

Helping organisations when they need to communicate suicide

Please be aware that this guide contains information and advice on a highly sensitive subject that some people may find distressing. Support and resources are available at the end of the guide.

Why we've prepared this guide

// Communicating the death of a colleague within an organisation is really tough. Finding out that a colleague has taken their own life, or that the death is being treated as a possible suicide, can make it even more difficult.

According to the Office of National Statistics, there were 5,224 suicides registered in England and Wales in 2020. And every day, Samaritans respond to around 10,000 calls for help. As such, many of our PR colleagues find themselves having to communicate the subject of mental health and suicide within the workplace.

We've produced this guide to support our PR and comms colleagues who might have to deal with this highly sensitive topic. Our ambition is that this guide will support you practically, and help you with your own mental health and wellbeing.

The guide provides practical advice on how to help organisations communicate suicide. It also looks at the wider issue of talking about suicide alongside mental health.

We've worked closely with people and organisations affected by suicide and are grateful to be carrying their voices and experiences as we make recommendations and offer advice.

Due to the enormity of this subject, we couldn't cover all aspects. Therefore, at the end of this guide, we've included a list of resources and suicide prevention organisations. We hope it helps. **//**

Rachel Royall

Chair of the CIPR Health group and IoIC Fellow

Section 1:

Preparing a suicide response plan

Like any emergency or crisis, having a response plan already in place will be an enormous load off your shoulders and provide immediate support to your teams. It won't cover everything, and will need to be adaptable depending on the circumstances, but it will help you respond quickly to a possible death by suicide.

Such a response plan is called a 'postvention'. It's used to explain the organised response

following a suicide. Broader than just communication, a postvention plan helps people to deal with grief and loss, and to get back to some sense of normality.

A suicide postvention plan might not be a standalone document; it might be part of occupational health or wellbeing policies, or part of a wider scenario planning for potentially challenging situations. Your communication response will be part of this broader plan.

Defining roles

Best practice communication planning will help you to define key roles. While the communications department is responsible for managing the communications, this will involve a matrix team that includes other named individuals who may be responsible for talking to those affected and managing other aspects of dealing with the issue.

The suicide postvention team could include the Managing Director or Chief Executive Officer, the line manager of the deceased, communications and HR personnel, suicide bereavement counsellors and mental health first aiders.

Your plan should cover, for example:

- Who needs to be communicated with and when?
- Who needs to sign off communication content?
- Who is the best person to make any necessary announcements?
- Who will liaise with family and next of kin?
- How will communication be managed on different channels, for example, with the media and on social media?
- Who will support employees affected by the suicide?
- What happens next?

Being prepared with scenario planning

While the circumstances surrounding a suicide will vary greatly, a facilitated desktop scenario to test procedures will help to ensure that everyone involved is aware of their roles and responsibilities.

Working through such a scenario could in itself be troubling for you and other people you are proposing to get involved. So, make sure you feel comfortable to be part of this scenario. Also, explain, in advance, the nature of the discussion before you begin so people are fully prepared.

People's responses to the exercise will help you determine who to involve and what their roles should be. It will also help you to determine who your stakeholders are and who you or they need to talk to.

See page 10 for guidance around your own wellbeing in this situation and use this information if someone responds unexpectedly.

Section 2:

Responding immediately when a member of staff is thought to have taken their own life


There are various ways in which you may hear about the sudden death of a colleague. It's bound to come as a shock. However, as with any issue management, you will need to act quickly. News of a possible suicide can spread rapidly with rumours and speculations that can cause distress to colleagues and relatives.

Responding immediately checklist

- 01** Establish what has happened and who knows what
- 02** Bring together the suicide postvention team
- 03** Notify board and senior management
- 04** Liaise with HR and line manager regarding contacting the family
- 05** Liaise with emergency services if death has taken place on site
- 06** Decide who will talk to those closest to the employee first
- 07** Agree what they will say and how they will respond to questions
- 08** Notify all other staff and other stakeholders in writing
- 09** Encourage employees to seek counselling if necessary
- 10** Operate an open-door policy to those people affected by emotional distress

Who knows what?

As the communication lead, the first thing you need to establish is who knows what. The following questions can help.

