

POLICY BRIEFING

Alcohol Misuse and Suicide

Although many factors are involved in suicide, the link between alcohol misuse and suicide has been well established and alcohol consumption has a significant influence on suicidal behaviour. Many people who are struggling to cope with problems turn to alcohol. Samaritans believe that reducing the harm caused by alcohol is important and that just as the reasons people turn to alcohol are complex, so too are the answers to this problem. A range of initiatives are needed to address the underlying emotional distress people experience, to provide support to people struggling with alcohol addiction, and to reduce access to alcohol. This briefing sets out the public policy approach which Samaritans believes is needed to reduce the harm caused by alcohol to people in distress.

Summary of Key Points:

- The link between alcohol misuse and suicidal behaviour is well established. The risk of suicide is up to eight times greater when someone is abusing alcohol. Alcohol reduces inhibitions enough for an individual to act on suicidal thoughts and increases impulsivity, changes mood and deepens depression.
- The burden of alcohol related harm is carried by those in the most deprived groups in society. Samaritans has previously found that men are more likely to use drugs or alcohol in response to distress. There is a strong association between substance misuse and unemployment and lower socio-economic status on the one hand, and suicidal behaviour on the other.
- Samaritans believes that a combination of policies which address both individual behaviour and the culture which normalises harmful drinking is required. Initiatives need to address the underlying emotional distress people experience and provide support as well as reduce access to alcohol. The World Health Organisation has found that the alcohol policies most effective in reducing harms and costs are pricing and availability policies such as minimum pricing. We support evidence-based interventions to reduce alcohol related harm.
- Suicide prevention strategies across the UK and Ireland recognise the link between alcohol misuse and suicide prevention but alcohol strategies do not make strong links with suicide prevention. Samaritans believes that there must be explicit links between alcohol reduction and suicide prevention strategies and that both must address the relationships between alcohol consumption, masculinity, deprivation and suicide.

Alcohol misuse and suicide

The risk of suicide when a person is currently abusing alcohol is eight times greater than if they were not abusing alcoholⁱ. There is a strong link between alcohol use and thoughts of suicide, suicide attempts and completed suicides among young people under the age of 24.

Alcohol misuse can reduce inhibitions enough for an individual to act on suicidal thoughts which they might never have done if not under the influence of alcohol and can increase impulsivity, change mood and deepen depression. Self-harm or suicide can take place after just one drinking session. A person doesn't have to be a heavy drinker or even a regular drinker: just one occasion of heavy drinking can reduce inhibitions enough to self-harm or act on suicidal thoughts. Ongoing abuse of alcohol is itself a major contributory factor in depression and suicidal behaviourⁱⁱ

The burden of alcohol related harm is borne by the more deprived groups in society. There are progressively higher rates of alcohol related mortality in more deprived areas. In the United Kingdom, alcohol-related deaths increase with decreasing socioeconomic status, producing a social gradient. This gradient is steeper for men particularly in Scotland.

What is Samaritans calling for?

Samaritans believes that a combination of policies is required which address both individual behaviour and the culture which normalises harmful drinking. Initiatives need to address the underlying emotional distress people experience and provide support as well as reduce access to alcohol. We support interventions to reduce alcohol related harm which have been proven to be effective such as:

- regulating the marketing of alcoholic beverages (in particular to younger people);
- regulating and restricting availability of alcohol;
- enacting appropriate drink-driving policies;
- reducing demand through taxation and pricing mechanisms;
- raising awareness of public health problems caused by harmful use of alcohol and ensuring support for effective alcohol policies;
- providing accessible and affordable treatment for people with alcohol-use disorders; and
- implementing screening and brief interventions programmes for hazardous and harmful drinking in health services.

Samaritans believes that there must be explicit links between alcohol reduction and suicide prevention strategies and that both must address the relationships between alcohol consumption, masculinity, deprivation and suicide. On the ground, substance misuse services must respond to the suicide risk associated with alcohol and drug misuse, particularly for men, in the context of employment or financial difficulties, and relationship breakdown.

Samaritans is advocating for stronger linkage between strategies. Some of the ways in which this can be achieved include:

- Suicide prevention strategies should support policies which have been shown to reduce alcohol related harm such as minimum unit pricing
- Mandatory training on suicide prevention and intervention should be introduced for all addiction services staff and primary care staff
- Suicide risk should be assessed as part of brief interventions for harmful drinkers
- Integrating treatment and care strategies and services for alcohol-use disorders and comorbid conditions, including depression, and suicidal behaviour
- Strengthening the links between alcohol treatment and mental health services/ suicide prevention services
- Links should be developed between local alcohol support services and organisations which can provide support to people experiencing suicidal feelings such as Samaritans

What is Samaritans doing about alcohol misuse and suicide?

- Providing round the clock, non-judgemental, confidential support to people who are struggling to cope
- Signposting to alcohol support organisations where appropriate
- Raising awareness of the link between alcohol and suicide through our research and policy work
- Advocating for stronger links between alcohol and suicide prevention strategies both at a national and grassroots level
- Working with organisations that support people with alcohol problems to provide support for people who are in distress and may be at risk of suicide

ⁱ WHO Global Status Report on Alcohol (2004) Geneva: WHO]

ⁱⁱ Department of Health and Children (2005) Reach Out: National Strategy for Action on Suicide Prevention 2005-2014. Dublin: HSE