Taking the lead to reduce suicide

SAMARITANS
Scotland
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Our vision is that fewer people die by suicide
Introduction

We opened our first Scottish branch in Edinburgh in 1959. There are now more than 1,000 volunteers providing our service in 20 branches across the country.

Samaritans was founded in 1953 and today is contacted over 5 million times a year by phone, email, text, and in face-to-face meetings.

Around 18,750 volunteers in 201 branches throughout the UK and Ireland provide a service that never sleeps. Samaritans volunteers are there to support anyone feeling down, depressed or struggling to cope. We offer a confidential service where people can speak freely without fear of being judged.

We find that people will often talk to us about things that they might not share with anyone else, including suicidal feelings. For some people, talking to Samaritans is the first step in dealing with the worries they face. This can help them to develop the strength and confidence to talk more with others.

‘They are so helpful. If they hadn’t helped me, I probably wouldn’t be here today. I was so depressed. Thank you so much for being there when everything else had failed. I would recommend it to anyone.’

Samaritans caller
Suicide in Scotland

In Scotland around 800 people die by suicide every year, making it a major public health issue. In 2008* the Scottish rate for both male and females was higher than rates in other parts of the UK.

We use the latest research and evidence to inform our work.

Currently in Scotland**:

- For all age groups, men account for around three quarters of suicides every year. Suicide is a leading cause of death in those under the age of 35 years. For males, the highest rates were found in the age groups 25-34 and 35-44 years and for females they were highest in age groups 35-44 and 45-54 years.
- Suicide rates in the most deprived areas of Scotland are up to four times higher than in the least deprived areas. Between 2006-2010 the suicide rate was significantly higher in Glasgow City than in Scotland as a whole.
- Between 2000-02 and 2008-10 there has been a 14% fall in suicide rates overall (15% for males and 9% for females).
- While the evidence indicates that the rate is dropping, suicide remains a major public health issue in Scotland. Our commitment to reduce the number of lives lost to suicide is vital.

Talking about suicide helps

Sometimes people think that talking about suicide, or asking someone if they feel suicidal, will encourage a suicide attempt. However, talking to someone about suicide does not create or increase risk. Talking about suicide helps. The best way to identify the possibility of suicidal intent is to ask the question directly. Listening empathetically and talking openly about someone’s thoughts of suicide can be a great source of relief to them and can take away the immediate impulse.

The University of Nottingham conducted an independent two-year study of our service, which involved over 1,400 people.*** The research team carried out interviews with callers, studied email and text conversations, and observed volunteers in action at Samaritans branches. The research found that most people who contacted us felt better immediately afterwards, that the contact helped them to feel calmer and reduced their risk of suicide. 85% of participants said they would use the service again.

For more about how we use evidence to inform our work, you can contact us using the details on page 2.
Working in partnership: Choose Life

Samaritans plays a key part in delivering Choose Life, Scotland’s national strategy and action plan to prevent suicide.

Although we are perhaps best known for our 24-hour telephone helpline service, our activity covers many other areas both locally and nationally.

Every local authority in Scotland has responsibility for reducing suicide in its own area, bringing together statutory and voluntary organisations to deliver local actions. Samaritans’ Scottish branches work closely with Choose Life coordinators across Scotland.

Our branches bring valuable services into the community. For example, through Samaritans Community Outreach Team Scotland (SCOTS), where volunteers from branches all over Scotland come together to provide emotional support at festivals and events and through our work supporting young people in schools.

Samaritans’ partnership work in Scotland focuses on:

- understanding who and where our priority groups are and establishing the best ways to reach them
- developing relationships and gathering information and support to influence policy
- making people in Scotland more aware of the breadth of Samaritans’ service, our approach and the skills and work of our volunteers.

Samaritans works with partner organisations to prioritise suicide reduction strategies, and uses its reputation as a best-practice charity to raise awareness of the issues relating to suicide.

‘Encouraging people to talk about feeling suicidal is a significant part of our preventative efforts in Scotland. We believe anyone who is thinking about suicide or struggling to cope needs the opportunity to explore their feelings with someone who will listen to them, and Samaritans is NHS Health Scotland’s key partner, with the Choose Life National Programme, in working to help prevent suicide in Scotland.’

