

# Death of a young person by suicide

## A support guide for professionals



# Introduction

Death by suicide is a tragic and bewildering event for everyone who is impacted by the experience.

This can be overwhelming, both professionally and personally.

The following guide seeks to assist you if you are impacted by the suicide of a young person:

- **To help you feel more prepared**
- **To know what to expect**
- **To consider how and when to seek support**
- **To support you to process what has happened**
- **To know you are not alone**

This resource isn't prescriptive, nor does it give definitive guidance. We are all unique and there is no one size fits all solution.

It seeks to understand from the experience of others, and to use this to help you if you find yourself in a similar situation.

**Thank you to all staff that gave up their time, knowledge and experience to help with the content for this guide.**

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**"You need breathing space if an incident has occurred."**

# Our awareness around suicide

## What is suicide?

Death by suicide is a tragic and devastating event that touches many people. Often what makes it even more painful is the stigma and taboo that surrounds suicide. This can make it difficult for those affected to talk openly and honestly without fear of judgment. The more we are able to talk and understand our own and other people's feelings about suicide, then the more we can offer appropriate and meaningful support.

## Language

When discussing death by suicide, it is preferable to use the terms completed suicide, died by suicide or took their own life. Using the words committed suicide, or successful suicide, can often be challenging language for those who are bereaved in this way, as it has overtones of a sin or crime, or conversely an achievement.

## Suicide prevention awareness

Knowledge of suicide and suicide prevention can help to prepare us should the worst happen. To learn more about suicide and suicide prevention awareness, some of the following services and resources may be helpful in different ways: Choose Life, NAC Educational Psychology Service, NAC School Counselling Service, NAC Mental Health and Well-being Team, GLOW, and suicide prevention training. Talking to someone who has experience and knowledge can also be helpful.

## Crisis Response

No one wants to experience the suicide of someone they know - but it is better to learn about the Crisis Response Approach and be able to draw upon that knowledge should you need it. Sadly, in North Ayrshire we have had experience of young people dying by suicide. As a result we have in-depth guidance that can be found at <http://childprotectionnorthayrshire.info/cpc/professionals/young-peoples-suicide-crisis-response-plan/>. Please take the time to look over this (this is especially useful for education staff) as it will help you respond to such a crisis. Services may also have critical incident plans that provide information and guidance.

In a situation of crisis, having clear tasks and agreed jobs to do can make the immediate aftermath of a death more manageable and less chaotic.

# What is bereavement?

Bereavement is what happens after someone dies - our unique response to a death.

We often think about bereavement in emotional terms - sadness, guilt, fear, loneliness. These are all true, but bereavement actually affects us in many other ways too.

Bereavement is **individual**: How we react to a loss is as unique as our relationship with the person.

Bereavement affects us **physically**: We will often have physical symptoms when we are grieving, such as heart palpitations, headaches/migraines etc. We might have confusing symptoms that we don't connect to grief, but it can often be the cause.

Bereavement affects us **cognitively**: Grief can affect how our brain works. We will often have difficulty with concentration, remembering things, processing detailed information etc.

Bereavement affects us **practically**: When someone dies, things change on a practical level - e.g. that person no longer comes to my class, I don't give that person a lift to school anymore etc. Changes in our practical routine can be difficult to get used to and can trigger an emotional reaction.

Bereavement affects us **spiritually**: When someone dies, we ask big questions. Why do bad things happen? Why is there suffering? What is the meaning of all of this? Often, we equate spiritual to religious, but this is not the case (though our religious beliefs may be affected). We all have a spiritual dimension to us that is affected when someone dies.

Often we put a hierarchy on grief - the loss of a child is the worst, the way someone dies is worse etc. However, when someone dies we are all affected. Minimising our loss because someone else's is worse can impair our ability to grieve for a person.

Give yourself time and space to grieve the loss, be kind to yourself about where you are at in that process and get support when you need it.



