not coping and in need of extra support?**

Signs to look out for include someone:

- 1 Being withdrawn or unsociable
- 2 Being low-spirited or depressed
- 3 Drinking alcohol excessively or becoming dependent on drugs
- 4 Finding it difficult to relate to others
- 5 Taking less care of themselves
- 6 Acting out of character
- 7 Being tearful or constantly fighting back tears
- 8 Being excessively irritable
- 9 Finding it hard to concentrate
- 10 Feeling less energetic or particularly tired
- 11 Eating much less or much more than usual
- 12 Putting themselves down (self-mockingly as well as seriously), e.g. "Nobody loves me" or "I'm a waste of space".

## **14) Is the Government looking at improving access to mental health services as a result of the financial crisis?**

The Government may need to spend more money on the resources allocated to mental health during this time of economic difficulty. Samaritans is calling for ministers to ensure that local health services are aware of the impact that financial problems may have on people's mental health and to ask them to refer people to appropriate support services like Samaritans. In these troubled times we need a responsive and supportive Government which makes suicide prevention a high priority.

## **15) Will the impact of the financial crisis on mental health be included in national suicide prevention strategies now or in the future?**

It has been recognised that the current economic downturn may affect suicide reduction targets for England. Samaritans wants to raise awareness of groups that may be at increased risk of mental health issues and suicide, so that GPs and other key workers can refer people to services such as Samaritans.

Samaritans provides expert input into all suicide prevention strategy development groups – such as the recent Welsh suicide prevention strategy – to ensure that there is a high level of investment in mental health services for people in distress. We are also working with government to make sure that future suicide prevention policies are developed that allow flexibility should a major crisis of this or any sort occur.

## **16) How many people contact Samaritans about financial issues?**

Samaritans receives 2.8 million contacts a year by phone, email, letter and face-to-face. Research undertaken by the charity shows one in ten (about 280,000) contacts concerns financial issues, with 41% of contacts who raise financial issues worried about employment, 32% concerned about housing and 25% anxious about debt (18).

## **17) Do you refer people on to support services particularly geared towards debt?**

Samaritans' volunteers will give people contact details of relevant organisations that could offer direct advice such as the Citizens Advice Bureau.

Samaritans also operates a third party referral system whereby people can contact the charity if they are worried about someone else. When a caller expresses concern that a third party is in distress or despair, but is unlikely to contact Samaritans, the volunteer will ask to be given contact details so they can arrange to call and offer emotional support.

## **18) Have Samaritans' calls and emails gone up?**

A number of our 201 branches have experienced an increase in calls in the months leading up to Christmas 2008. Some branches have given anecdotal evidence to suggest that this is as a direct result of the current economic climate. Contacts to Samaritans have been steadily increasing for the past five years.

## **19) What kind of issues are people contacting you about at this time?**

People have been contacting us about job loss and redundancy worries, debt problems and housing insecurities. It is not new for us to offer emotional support in this area as we have received calls about debt and financial worries throughout the 55 years that we have been in operation.

## **20) What can managers do to support colleagues under increased pressure at work and at risk of redundancy?**

Managers should recognise that it takes courage for an employee to approach them to talk about issues that are causing them to feel anxious. They should have the skills and confidence to acknowledge the difficult circumstances and feelings an employee may be experiencing rather than make an immediate referral to HR (which can appear like a rejection if done too soon). Being listened to and feeling understood can significantly reduce feelings of anxiety. The most significant sign for an employer to look for is a change in behaviour (see question13).

## **21) Will people with mental health issues be the first to go if employers need to make job cuts?**

Employers have legal responsibilities to treat people with mental health problems fairly and indiscriminately and we would hope that UK employers would be mindful of this. Raising awareness of mental health issues in the workplace and encouraging managers to support their staff by acknowledging any difficulties a colleague

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or employee may be experiencing can be incredibly helpful in minimising mental health issues.

## **22) Is the credit crunch having an effect on donations to Samaritans?**

At this time it is too early to evaluate what the impact of the current financial climate will be but we are being cautious in our financial forecasts and closely monitoring income to identify any deterioration.

As a charity that offers vital emotional support to anyone in distress and despair we are more relevant than ever and consistently need funding to maintain our availability round-the-clock. We want to stress to our generous supporters that we rely on their continued support to maintain our life-saving service.

## **23) Is it true that Samaritans lost money as a result of the collapse of the Icelandic banks?**

No. It has been misreported that Samaritans has lost money as a result of the collapse of the Icelandic banks. In fact, we have lost no money and have no money at risk.

## **24) How can people contact Samaritans?**

For 24-hour support, you contact Samaritans in six ways:

Telephone: 08457 90 90 90 - UK  
1850 60 90 90 - Republic of Ireland  
Minicom- 08457 90 91 92  
Email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)  
Write to: Chris, PO Box 9090, Stirling, FK8 2SA  
Drop in to: your local branch – we have 201 around the UK and Republic of Ireland  
Log on to: [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

Patron: HRH The Prince of Wales

Chief Executive: Dominic Rudd

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18) *Samaritans' Branch Survey on the economic crisis*. November 2008

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