

National guidance on managing the risks of public memorials after a probable suicide

Published	28 November 2022 (Latest release)
Type	Guidance
Topics	Suicide

Acknowledgments

Public Health Scotland would like to acknowledge the Public Health Agency for Northern Ireland for granting permission to adapt their publication Advice for communities, groups and schools on public memorials following a sudden death that is a suspected suicide.

Contents

Where to get help

Introduction

Overview

Purpose

Memorials

What is a memorial?

Why have a memorial?

Things to consider

Memorials at the site of a suicide

Permanent memorials

Annual memorial events

Managing media

Press

Social media: public posts

Memorials in educational settings

Ensuring consistency

Memorial activities held in a school

Communicating with and supporting students

Yearbook pages and graduation ceremonies

Contacts

Media enquiries

Requesting other formats

Feedback on this guidance format

Where to get help

If you're dealing with suicidal thoughts or thinking about self-harm, it's important to know that you're not alone. Help is available when you're feeling low – you do not have to hurt yourself or suffer in silence.

If you're struggling to cope, reach out to one of the services on NHS inform.

If it's an emergency, dial 999.

Introduction

Overview

This guidance is for local multi-agency steering groups for suicide prevention. It discusses how to respond to and manage memorials for suicides or probable suicides in public spaces.

It is essential to note that any recommendations within this guidance are only advised following consideration and consultation with the immediate family or relevant others.

This guidance takes a similar approach to that identified by the Society of Chief Officers of Transportation in Scotland in relation to roadside memorials. It does not advise against placing tributes. Rather, it seeks to manage the issue to reduce the possible risk of more suicides and the identification of a possible location of concern.

Where existing local guidance on memorials after a suicide or probable suicide is in place, a review against this guidance should be undertaken.

Maintaining public safety and reducing the risk of further suicidal activity should be a priority when considering memorials for suicides or probable suicides. However, this will need to be balanced with the wishes of the family and the community.

Purpose

The main purpose of this memorial guidance is to ensure the needs and wishes of the bereaved are central to the process, and that any decisions made are done in a respectful and sympathetic way.

Memorials

What is a memorial?

When someone close to us passes away suddenly, our natural reaction is shock, disbelief and emotional pain. A common reaction is to want to do something to remember and celebrate the life of the person who has died.

Some people may wish to hold remembrance events or memorials to celebrate their loved one's life. While this can help people to grieve, it is important to note that, when someone has or is suspected to have taken their own life, the impact on their family, friends and community can leave people feeling very vulnerable.

Any act of remembrance following the death of a loved one can be a memorial. This could be:

- placing flowers, scarves, teddy bears, cards or other tokens at a site of special meaning
- holding vigils
- installing benches
- an organised event such as a walk, run or cycle
- the creation of a book of condolence

Why have a memorial?

Memorials can help those bereaved by probable suicide by supporting them through their grieving process. They may help bereaved individuals to express grief.

Engaging friends and family in planning a memorial can lessen some of the loneliness that can occur following the death of a loved one. Memorials may help those bereaved to understand that they are not alone and may provide a forum to talk about the deceased.

Things to consider

Memorials could inadvertently create risk or cause distress. It is essential to consider:

- the impact memorials might have on the bereaved family
- the impact on other vulnerable people, especially those at risk of suicide (further information can be found within National guidance for identifying and responding to a suicide cluster)
- the risk of drawing attention to a particular location that may offer means or opportunity for suicide (information on locations that may offer means or opportunity for suicide can be found within National guidance on action to reduce suicides at locations of concern in Scotland)
- the media may highlight a potentially newsworthy death

People differ in how they react to reminders of the loved one they lost. While one family may be comforted by seeing a memorial, for another it may simply cause more distress.

It is also important to consider the feelings of others who may have been bereaved in a similar manner, or at the same location, and avoid the risk of re-traumatising them.

Memorials at, or near, the location where a person has taken their own life can have a significant impact on vulnerable people. Marking the place where someone has died by suicide could impact other people who may be considering taking their own lives and could lead to increased suicidal behaviour.

Memorials at the site of a suicide

As an immediate response to the death of a loved one or friend, individuals may create spontaneous memorials by placing tokens of remembrance at, or near, the location where the person took their own life.

It is important to let those close to that person have an opportunity to express their feelings by creating memorials, however, there is growing concern about doing so at the site of a suicide. There is a possibility that it increases awareness of the site as a possible means or opportunity for suicide.

Things to consider

- Appointing a named individual to liaise with the family throughout the process to ensure they are consulted and kept informed.
- The removal or relocation of the temporary/spontaneous memorials in consultation with the person's immediate family.
- An agreement with the person's immediate family on what will be done with the tributes after they are removed and/or relocated.
- How the communication of the public safety concern will be achieved with the wider community.
- What alternative activity can be provided for individuals who need to continue to express their grief. Some common forms of remembrance include memorial walks, fundraising events, sports events or books of remembrance.

One idea to consider (if authorised by the family) is to allow the tributes to remain for a short period of time and until a date agreed on by the family. If the family do not agree to tributes, they should be removed immediately to respect the family's wishes.