- How did you find out?
 - Who told you?
 - What did they tell you?
 - Who else have they spoken to?
 - Has anyone in the organisation been in touch with the next of kin?
 - Are the police and other authorities involved?
 - Who do you need to work with internally?
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Respecting the family's wishes

Every situation is different. It could be that a member of the family will alert your organisation to the death. Or you might be made aware of the situation through a third party, such as the police. You may even have been alerted via social media.

The important thing is to ensure that nothing is communicated from your organisation until you're certain the family are aware of the death.

How the news is delivered

If you are made aware of the suicide before the family has been told, for example if the incident happens in the workplace, do not inform the family directly. This will be done by the police or another appropriate authority trained in how to deliver such news.

Once you have been informed, there are details you'll need to help guide the communication response. You'll therefore need to liaise with the person in your organisation who'll be communicating with the family or next of kin.

Named family liaison person

Speaking with the family and adhering to their wishes is one of the most important parts of the plan. There will be a named family liaison person and they may need some support from a comms and media perspective.

When speaking with the family or next of kin, the appointed person should express their and your organisation's condolences, and discuss how the family would like the death to be communicated, for example, with colleagues and potentially the media.

Asking questions

Asking such questions at this early stage might feel uncomfortable. But they are necessary if you are to avoid upsetting loved ones further by not conforming with their wishes.

Some questions the appointed person might want to ask:

- What would you like us to say to colleagues?
- Would it be acceptable to send cards and/or flowers?
- Are there any religious or cultural practices we need to be aware of?
- What would you like us to do with their personal belongings?
- How do you feel about colleagues getting in touch with the family directly?
- How would you like to deal with queries from the media?
- Would you like work colleagues to attend the funeral and, if so, can we share the details in any communication?

Helping the family with social media

You might also want to support the family on how to manage their social media. Alert them to the fact that journalists might look for content (for example, photographs) and they could also try to contact family and friends via social media. If appropriate, and depending on the public profile of the death, individuals may need support in securing social media settings.

Liaising with the police and other authorities

There are several reasons why you may need to liaise with the police and other authorities. Someone from your organisation might have reported that the deceased didn't show up for work. The death might have taken place at work, or be linked to the organisation in some way.

Whatever the reason, someone from communications should be responsible for helping the authorities with their enquiries both immediately after the death and in relation to any ongoing investigation or future inquest.

Operational communications

If the death has taken place at work, an area may be closed off for several days. Therefore, liaison with site offices and operational colleagues is important.

You may need to support site teams with physical communication, posters and signposting, for example, if they need to reroute staff, visitors or deliveries.

If this affects how members of the public access your premises, you should make sure information is updated on the website. You might also need a plan for when an area is reopened.

Talking to the immediate team

In your postvention plan, you may have already decided who should make the organisation-wide announcement and how. While there isn't one right way, it's common practice for the deceased's manager to gather the immediate team together to deliver the news personally.

Your postvention plan should also take into consideration how to contact remote teams if they can't be spoken to in person.

At this stage, all you may be able to say is that 'name of colleague' has died or has been found dead – even if the media has already reported the story as a suicide. See section below about how to refer to the manner of the death.

How to refer to the manner of the death

Unless the death happened in extreme circumstances where others were present, it's unlikely you'll be able to use the word 'suicide' in your early communications.

The cause of death might not have been established yet and, even then, an inquest will need to be held before a suicide verdict is given. This can take several weeks or months. In the interim, your communications could refer to a 'possible suicide' if agreed with the family.


The deceased's manager should make it clear that a wider announcement will be sent to all colleagues shortly – and that the death is under investigation. As such, the team should be conscious of what they say to others until more is known and support is available.

Supporting the team's responses

The manager should also be prepared for the team's reaction. Some members may have been very close to the deceased and become upset or distressed. Different people will have different responses to the news. But all responses will need to be managed and supported.

Your postvention plan should cover how people can get help both immediately and in the days, weeks and months ahead.

See page 16 for information on help and resources available to support colleagues.



Making a wider announcement internally

Once someone from your organisation has spoken with the family, agreed what can and cannot be said, and spoken to those closest to the deceased, you can make a wider announcement.