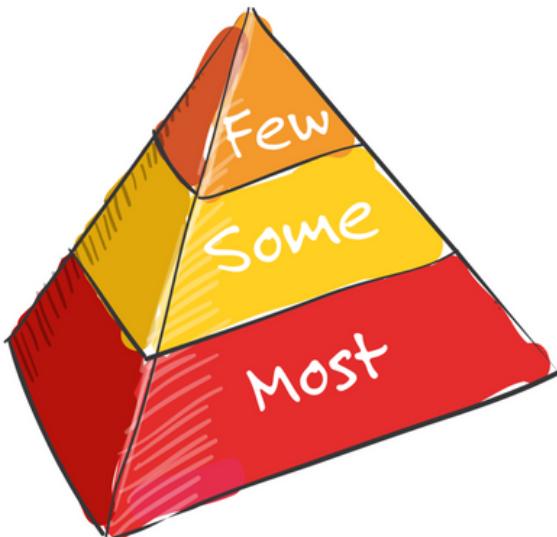
# Levels of Support

We know from research that when someone is bereaved they don't automatically need to be referred for specialist support, whilst recognising that it is still important to talk about it.

What we know is that **MOST** people will grieve with support from their existing networks. **SOME** will need some extra intervention in the form of something like bereavement counselling or a support group, and a **FEW** will need referral to a specialist mental health service for more intensive support.

This pyramid reflects what we found in our focus groups about support for professionals. People often valued the informal support the most, however knowing what else was available - and when and where to access this - was helpful should they need it.

The pyramid should not be viewed as a hierarchy. It is not about needing 'more' support, but about accessing the support that is right for you at the right time. There is no one size fits all and there are different kinds of support for different circumstances.



**Few:** Specialist bereavement support for vulnerable or traumatised

**Some:** 1-2-1 family, peer, or group bereavement support

**Most:** A supportive response from existing networks

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# What Support Might I Need?

Support that you might need after a suicide looks different at different times and for different people. There is a comprehensive guide on **pages 10 to 14** that outlines in detail different stages of the process that happens after a suicide, things that need to happen and what help and support might look like at an individual and organisational level.

## Some things to remember about support are:

- Our reaction to a suicide in our community is different depending on lots of factors; including our current circumstances, our past experiences and who we are as a person. We are all individuals so the support that we might need looks different for everyone.
- Support can come in many forms. It can be formal, or informal, individual or in groups. The power of tea and cakes should not be underestimated!
- It's good to talk! Many people will find talking to a colleague, a friend or a professional really helpful. Sometimes being able to talk to colleagues who have been through the same experience is really helpful. Sometimes though, we don't want to talk - and that is ok too!
- The support that we need might change over time. When a suicide first happens there is, understandably, a focus on all the practical things that need to be done. However, you might need emotional support too at that time. In the longer term, you may continue to have (or dip in and out of) emotional support in one form or another, and there should be no expectation from you - or from others - that there is a time when you 'have got over it'. Support into the longer term is natural and normal.

**“Admin staff had to deal with all the written information – that has a big impact.”**

**“You don’t know what you need until you have been through it and come out the other side.”**

# What to Expect?

- **ANXIETY** when hearing about the death and wondering 'is it one of mine'.
- **SHOCK** when you know it is a young person under your care.
- **QUESTIONING** and **REPLAYING** anything you said or did or didn't do.
- A sense of **FAILURE**. Are people **JUDGING** me or my colleagues or team?
- Anxiety walking into work for months afterwards - feeling the **DREAD** in your stomach.
- **HYPERVIGILANCE** around other young people - is it going to happen again?



"I am changed as a person because of this experience."

"Was it one of mine?"

# Professional Responses

## What is my role?

It may help to understand that you still have a job to do and tasks to carry out.

This can help you to focus your mind and keep going.

## What if I feel overwhelmed?

At work it may be overwhelming, especially when dealing with other young people or supporting someone (a colleague, family member or young person) in their grief.

Allow time to stop and reflect for a while.

Share how you are feeling with a trusted colleague or trusted line manager.

It may be possible for timetables to be adjusted to free up time to support other young people, or for you to take some time out for yourself.

## Am I alone?

No, you are not alone, you can be sure your

colleagues are experiencing similar feelings, maybe at different times and in different ways.

Sometimes it helps to talk to each other, or even just to sit together in the workplace after young people have gone, have a coffee and simply know you have a shared experience.

Other services/individuals within your workplace may have staff members who are also feeling isolated - seek out those you trust for contact and support.

