

Step by Step

Memorials information ←

This guidance forms part of Samaritans' Step by Step resources for communities working with and supporting young people. Step by Step is a Samaritans service offering support, resources and practical advice for adults who work with young people and their communities, that have been impacted by an attempted or suspected suicide.

If you would like to find out more about this service:

✉ stepbystep@samaritans.org ☎ 0808 168 2528

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The death of a student or staff member can be felt by everyone in the school community. If the person took their own life it can intensify this impact and raise questions that are difficult to answer.

Following any death, there is a natural wish to pay tribute to the person who has died. Following a death by suicide, there is a need for careful planning and management of any memorial in the school or elsewhere. Memorials should be handled with great care and sensitivity. It is important to acknowledge the need for the memorial but also to recognise the potential risk of glamorising or sensationalising a death rumoured or known to be by suicide. This can unintentionally increase the risk of others taking their own lives.

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Temporary memorials

Some people will want to mark the death with flowers, toys, messages or other mementos. The school can take partial control of this by choosing the place where a memorial is sited. Some schools have found it helpful to have the memorial in a public place within the school, perhaps in the assembly area, chapel or another open space. This will allow staff to monitor the tributes which are placed there, to support any students gathering there, or to move them on gently when this is appropriate.

Deciding when to remove the temporary memorial is always difficult, as it carries the risk of evoking a negative reaction. One way to mitigate this risk is for a senior staff member to discuss the removal of items in the memorial with the family of the person who has died, before the flowers, mementos and messages fade or become damaged.

To encourage a healthy grieving process within the school community, some practitioners have recommended a policy of allowing temporary memorials for no more than two weeks, or removing them soon after the funeral or memorial service.

It is important to communicate clearly with all members of the school about the wishes of the family and when the memorial will be removed. Any further tributes should then be taken down at the end of each day.

Permanent memorials

Vulnerable young people may be at risk of interpreting any memorial as giving positive attention to suicide as a viable choice for dealing with problems.

Many schools have a 'quiet' area eg a space outside or a garden, where students can go when they need some time to themselves. Some schools also use this place as a memorial garden to remember anyone related to the school who has died.

This helps to avoid elevation of suicide over other forms of death. Grieving students could be encouraged to use this area when they feel they need it. Staff would be able to monitor the area and offer support if necessary.

Can online memorials help?

The period following a suicide is one that can involve a great deal of trauma and confusion. There is no right or wrong way for your pupils to react following a suicide in a school community. Some may be more willing to talk than others about the death. Some may prefer to discuss their feelings outside of the school community.

Young people increasingly use online resources and social networking sites in their daily lives and this may well be a way in which young people feel comfortable in discussing their thoughts and feelings.

The information below will give you the basic information you need to educate your students about the potential risks of using the internet and social networking sites to help deal with a suicide.

Social media is now the common place location of an online memorial after the death of a person. Most of these are established by a friend and are unmoderated (meaning there are no controls over what is posted), which makes them effectively unmanageable. While these memorial sites seem to be an important part of today's grieving process and a focal point for both grief and support, they can also attract inappropriate comments. These could include accusations of bullying and deliberately inflammatory comments which can evoke very strong reactions, far beyond the virtual world.

While controlling or closing these sites is almost impossible and would likely be counterproductive, some schools have had success in mitigating these risks by asking a group of senior students, supported by staff, to offer support to the site's founder in reviewing and moderating any material posted to the site. In doing so, inappropriately-worded comments or direct accusations can be referred back to the person posting them and more appropriate wording or approach can be used. This can also help the school to identify and respond to those who could be at risk themselves and offer guidance with sources and offers of support.

Final thoughts...

There is a delicate balance between celebrating and protecting the memory of the person who has died and supporting friends and family in their feelings after the event. For many young people, this could be their first close experience of death or sudden death and they may not know how they should respond. Staff and parents are often looked to for examples of how to respond appropriately at such a time.

They can reduce students' anxiety by helping them recognise that there is no right or wrong way to grieve and that talking openly can help. It's important to reassure young people that what they are feeling is normal.

Samaritans are available round the clock, every single day of the year. We can help you talk through whatever is troubling you, find the answers that are right for you and offer support: **116 123** (this number is free to call), email jo@samaritans.org

Social media

Schools often feel that social media is out of their control. Social media and the internet enable messages to reach a huge audience immediately. It may be that students, parents and staff first hear news of a possible suicide through social media. It is very common for RIP pages to be set up immediately following the death of a student or staff member. These can be a helpful place to share memories, support one another and share details of funerals. Bereaved families have found that it can be a way of keeping in touch with the deceased's friends. **Some points for consideration to enable a safe response to a suicide and reduce the risk of contagion are:**

For the school to:

- send out messages signposting to support both in and out of school
- send out supportive messages to the community emphasising inclusion
- set up a memorial page that is monitored by staff.

To monitor social media for:

- messages of concern from students
- rumour or speculation
- details of the method of suicide
- messages that suggest suicide was a positive outcome
- messages that indicate someone identifies closely with the deceased
- any concerns that need to be responded to – to dispel myths, identify vulnerable young people and report and remove offensive comments.

To encourage students to:

- send positive supportive messages
- not collude with rumour
- report any concerns with friend's posts or messages to staff
- report any impromptu gatherings to staff.

Someone to talk to – people contact us when things are getting to them. They don't have to be suicidal.

We're always here – round the clock, every single day of the year.

A safe place – as volunteers we're ordinary people who give others the space to talk about what's troubling them.

People can be themselves – whoever they are, however they feel, whatever life's done to them.

We're a charity – it's the public's kind donations that help fund our service.

 [samaritans.org](https://www.samaritans.org)

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