

POLICY BRIEFING

Bereavement by suicide

Around 6,500 people die by suicide each year across the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland, with each of these deaths likely to cause intense grief and emotional distress to those closest to the person who has died such as parents, siblings, partners and friends, but often also having an impact on the wider community. National governments and statutory services can act to improve the support and information that is available for people who have been directly affected by suicide and a wide range of support services is also provided by the voluntary sector. This briefing sets out the public policy approach that Samaritans believes needs to be taken to most effectively support people who have been bereaved by suicide.

Summary of Key Points:

- Samaritans are aware that the emotions experienced after bereavement by suicide can differ considerably from other types of death and that the shock can be especially acute and complex. There is also evidence that people who have been bereaved by suicide can themselves be at a higher risk of suicide.
- The availability of services aimed specifically at people who have been bereaved by suicide can be too limited in some parts of the UK & ROI. Samaritans believes that national suicide prevention strategies should include an objective to support people bereaved by suicide, promoting cross-government working and local commissioning of services where appropriate, in order to improve the availability of services.
- Avoiding practices that could inadvertently cause harm must be an important aim of providing services to people who have been bereaved by suicide and so quality standards should be developed and used by service providers and commissioners.
- The signposting of people who have recently been bereaved by suicide to support services and to useful resources such as *Help is at Hand* could be improved. This requires support from a wide range of organisations, most notably coroners' offices, the police, health and social care services, funeral directors and faith organisations.

Improving support for people who have been bereaved by suicide

While bereavement of any kind can cause intense feelings of grief and loss, Samaritans is aware that bereavement following a suicide can be particularly traumatic because of the often sudden and unexpected nature of the death and because of the knowledge that it was a deliberate act. People who are bereaved by suicide are left coping not just with loss, but also with painful questions about whether the death could have been prevented, which can cause feelings of anger, guilt and despair. The stigma that can still be associated with death by suicide can mean that people who have been bereaved by suicide can find it more difficult to talk about the death with the people around them sometimes leading to a sense of embarrassment and social isolation. In addition to the traumatic emotional consequences that people bereaved by suicide suffer, we are also aware that research demonstrates that they are themselves at increased risk of dying by suicide.¹

Each of the nations in the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland now has a national suicide prevention strategy, the purpose of which is to establish a framework, led by government and supported by a wide range of partner agencies and organisations, to implement a full range of known interventions can be implemented in a systematic way.

The most recent Suicide Prevention Strategy for England, published in 2012, includes an Area for Action which aims to “provide better information and support to those bereaved or affected by suicide”. The strategy states that “effective and timely emotional and practical support for families bereaved or affected by suicide is essential to help the grieving process, prevent further or longer-term emotional distress and support recovery”.² But a particular concern that has been highlighted by some organisations that represent people who have been bereaved by suicide is the lack of specific services available to meet their needs, both in the immediate aftermath of the death and in the longer-term. Such services are often run by voluntary organisations with limited coverage.

What is Samaritans calling for?

Samaritans believes that national suicide prevention strategies should include a specific objective of supporting people bereaved by suicide which would promote cross-government working where appropriate and emphasise the importance of local commissioning of suitable services.

¹ Qin P, Agerbo E and Mortenson PB (2002) Suicide risk in Relation to family history of completed suicide and psychiatric disorders: a nested case-control study based on longitudinal registers. *Lancet* 360: 1126-1130

² *Preventing suicide in England – a cross-government outcomes strategy to save lives*, DH (2012)

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/216928/Preventing-Suicide-in-England-A-cross-government-outcomes-strategy-to-save-lives.pdf



When providing support services to people bereaved by suicide it is vital to ensure that they are delivered in a responsible and professional manner and that care is taken to avoid practices that could inadvertently cause harm. In order to minimise the risk of this occurring, a quality standards framework should be developed and made available in each nation to be used by service providers and commissioners.

The *Help is at Hand* booklet³ is a resource for people bereaved by suicide and other sudden, traumatic death, developed by Professor Keith Hawton and Sue Simkin at the Centre for Suicide Research at the University of Oxford. Feedback on the content of this document has generally been positive although a frequently raised concern is that many people bereaved by suicide are unaware of the resource and are not signposted to it by services that they come into contact with. There are various potential 'gatekeepers' who are likely to come into contact with people who have recently been bereaved by suicide which could alert them to the existence of *Help is at Hand* and how they can access a copy. Coroner's offices are particularly well placed to do this and in England and Wales they have their own booklet, known as the *Guide to Coroner Services*⁴, which they distribute to people who come into contact with their services.

Samaritans believes that all coroner's offices should signpost people bereaved by suicide to *Help is at Hand* and also to include a reference to it in the *Guide to Coroners Services*. Other organisations that could do further work to signpost bereaved people to this resource includes the police, health and social care services, funeral directors and faith organisations. *Help is at Hand* is also quite a lengthy document which covers a wide range of topics and so it could potentially be improved by reducing or simplifying some of the content or be breaking it into different sections so that people can more easily choose to access information which is directly relevant to them.

What is Samaritans doing to support people bereaved by suicide?

Samaritans is currently working with Cruse Bereavement Care, to develop a programme which places the individual bereaved by suicide at the centre of a new jointly run service. Throughout this process we are working closely with clinical experts from a range of fields including psychology and psychiatry, to make sure that those struggling to cope receive a high level of support.

³ *Help is at Hand*, Hawton K & Simkins S (2008)

<http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Suicide/Documents/Help%20is%20at%20Hand.pdf>

⁴ *Guide to Coroner Services* <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guide-to-coroner-services-and-coroner-investigations-a-short-guide>