## How do I work with other young people?

It is very hard not to be 'hyper vigilant' around other young people, both in the workplace and in your own personal community or family.

This is a natural response and it can be helped by sharing with colleagues and having open conversations.

Use your line manager.

# Some Common Responses

Key points in time	How can I respond?	How can my team or line manager help?	How can the organisation help?
<b>Before an incident occurs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be suicide aware.</li> <li>• Attend training.</li> <li>• Read and learn.</li> <li>• Know your own response to suicide.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allow time to share experiences.</li> <li>• Enable peer support following attempted suicides.</li> <li>• Be aware of pathways of support for young people and staff.</li> <li>• Encourage training and awareness.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support information sharing about suicide prevention and awareness.</li> <li>• Provide training and expertise (for info about training, email <a href="mailto:chooselife@aapct.scot.nhs.uk">chooselife@aapct.scot.nhs.uk</a>).</li> <li>• Enable training attendance.</li> <li>• Strive for a suicide safe organisation.</li> </ul>
<b>Initial feelings on hearing the news and relief/shock once details are known</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You will likely feel anxious and wonder who it is, was it one of mine?</li> <li>• These are universal responses and others will be feeling it too.</li> <li>• Recognise and acknowledge these feelings.</li> <li>• Listen to the facts and what is known. Be patient.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most staff will feel the same.</li> <li>• Share and talk about real facts and knowledge.</li> <li>• All emotions are heightened, so ensure teams/staff know the facts - not rumours.</li> <li>• Create time and space to debrief or just sit.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure information is shared quickly and efficiently.</li> <li>• Implement the crisis response plan (to access North Ayrshire Child Protection Committee's Young People's Suicide Crisis Response Plan, visit <a href="http://childprotectionnorthayrshire.info/cpc/professionals/young-peoples-suicide-crisis-response-plan">http://childprotectionnorthayrshire.info/cpc/professionals/young-peoples-suicide-crisis-response-plan</a>).</li> <li>• Recognise how staff on the ground are feeling and be supportive and sensitive.</li> <li>• Be visible.</li> </ul>

# Some Common Responses

Key points in time	How can I respond?	How can my team or line manager help?	How can the organisation help?
<b>What do I do at work?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Focus on the tasks you can do and have to do.</li><li>Allow yourself space for time out if you can.</li><li>Be aware of the practical impact (see page 5) and discuss with your line manager.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Use crisis response guidance and discuss with team who is doing what, how other young people will be told, what information you are sharing, how it is shared etc.</li><li>Make sure staff understand their roles and yours.</li><li>Consider the practical impact, e.g. removing child/parent from the register, text alerts, exam arrangements etc.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Support your team/service to be able to carry out their day to day tasks.</li><li>Be visible and flexible.</li><li>Be familiar with crisis response and be clear about communication channels.</li></ul>
<b>Share time and space with those who 'know'</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Seek out those you trust and connect with - maybe colleagues from within or without your service, not always to talk-just to be in the same space</li><li>Maybe share particular impact for you, e.g. if you have been impacted before, tell your line manager</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Provide opportunities for staff to come together informally after work, with tea and cakes, just to be in the same space.</li><li>Be flexible with work arrangements as best you can - adjust timetables to allow more pupil/young people support and time out for staff.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Actively support your team and enable staff to get together.</li><li>Be visible with support - physically visit, and provide room space.</li></ul>

# Some Common Responses

Key points in time	How can I respond?	How can my team or line manager help?	How can the organisation help?
Formal debriefing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This can be daunting.</li> <li>• You will be feeling under pressure anyway.</li> <li>• You will have questioned yourself already.</li> <li>• Remember others feel the same.</li> <li>• No one is responsible.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remember some staff may find this very difficult.</li> <li>• Remind them this is not about blame. It's a chance to talk about what happened - some breathing space.</li> <li>• Create a safe space.</li> <li>• Consider using an external facilitator.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not treat this as a 'blame' or 'saving reputation' exercise.</li> <li>• Staff will already be examining their role/actions and feeling anxious and self-questioning. This should be to support staff to share and be honest. This is the best way to understand and support staff/young people/family.</li> <li>• Protect staff from blame – do not imply mistakes or question their responses.</li> </ul>
Bringing it home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You will find it difficult to 'leave work at work', but if you can create a space between work and home to be able to have time to process what you are feeling then this will help.</li> <li>• Be aware how this might impact things at home.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a supportive environment.</li> <li>• Have space for staff between the end of the day and going home to be able to touch base with each other.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognise individuals' needs.</li> <li>• Have a variety of supports available to staff and line managers.</li> </ul>