The scale of that announcement will vary depending on your organisation. Smaller organisations may choose to make an announcement to the wider organisation directly; global organisations may choose to make local announcements.

The family may request that the death is not disclosed as a suicide. However, if information has already spread through informal communications, you risk appearing untrustworthy if you don't acknowledge the death as a suicide.

Encouraging employees to seek support

People respond very differently to the news of the death of a colleague by possible suicide. Make sure there is support available and that people know where to go for help if they're struggling. If you have an Employee Assistance Programme, let people know about it. As much as possible, encourage management to operate an open-door policy to those people affected by emotional distress.

Reducing the risk of contagion

When making a wider announcement, do not refer to the method of suicide, even if known, as evidence suggests that this increases the risk of imitation. This imitation is referred to as contagion: when the death of a colleague by possible suicide triggers suicidal thoughts and feelings in some already vulnerable individuals.

See page 16 for information and resources available to help vulnerable people.

Maintaining confidentiality

You should tell the family that you'll do what you can to maintain confidentiality, for example, reminding people that while it's human to want answers, speculation can be hurtful to loved ones. However, you may also want to say that certain elements may be out of your control.

Making an announcement in writing

Making a wider announcement is usually done in writing. As well as including the necessary facts about the death, it should contain advice on what to do and who to contact if people are upset, concerned or want to help in some way.

Making an announcement on an online platform

You may want to consider turning off the comment options on online announcements to avoid people posting rumours or comments that could trigger depression or anxiety in others. If you do this, you can set up a separate section or process for tributes.

Using the right language

How you communicate a suicide will influence how people respond.

You need to be as open and honest as possible without sensationalising what has happened or normalising suicide as a reasonable response to a mental health issue. Make it clear in your communications that anyone experiencing difficulties can seek and get help. You need to respect the privacy of the deceased and the rights of the family. And you need to be aware of contagion as referenced earlier.

Statements generally include:

- Condolences to family and friends
- What support is available for those affected
- Any immediate changes in work schedules
- A commitment to providing a future opportunity to pay respects

Statements should only provide confirmation of suicide if:

- The family approves
- The suicide took place in public. It would be disingenuous, otherwise
- The coroner has confirmed a suicide verdict

Even when you can refer to the death as suicide, you need to be mindful of the language you use and do not mention the method of death. The following guidelines have been set by Samaritans.

Do say	Don't say
Suicide	Commit(ted) suicide
Taken his/her/their own life	Suicide victim
Ended his/her/their own life	Successful or failed suicide attempt
Death by suicide	Cry for help
Attempted suicide	At peace/died instantly
Suicide attempt	Suicide epidemic/wave

Please note that some statements you might perceive as positive should not be used. For example, saying the person is now 'at peace' or 'in a better place' can trigger (or increase the likelihood of influencing) contagion.

Handling external communications

Within your response plan, as well as a list of internal stakeholders, you should include a list of external people and who in the organisation is responsible for communicating with them.

These could include:

- Former employees
- Contractors
- Clients
- Suppliers
- Police
- Media
- Health and Safety Executive (HSE)

You might want several different people from your organisation to talk to different stakeholders.

You should note who needs to be contacted personally, rather than allowing them to hear the news through gossip or the media. These generally include clients and suppliers with whom the deceased had a close working relationship.

Ensure everyone has a consistent narrative and is coached in what can and cannot be disclosed, bearing in mind the wishes of the family.

Let people know when you'll be able to provide further information and signpost them to support and/or to whom any further questions can be directed in the interim.

Reporting the death of an employee to the HSE

In the UK, an employer is required by law to report a work-related death of an employee to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). However, employers do not have to report the death of an employee by suicide or possible suicide.

In fact, the HSE reporting rules specifically exclude suicides from the requirements on employers to report deaths that arise from work. You should ask the police or coroner's office for guidance on what you should report to the HSE.

You might also need to consider what to report if the family and/or colleagues believe that work played a part in influencing the person to take their own life.

Issuing holding statements

It's common practice in PR to prepare several holding statements (including press releases and media comments) to cover a range of potential crises. However, as the circumstances surrounding a death by possible suicide will vary enormously, it might not be practical to prepare a detailed holding statement in advance.