Margaret Burns, Chair, NHS Health Scotland
Other key national partners

Four more examples of how national partnerships complement our branch work and magnify our impact.

Supporting prisoners with our Listener scheme

Prisoners are at higher risk of suicide than the general population. Samaritans operates a Listener scheme in all adult prisons in Scotland. The scheme involves Samaritans volunteers training prisoners to become listeners, who then provide an in-prison service to their fellow inmates. It is a completely confidential service. Those who provide the Listener scheme service are ordinary prisoners who volunteer their time.

Here is a description of the experience of one of our listeners: ‘If I were to be completely candid, I had always envisioned Samaritans as the last port of call. Since becoming a listener, that narrow-minded view has changed. At first, I was – like many – sceptical about the function and effectiveness of such a scheme. However, more than two years have now passed and I have witnessed first-hand the difference we can make in the bleak world of prison.’

Ensuring high-quality reporting standards in the media

Samaritans produces guidelines for reporting and portraying suicide, for use by all media outlets, ranging from news coverage to film and television soap opera storylines. The guidelines encourage responsible reporting and support the media to raise awareness of the complexities of suicide and self-harm. Our guidelines recommend the inclusion of sources of support for members of the general public in coverage relating to suicide and self-harm.

A combination of grief, over identification and fixation on suicide can lead to an increase in suicidal behaviour amongst vulnerable people, particularly young adults. This phenomenon is known as social contagion. Research shows that the media plays an important role as it can be a means of transmitting or moderating the information which may lead to contagion.

Following a number of suicides within a small geographical area of Scotland over a short period of time in 2010, Samaritans worked locally and nationally with Choose Life to promote responsible, non-sensational media coverage in order to reduce the risk of encouraging further suicides.

Working closely with the Press Complaints Commission (PCC), in 2011 Samaritans and the PCC hosted a seminar for senior media professionals in Scotland. This brought them together with a panel of experts to discuss the reporting of suicide.
Protecting vulnerable people online

In addition to our own website and social networking spaces, we work closely with leading service providers to offer support in the online environment.

In November 2010 we joined with Google to launch a new search feature, publicising our helpline details when users make a suicide-related search online. This encourages people to get help from a safe source, rather than from other distressed people or malicious websites. Samaritans was able to secure the ‘Google One Box’ as we are the only emotional helpline that offers a locally based service across the whole of the UK and ROI.

We also formed a partnership with Facebook, which afterwards lets users in the UK tell Samaritans if they are worried about a friend, via Facebook’s Help Centre. Facebook can put us in touch with the friend to offer our support.

Reducing suicides with Network Rail

In 2010 Samaritans and Network Rail formed a partnership with the aim of reducing suicides on the railways, by 20 per cent over five years. Our programme of activity, which serves the majority of the Scottish population, includes:

- training for Network Rail and Train Operating Company staff in identifying potentially suicidal people, intervening in a potential suicide and dealing with the impact of suicide on railway staff
- placing Samaritans posters with helpline contact details at key stations around the country
- national communications campaigns targeting high-risk groups and increasing awareness of Samaritans for those feeling suicidal.

The lessons learned from this new partnership will help us produce a model that can be replicated in other high risk locations.
Our volunteers

The service that so many people rely on is delivered exclusively by our dedicated volunteers.

Over 1,000 people give their time to volunteer with Samaritans in Scotland, taking more than 2,500 calls each week. Volunteers come from all walks of life and range in age from early 20s upwards. Samaritans invests heavily in training for our volunteers to ensure that we provide the best-quality service possible to those in need of support.

Once selected, new volunteers go through a full training course, run for several hours a week for up to eight weeks. Only after this is completed are volunteers, under supervision, ready to start taking calls.

Initial training is then followed by a six-month probationary period which includes an introduction to other aspects of Samaritans’ work, and support from an assigned mentor. Experienced volunteers are also required to maintain their skills by a programme of continuous learning each year.