# Some Common Responses

Key points in time	How can I respond?	How can my team or line manager help?	How can the organisation help?
Hypervigilance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This is a rational response to trauma - even if it doesn't feel that way.</li> <li>• Remember that you aren't responsible for everyone.</li> <li>• Be aware of your response.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have awareness of hypervigilance.</li> <li>• Provide reassurances and consider triggers - e.g. which other young people might cause concern.</li> <li>• Flexible working arrangements can help with triggering situations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trauma informed care approaches should be supported at work for service users and staff.</li> <li>• Understanding different needs of staff and teams across an organisation.</li> </ul>
Carrying on working responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time, space and reflection will be needed in the long term.</li> <li>• Don't be scared to ask for help.</li> <li>• Be flexible.</li> <li>• Know who to ask for help as you need it.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be flexible and think about how you can support staff in the longer term.</li> <li>• Don't put a time limit, explicit or implicit, on when and how people can access support.</li> <li>• Don't imply when staff "should be over it".</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognition that challenges can last into the longer term.</li> <li>• Consider organisational culture and what helps or hinders people being able to ask for help.</li> </ul>

# Some Common Responses

Key points in time	How can I respond?	How can my team or line manager help?	How can the organisation help?
Prolonged anxiety/fear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Keep seeking support and asking for help.</li><li>• Consider which ways this is impacting life - eg physical symptoms, not sleeping, trouble concentrating, family relationships.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Proactively check in with staff regularly.</li><li>• Be aware of further supports that might be useful for staff and know where to signpost to.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Good occupational health support.</li><li>• Good mental health policies.</li><li>• Recognise the importance of informal, as well as formal, support.</li></ul>
It changes you	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• This experience will change you.</li><li>• Consider how to make meaning, and take positives, from the experience that you have had.</li><li>• Understand your experience.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Recognise that these events change teams and individuals.</li><li>• Use it as a spur to increase training opportunities or access to information.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Understand how workplaces/schools/teams will be impacted.</li><li>• Support their work to make positives out of a terrible event.</li></ul>

# What Support Might Look Like

- Going for a walk
- Speaking to others who have had the same experience
- Reordering tasks
- Talking to a colleague or friend
- Discussing things that might help with your line manager
- Coffee and cake in the staff room
- Taking time out
- Accessing your EAP (Employee Assistance Programme) at work
- Calling a helpline for a chat
- Checking in with yourself about how you are feeling

**“I didn’t realise I  
needed support.”**



# What Support Might Look Like

**Support can be formal or informal and can come from a whole range of different people and places. You might get support from:**

- Colleagues - both in your organisation and other organisations with whom you work closely
- Friends and family
- The GP or another health professional
- Your line manager
- An EAP or Occupational Health
- Someone that has had a similar experience in the past
- A helpline

**Think too about who might need support. This could include:**

- Admin staff
- Cleaners or janitors (often go unnoticed but are embedded in the organisation)
- The people that are in and around your team (e.g. those who support a school community but aren't employed by the school)
- New or inexperienced staff
- Staff that have multiple stressors in their life already

**Think too about what might affect your own and others' ability to access support.**

**This could be things such as:**

- Dual roles - what else is their community role?
- Organisational culture
- Culture of the job role
- Local culture (e.g. community or religious)
- What else is happening for the person, or has happened in the past.
- Workload
- Pressure to perform
- Not wanting to ruin opportunity for career progression
- Being suspicious of other organisations
- Being seen as weak/should be able to cope

**“Different organisations have different mindsets.”**

**“If you have mental health on your record you won’t get a promotion.”**

# Useful Resources

## **Suicide Bereavement Support Service (pilot) - August 2021 to August 2023:**

A service run by mental health charity Penumbra for anyone in Ayrshire and Arran impacted by the loss of someone to suicide. Call **0800 471 4768** or email [suicidebereavementsupport@nhs.scot](mailto:suicidebereavementsupport@nhs.scot)