As soon as is practical, you might want to issue a holding statement covering what you can say. In line with the family's wishes, this might be similar to the announcement you prepared for key external stakeholders. It could include reference to working with family and partners, supporting staff, and your role in any investigation or public inquest.

Working with the media

It's unlikely that you'll need to contact the media about the death proactively. If the media have been informed by other agencies, you may not need to say anything. Establish with the family and internal stakeholders whether you do need to make an announcement.

However, you may need to report the death in a public way. For example, if you are a public sector organisation and your board meetings are in public you may need to report steps that have been taken following the death.

Commenting by choice

To avoid generating more media stories about the death, it's better to only comment if necessary.

However, if the media are already aware, you might be asked for a comment. Or, if the deceased is a senior or well-known figure within the community or industry, you might want to send out a statement expressing your organisation's condolences. Work with the family to approve this.

This scenario will vary depending on the circumstances of the death and your organisation. Scenario planning ahead of the issue will help in these matters.

Samaritans' media guidelines

If the death is being reported as a suicide and a statement is deemed necessary, there are some very useful guidelines on writing about suicide on the Samaritans' website.

See page 16 for a link to 'Samaritans media guide for reporting suicide'.

Advising staff how to respond to media enquiries

Be aware that some media outlets will contact staff directly, regardless of any official comment. They might try to do this via social media or telephone, or they might try to enter the workplace to speak to colleagues or take photos of where an incident took place. This can be extremely distressing.

Reminding the media of your protocols, and explaining to staff and security what to do in this situation will be helpful. Advise staff and security they need to direct any queries to your media or communications department. This will ensure that queries and responses can be dealt with in line with the family's wishes.

Handling social media

Social media can become a focal point for colleagues, family and friends to pay their respects and share memories. This can be a positive outlet. However, it can also become a vehicle for expressing anger, guilt or blame. And it can increase the risk of contagion.

Therefore, don't actively post comments from the organisation, but do keep monitoring what is being said and by whom.

Expressions of suicidal intentions should be addressed immediately so that those providing counselling are aware. Ensure you know to whom you should report any concerning posts.

Looking after your own mental wellbeing

The first few hours and days after the death of a colleague by a possible suicide will be emotionally draining. Try to respond quickly, keep a level head and guide others on what to say and do.


It's important to keep your physical strength up. Eat and sleep as well as you can. Don't let guilt or regret stop you from taking care of yourself.

It's natural to respond to the death of a suicide with feelings of confusion, anger and guilt. But spotting signs that someone is at risk of suicide can be hugely difficult. And blaming yourself because you feel you could have done more won't help you or the immediate situation.

If you are a manager of people in your comms team, monitor their wellbeing and encourage them to access support as appropriate.

Do be honest about how you're feeling. Expressing your emotions openly won't make you look weak. But it will help you deal with an extremely difficult period.

You might feel others require counselling ahead of you – especially if they witnessed the death or were very close to the deceased – but you too should talk to someone as soon as is practically possible.



Section 3:

Managing communications during the weeks and months afterwards

Once the initial processes have been put in place and you've communicated news of the death with all necessary stakeholders, you will need to manage the next stages.

These could include managing social media chatter, communicating the status on inquests and investigations, and dealing with memorials and anniversaries.

Communications with the family in the weeks and months following the event will be important too. Establish who in your organisation will stay in touch. Check with the family if that is what they want and, if so, how they would like future contact to take place.

Managing communications during the weeks and months afterwards checklist

- 01** Continue to talk about suicide in the workplace
- 02** Discuss how to pay tribute to the deceased
- 03** Be open and honest about multiple suicides and attempted suicides
- 04** Respond to ongoing media and social media commentary
- 05** Reinforce trust by making senior management visible
- 06** Prepare for anniversaries and other milestones

See page 16 for a list of support services and resources.

Continuing to talk about mental health and suicide in the workplace

During the next phase, you will need to be empathetic and balance the need to return to some sense of normality with giving people time to reflect and pause.