Volunteering time worth £3m

Although the benefit of human contact cannot be measured in monetary terms, in 2010, our volunteers contributed around 300,000 hours of their time. This equates to more than £3 million if the same service were offered by paid staff.* However, the beneficial impact on health and wellbeing is impossible to quantify.

Greg Burgess, Choose Life Coordinator for North Lanarkshire, says:

’Samaritans volunteers locally and nationally are some of the most helpful and dedicated people I’ve ever met. The training delivered at schools in the area is of a highly professional quality and the feedback from the teachers and young people is wonderful. For me, Samaritans volunteers have made my work in suicide prevention so much easier and I feel that without the support of these volunteers the Choose Life work would be a greater challenge.’

‘Samaritans are invaluable and do great work. If I hadn’t contacted them I could possibly be dead now. It’s a security to know that there is someone there 24 hours a day in case you need them. My crises never happen between 9 and 5.’

Samaritans caller

*S Based on all active volunteers, volunteering an average of five hours a week over a year, based on the average hourly rate taken from the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings 2010, Office of National Statistics, December 2010.
‘As a Samaritans volunteer you are highly trained and well supported – but most of all our work is incredibly valuable and really rewarding.’

Samaritans volunteer
Angus MacLeod, Chair of Western Isles branch on providing support to a remote community:

‘The Western Isles branch is Scotland’s smallest, with 13 listening volunteers. Our branch has strong partnerships with many groups in the local community and we work hard to raise the profile of Samaritans. Last year, the branch set up a support group for people bereaved by suicide. Starting with just one caller, the numbers have continued to grow and now group members meet once a month.

Despite our small size and isolated location, there is a strong team spirit among volunteers. We see each other regularly, know each other well and help to support one another.’

Joyce Beattie, Volunteer Representative for Scotland, on ensuring the quality of our support to communities:

‘From my 10 years with Samaritans, including my time as Chair of the Dundee branch, I know that volunteers come from all walks of life and join for many different reasons. Our selection criteria ensure that we recruit and train each volunteer in a way that gives them the understanding and knowledge to support our callers in a confidential manner without judging anyone.

By being available around the clock and developing new initiatives such as our service in schools and hospitals, we make sure that we are available for anyone that needs us.’

Karen McCoss, Chair of Perth branch, on using evidence to focus the branch’s efforts:

‘Our branch has strong links with Choose Life in Tayside and, following their analysis of local suicide trends, we now have a better understanding of the circumstances surrounding those who take their own lives.

Our area has a lower than average number of deaths by suicide compared to most other parts of Scotland, but by using this information we are able to focus our work more effectively on those at higher risk of suicide, including those who live within the more deprived areas of Perth and Kinross.’
The difference you make

As a charity we are grateful to the many individuals, companies, trusts and the Scottish Government for their generous support. Our volunteers would not be able to deliver our service without it.

The majority of our income comes from donations and legacies. This means we can:

- continue to provide our vital service
- develop new initiatives to ensure we are always able to offer callers the best possible support
- work on campaigns that raise awareness and extend our reach.

‘Samaritans are really the only people I feel I can speak to openly and frankly about my problems, without being judged or interrupted or feel like I’m bothering someone. Both times I called, afterwards I felt like a huge weight had been taken off my shoulders. I felt ready to work through and face my problems rather than just burying them.’

Samaritans caller

For every £1 you give, we provide £6.50 in service value.
Our branches in Scotland

Contact us
If you would like to support Samaritans in Scotland – by becoming a volunteer, funding our work or helping in any other way, we would be pleased to hear from you.

Please contact us at:
First Floor, Spectrum House
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Visit: www.samaritans.org/scotland

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2. Orkney
3. Caithness
4. Western Isles
5. Inverness
6. Elgin
7. Aberdeen
8. Dundee
9. Perth
10. Correspondence Branch (Stirling)
11. Kirkcaldy
12. Dunfermline
13. Falkirk
14. Edinburgh
15. Inverclyde
16. Glasgow
17. Hamilton
18. Borders
19. Ayrshire
20. Dumfries

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