### **Bereavement support and information:**

**At a Loss** provides the UK's signposting website for anyone bereaved and those supporting them. Visit [www.ataloss.org](http://www.ataloss.org)

**Child Bereavement UK** offers education for professionals and one to one and group support for families when a baby or child of any age dies or is dying, or when a child is facing bereavement. Call **0800 028 8840** or visit [www.childbereavementuk.org](http://www.childbereavementuk.org)

**Beautiful Inside and Out** was set up by Pauline Moriarty in 2013 following the suicide of her daughter. The charity has been involved with a number of Youth and Philanthropy Initiative (YPI) participating schools and provides bespoke counselling and bereavement support to parents and young people in crisis. Call **07984 328808** or visit [www.facebook.com/beautifulinsideandoutscio/](http://www.facebook.com/beautifulinsideandoutscio/)

**Touched by Suicide Scotland** is a self-help organisation delivered and run by those who have been "touched by suicide." The organisation aims to meet the needs and break the isolation of those bereaved by suicide, offering emotional and practical support in a number of ways via phone, email support groups and general information. Call **01294 274273**.

**Winston's Wish** offers practical support, information and guidance to all those caring for a child or young person who has been bereaved. Call **08452 03 04 05** or visit [www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk)

**Cruse Bereavement Care** promotes the well-being of bereaved people and enables individuals understand their grief and cope with their loss. As well as providing free care to all bereaved people, the charity also offers information, support and training services to those who are looking after them. Call **0808 802 6161** or email [www.crusescotland.org.uk](http://www.crusescotland.org.uk)

**Survivors of Bereavement through Suicide** aims to meet the needs and break the isolation of those over 18 years old bereaved by the suicide of a close relative or friend, offering a helpline, information and some support groups. Call **0300 111 5065** or visit [www.uk-sobs.org.uk](http://www.uk-sobs.org.uk)

**"I felt the full responsibility of saving someone's life. I know now that is not my job."**

# Useful Resources

## Suicide awareness and information

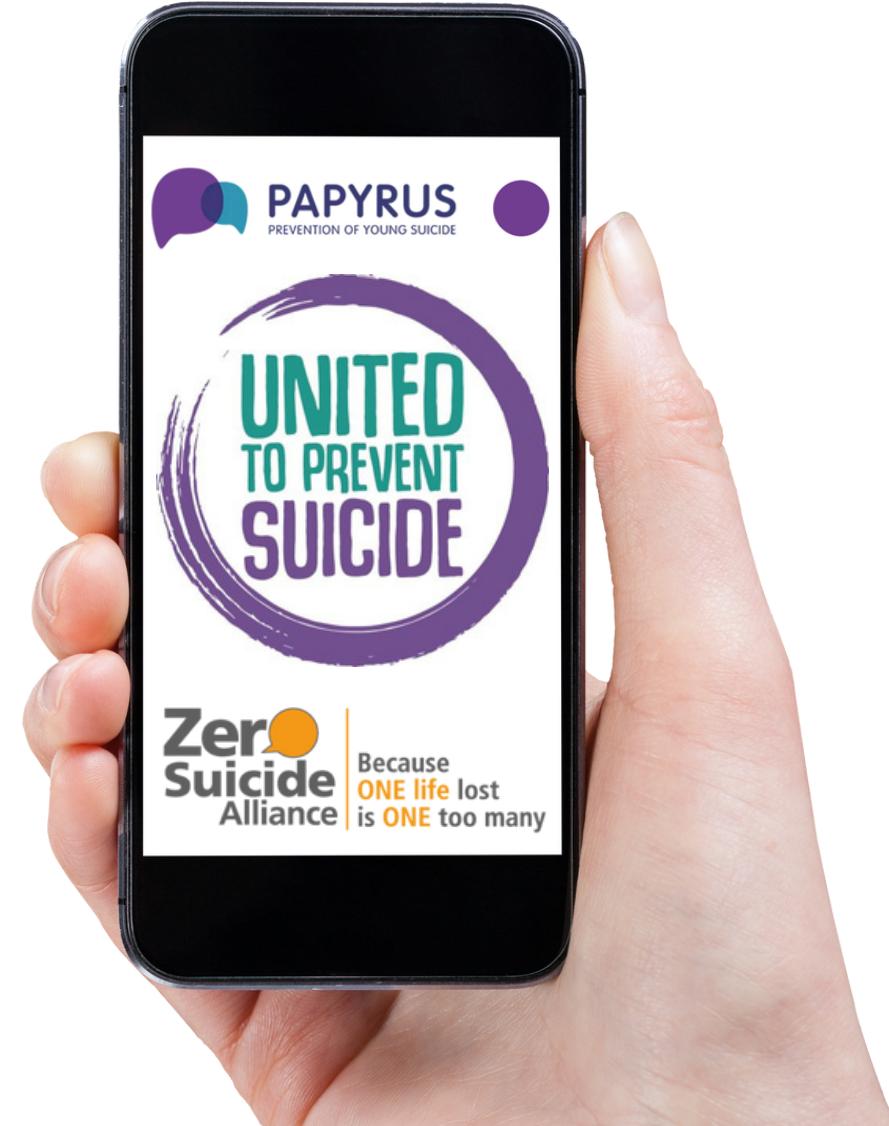
**Papyrus** is a national charity dedicated to the prevention of suicide for those under 35. If you are having thoughts of suicide or are concerned for someone, phone **0800 068 4141** or text **07786 209 697** for confidential support and practical advice. You can also visit [www.papyrus-uk.org](http://www.papyrus-uk.org)