Remind staff where they can go for help if they're struggling, and ensure that line managers, senior management and HR personnel are available. If you have an Employee Assistance Programme, make sure this is well publicised and promoted.

You may want to work with your HR department to communicate policies related to wellbeing and on procedures dealing with issues such as harassment, bullying and work-related stress.

Supporting the healing process

People come to terms with the death of a colleague by suicide at different rates. But the process is made easier if their employer stays connected with them through support systems and promotes good mental and physical wellbeing.

Continue to work with HR and line managers to monitor people's response and consider featuring personal wellbeing and resilience stories on your intranet or in newsletters.

There are many positive case studies available to share with colleagues. These include those featured in the Business in the Community document 'Crisis management in the event of a suicide: a postvention toolkit for employers' and in the July 2021 issue of 'Voice'.

See page 16 for links to documents containing case studies and a list of support services and resources.

Paying tribute to the deceased: preparing for anniversaries and other milestones

Many people within your organisation will want to honour the deceased. In whatever way they choose to pay tribute to their colleague, their actions need to be in line with the family's wishes.

Some colleagues may want to attend the funeral, some might want to share memories and photos on your news platforms, and others might want to 'do something positive' by getting involved with fundraising or speaking about suicide and mental health within the organisation and at conferences and events.


Looking after vulnerable people

There may be certain dates or events that affect some employees more than others, especially those close to the deceased. These include the anniversary of the death, the completion of a significant project, the deceased's birthday, the annual work picnic or Christmas party.

It's important to take care with such memorials. Any activity should consider both the wishes of those who want to remember the deceased and those for whom the memory might increase the risk of imitating suicidal behaviour.

Ensure that any vulnerable people have the option to participate or not – and are supported in whichever decision they make. Make it clear in your communications that anyone experiencing difficulties can seek and get help.

Your aim should be to remember the person but not glamourise or romanticise the way they died. Give people a safe platform to express their fond memories but encourage them not to re-live the details of the death.



Dealing with multiple suicides and attempted suicides

There are several reasons why certain organisations experience a higher number of attempted suicides and deaths by suicide.

The workplace might be a particularly stressful environment. And certain job-related features such as lone working, low pay, low job security or freely available alcohol can also increase the risk of suicide in vulnerable people.

If there has been (or there's a likelihood of) multiple suicides or attempted suicides, this should be addressed in your suicide postvention plan. There should also be a robust prevention plan in place.

You shouldn't shy away from talking about mental health and suicide in your communications. You should liaise with your operational, HR and legal teams to find out how the organisation is addressing these issues. You should then communicate their responses in your internal communications programmes.

Handling ongoing media and social media commentary

Both mainstream and social media tend to move on quickly after the initial flurry of speculation surrounding a suicide. However, commentary may start up again on the news or publication of the coroner's inquest. So, you may want to reiterate your media policy of directing all queries via the communications team.

Managing communications surrounding the inquest

Be prepared with statements covering what you can say at this stage. This can include expressing your condolences to family and friends, and saying you might not be able to comment further until after the inquest.

Inquests are held in public with evidence provided by witnesses. The process may be distressing for some, particularly those called to give evidence. They may need help to be prepared, especially if you are expecting media to be present. So, make sure those affected know how to access mental health and wellbeing support.

The media will most likely attend the inquest hearing and report on the legal proceedings. If the inquest is likely to attract problematic news reporting (for example, an unusual method of suicide) it can be helpful to contact the Samaritans' media advice team on mediaadvice@samaritans.org.

Section 4:

Talking about suicide in the workplace

In this context, the role of the communicator is two-fold: to help your employer understand the duty of care it owes its workforce, and to use communication tools to talk safely about mental health and suicide in the workplace.

Whether they've experienced a workplace suicide or not, it's important for organisations to talk about mental health and suicide prevention – and put measures in place to deal with such issues.

Talking about suicide in the workplace checklist

- 01** Help senior management and board to exercise their duty of care
- 02** Maintain an ongoing conversation about mental health
- 03** Provide warnings about the nature of the content
- 04** Feature positive content and case studies on your platforms
- 05** Provide 'how to' guidelines for colleagues
- 06** Support the wider issue externally
- 07** Be aware that talking about mental health is an ongoing issue

Helping your employer understand its duty of care

As well as supporting the physical and mental wellbeing of their staff, employers need to go further and engage staff in open conversations about mental health, including the risk of suicide.