With the agreement of the family, a note should be placed on the spot that states appreciation of the tributes and gestures, confirms the date of removal and what will happen to the items on removal.

For example, 'We appreciate your gestures of remembrance for [name of the individual]. These will remain here until [date]. They will then be collected and given to their family, whom we know will appreciate your kindness and compassion.'

You could also consider signposting to sources of support along with the public notice.

After removal, items can be given to the family who can then decide what should be done with them.

Permanent memorials

If the family wishes to have a permanent memorial, they should discuss where these will be placed. For example, some local areas now have benches in public parks or allow tree planting.

Owing to the potential impact on vulnerable individuals who may be at higher risk of suicide, we would not recommend creating long-term or permanent memorials, such as plaques, benches, murals or tree planting, at or near the location where the death took place.

Personal memorial sites raise public awareness of the location as a place where suicide or probable suicide has occurred. It can also highlight to vulnerable individuals that this is a location that offers access to means or opportunity for suicide.

Annual memorial events

Some local areas organise annual memorial events. These events can provide an opportunity for people to share their experiences of loss and to provide support to those who need it.

It is suggested that local areas consider establishing annual memorial events to provide further opportunities for families and relevant others to remember the life of the individual who has died.

Managing media

Press

If you receive local press queries about a memorial at the site of a suicide, please refer the journalist to the following guidance:

- Samaritan's media guidelines
- National Union of Journalist's (NUJ) guidance for reporting mental health and death by suicide
- The suicide reporting toolkit

Multi-agency steering groups for suicide prevention should aim to engage with local media and build relationships with news outlets in reporting suicide carefully and sensitively through the adoption of the guidance.

Social media: public posts

Social media is ever changing, but is a primary means of communication for people of all ages, especially young people.

It is common for people to express their feelings and offerings of condolences through social media platforms. It is important to note that some online sites are 'public.' This means anyone can see what is posted. It is therefore important to consider those who may be particularly vulnerable.

Highlighting support services

Communities can use social media to highlight the support services available.

The multi-agency steering group should encourage local partnerships' social media communication channels to highlight national and local services and supports.

The Samaritans has produced a series of guidance for communities on how to talk safely about suicide online, creating safe online memorial pages for friends or family who have died by suicide and, in partnership with Chatsafe, guidance containing tools and tips for young people on communicating safely about suicide.

- How to talk about suicide safely online
- Remembering friends or family who has died by suicide in a safe way online
- A young person's guide for communicating safely online about suicide

Memorials in educational settings

Please note that we refer to schools throughout this section, though the guidance applies to all educational settings (e.g., schools, colleges and universities).

Educational settings may have existing policies on handling the death of a student which should be referred to alongside this guidance.

It is essential that any recommendations should reflect discussions with the immediate family or relevant others.

Ensuring consistency

Educational settings should have an official policy which reflects a similar approach to all deaths. This ensures that there is no stigma to deaths that occur under certain circumstances, like suicide.

Memorial activities held in a school

A common memorial act in schools is a book of remembrance.

If the school wishes to do this, the school should consult the family in advance and if agreed, decide the length of time in which the book will remain open and the long-term storage of the book (e.g., if the family wishes to receive and store the book at home or if the book should remain within the school setting).

To ensure that students and staff are aware of available support and guidance, wellbeing support services should be visible and signposting to sources of support made available where the book of remembrance is displayed.

Communicating with and supporting students

It can be more effective and safer to deliver messages in a smaller classroom format rather than a large assembly.

A prepared statement can be read that is simple, direct and to the point. For example: 'the school has lost a valuable member of its community to a sudden and tragic death'.

This is also an opportunity to highlight support services available within the school and to identify vulnerable students who may need more focused support, both in the short and longer term.

Yearbook pages and graduation ceremonies

Yearbook pages and graduation ceremonies need to be handled carefully and sensitively.

Some schools are adopting yearbook standards to make it clear that deceased individuals will be remembered in the same way as their living peers – with pictures, short quotes and acknowledgement of the contributions they have made to the school. The circumstances of the death should never be highlighted.

Yearbooks are tributes to the accomplishments individuals made during their academic careers, not to the way in which they died.

Graduation ceremonies should follow the same guidelines and acknowledge the individual as a member of the graduating class.

The Samaritans website provides further guidance on memorials in education settings:

- Memorials at universities
- Memorials at schools

Contacts

Media enquiries

If you have a media enquiry relating to this publication, please contact the Communications and Engagement team.

Requesting other formats

Translations and other formats are available on request at p hs.otherformats@p hs.scot or 0131 314 5300.

This publication is licensed for re-use under the Open Government Licence v3.0.

For more information, visit www.publichealthscotland.scot/ogl

Feedback on this guidance format

Your rating

Please rate this format of guidance compared to a PDF version. *

*1 being much worse, 3 being no change and 5 being much better.

- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5

Your feedback

What feedback do you have about this format for guidance? *

*Please note that your feedback is anonymous and we are unable to respond. Please do not include personal information in your feedback.

Submit

Last updated: 21 March 2024

Follow us

Twitter

Instagram

LinkedIn

© Public Health Scotland

OGI All content is available under the Open Government Licence v3.0, except where stated otherwise.