**Public Health Scotland Suicide Information** (formerly Choose Life) offers a Suicide Prevention Overview with links to the Scottish Government's Suicide Prevention Action Plan as well as links to a number of additional useful resources. Visit <https://www.healthscotland.scot/health-topics/suicide/suicide-prevention-overview>

**United to Prevent Suicide** is a national campaign and movement to raise awareness around suicide and encourage everyone to talk more about suicide. Visit <https://unitedtopreventsuicide.org.uk/>

**Zero Suicide Alliance** is a collaboration of National Health Service trusts, charities, businesses and individuals who are all committed to suicide prevention in the UK and beyond. They can provide online training, stories and resources. Visit [www.zerosuicidealliance.com](http://www.zerosuicidealliance.com)

**Grassroots Suicide Prevention** provides resources and awareness on how to support those at risk of suicide, including the stayalive app. It offers a number of training courses, downloadable resources and toolkits via its website at <https://prevent-suicide.org.uk/>



# Useful Resources

## General help and advice

**Breathing Space** can support individuals experiencing difficulty, unhappiness, mental health problems and emotional distress, with a free confidential telephone service enabling anyone in Scotland to open up when they're feeling down. Call **0800 83 85 87** or visit <https://breathingspace.scot>

**Samaritans** provide confidential and non-judgemental emotional support (24 hours day, 7 days a week) for people who are experiencing feelings of distress or despair, including those that could lead to suicide. Call **116 123**.

**NHS 24** is a national telephone service that provides out of hours advice for urgent care, as well as online information about a range of health issues, self-help support and local information. Call **111** or visit [www.nhs24.scot](http://www.nhs24.scot)

**SAMH** provides information and support for people across Scotland with mental health problems, including a number of resources for those experiencing suicidal thoughts and those caring for them. Call **0344 800 0550** (9am to 6pm, Monday to Friday, except on bank holidays) or visit [www.samh.org.uk](http://www.samh.org.uk)

## Support through your employer

Individual organisations and employers will often have support available through Occupational Health, or if you are part of a Trade Union they may provide another avenue for support. Contact your employer or Trade Union for more information on what support they can offer.

## Counselling

Counselling covers a range of therapeutic interventions delivered by trained practitioners.

Please find out more and check counsellors against the register at  
<https://www.bacp.co.uk/about-therapy/we-can-help/>

**Crisis Counselling** covers a range of issues and concerns, offering a variety of types of counselling and providing a bespoke service to meet the individual or family's needs. Call **0141 812 8474** or visit [www.crisiscounselling.co.uk](http://www.crisiscounselling.co.uk)