As the communicator, encourage your organisation to:

- Make a board level commitment to understanding the risk of workplace suicide
- Provide a platform for those who want to talk about mental health
- Train managers to understand, recognise the signs of and manage the risk of suicide
- Include suicide postvention as part of crisis management
- Have a detailed plan of support for employees in the event of a suicide at work
- Share learnings from their own experience where applicable

Talking safely about mental health and suicide

When writing or talking about mental health and suicide, you need to be mindful of what you say and how you say it. You need to be considerate with the language and terminology you use.

See page 8 on information on using appropriate language.

Making people aware that mental health support is an ongoing issue

It's not enough to communicate well in response to a death or incident, or to take part in 'awareness days' and then do nothing the rest of the year. You need to actively involve your organisation in good mental health practice both inside and outside of the organisation.

You can write thought leadership pieces on the subject, offer speakers at or attend conferences, contribute to journalist's requests for case studies, mark major events such as World Suicide Prevention Day and World Mental Health Day, and encourage employees to get involved with mental health charities.

Here are some useful guidelines on practical approaches:

- 01** Provide warnings about the nature of the content at the beginning of articles, web pages, talks and events to allow people to opt out if the subject is likely to trigger a distressing response
- 02** Talk about the wider issues around good mental health and suicide prevention – point people towards support both inside and outside the organisation
- 03** Tell stories about people who have come through a suicidal crisis – but do not include details of suicidal attempts and methods
- 04** Feature mental health charities in your communications and encourage employees to get involved as volunteers, fundraisers or donors
- 05** Provide employees with guidelines on how to spot the signs of depression and poor mental health, or how to behave with a colleague who's returned to work after a period of poor mental health or bereavement
- 06** Actively involve your organisation in good mental health practice both inside and outside of the organisation – keep finding or creating opportunities to contribute to conversations about mental health and suicide

Section 5:

Where to find more help and information

The subject of suicide is an enormous one; this document provides a framework for communicating with various stakeholders following the death of a colleague by suicide or possible suicide. But there are many other resources on the wider issue available.

For more information on other aspects of suicide, particularly suicide prevention, please refer to the following. Also, please make your managers and colleagues aware of these resources.

General employee welfare

Employee Assistance Professionals Association
eapa.org.uk

Unmind
unmind.com

Bereavement support services

**Support after Suicide Partnership
 (online hub of support services)**
supportaftersuicide.org.uk

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide
uksobs.org

Cruse
cruse.org.uk

Mental health and suicide prevention

Samaritans
samaritans.org

National Suicide Prevention Alliance (NSPA)
nspa.org.uk

Zero Suicide Alliance
zerosuicidealliance.com

Mind
mind.org.uk

CALM
thecalmzone.net

Support for families with children

Winston's Wish
winstonswish.org

Simon Says
simonsays.org.uk

Useful guides and case studies

**Crisis management in the event of a suicide:
 a postvention toolkit for employers**
bitc.org.uk/toolkit/crisis-management-in-the-event-of-a-suicide-a-postvention-toolkit-for-employers/

Samaritans media guide for reporting suicide
media.samaritans.org/documents/Media_Guidelines_FINAL.pdf

Responding to suicide risk in the workplace
cipd.co.uk/knowledge/culture/well-being/responding-to-suicide-risk-in-workplace#gref

Are you really okay? Portraits told to Rob Jones
 Pages 36 to 47 of Voice July 2021: wypartnership.co.uk/application/files/4916/2332/0305/36-47_Voice_July_21_Suicide_feature_full.pdf

CIPR support

Mental health support services
cipr.co.uk/CIPR/Our_work/Policy/Mental_Health.aspx

Skills guide: the role of social media in crisis issues management
cipr.co.uk/cipr/CIPR/Learn_Develop/Resources/The_role_of_social_media_in_crisis_issues_management.aspx

Skills guide: crisis planning
cipr.co.uk/cipr/CIPR/Learn_Develop/Resources/Crisis_Planning.aspx