



**Advice for communities,  
groups and schools  
on public memorials following a sudden  
death that is a suspected suicide**



This guidance is for communities, groups and schools who have lost someone they know to suspected suicide. It is intended to encourage consideration of the bereaved family and to offer guidance on reducing the impact of memorials on other vulnerable people in their community. It was developed by experts in the field of mental health and suicide prevention, and is based on worldwide evidence and research aimed at reducing the risk of further suicidal behaviour.

Only a coroner can declare the cause of death to be suicide. Therefore this guidance will apply to deaths and disappearances that may be suspected suicides or that occurred at sites where there have been deaths by suicide in the past.

**It is essential to note that any recommendation within this guidance is only advised following consideration from the immediate family.**

## Support

If you are struggling to cope with the loss of someone close, there is help available. Speak to your GP about local services that you can access. There is bereavement support available right across Northern Ireland through your local Health Trust, community and/or voluntary groups. Page 8 outlines the numbers you can ring for support.

If you are in distress or despair, or know someone who is, you can call Lifeline on **0808 808 8000** or Samaritans on **116 123** (both numbers are free from UK landlines and mobiles). **If you, or someone you know, is in immediate danger dial 999.**

When someone close to us passes away suddenly, our natural reaction is of 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 taken their own life, the impact on their family, friends and community can leave people very vulnerable.

## **What is a memorial?**

Any act of remembrance following the death of a loved one can be a memorial. It might be in the form of placing flowers, cards, balloons or other tokens, an organised event such as a walk, run or cycle, or the creation of a book of condolence.

## **Benefits of memorials**

Whether private or public, memorials can benefit those bereaved by helping them with their grieving process. Memorials may help bereaved individuals to express grief and to understand that experiencing the intense feelings that accompany death is normal. Engaging groups of people in the planning of a memorial can lessen some of the loneliness that can occur following the death of a loved one. Memorials may help those left behind to understand that they are not alone and may provide a forum to talk about the deceased.

## **Potential risks**

However, there is also the potential for memorials to have a negative impact or to cause distress. Before starting to plan or create any type of memorial, it is essential to consider:

- the impact it might have on the bereaved family;
- the impact on other vulnerable people;
- the risk of drawing attention to a particular location.

The family of the deceased person must be allowed to decide how they would like their loved one to be remembered, and anyone planning a memorial should seek approval from the family in advance. 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 other families 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 gone missing or taken their own life can have a huge impact on vulnerable people. There is evidence that marking the place where someone has died by suicide can impact on other people who may be considering taking their own life and lead to increased suicidal behaviour, so it is safer if memorials are in a non-related location or venue.

## Changing established precedents

In most cases, the response to a sudden death in a community is not specifically addressed in formal policy or practice. An informal protocol may have grown up over the years that has now become established custom. It is appropriate to consider revisiting your existing response to memorials in light of the guidance in this document, which is based on an increasing body of knowledge about suicidal contagion, and making clear recommendations based on enhancing public safety. It is never too late to change unsafe or potentially damaging practices.

## Temporary/spontaneous memorials

As an immediate response to the death of a loved one or friend, individuals may create spontaneous memorials by placing small tokens such as pictures, flowers or candles at the location where the deceased took their own life. It is important to let individuals have an opportunity to express their feelings by creating memorials but the community also needs to address the following questions:

- Have you sought the permission of the immediate family?
- Does the family wish a time limit to be placed on these tributes?
- How will you communicate that information to the individuals?
- What will you do with the tributes after you remove them?
- What alternative activity can you provide for individuals who need to continue to express their grief?
- What is your responsibility to address wider public safety and use/misuse of public space?

An idea to consider (if authorised by the family) is to allow the tributes to remain until a date agreed by the family. Place a note on the spot that says something like:

*"We appreciate your gestures of remembrance for [NAME THE INDIVIDUAL]. Your tokens will remain here until [DATE]. They will then be collected and given to his/her family, whom we know will appreciate your kindness and compassion."*

The family can then decide if they want to place the items at the graveside or elsewhere.

## **Permanent memorials**

Due to the potential impact on vulnerable individuals, we would not recommend creating long-term or permanent memorials, such as plaques, benches, murals or tree planting, at or near the location where someone died or went missing. Evidence has shown that marking the place where someone has taken their life can impact on other people who may be considering taking their own life and lead to increased suicidal behaviour.

If the family wishes to have a permanent memorial, we would advise that this is placed at a private location such as the family home and not in a public area. The creation of any permanent memorial will need the permission of the property owners in advance, eg private property owners or local council.

## **Memorial events such as vigils, walks or other activities**

Some common forms of remembrance include:

- memorial walks
- fundraising events
- sports events
- books of remembrance

These can all be beneficial to both the family and the local community; however we would advise that any event organised focuses clearly on the celebration of the person's life and not on how they died.

We would recommend that support is provided and clearly highlighted during any event. This could be in the form of having a trained counsellor available and/or providing cards/leaflets with support information. Your local HSC Trust can advise you on what support services and printed materials may be available – see page 8 for details.

### **Book of remembrance**

If you wish to open a book of remembrance, we would advise that you speak to the family in advance and agree the length of time the book will remain open and where the book will be stored in the long term, ie if the family wish to keep the book at home or have the book stored at the club/school/church etc.



### **Fund raising**

Money raised through fund raising events can be used to help the family with funeral costs and/or a donation to a local charity in remembrance of the person who has died.

### **T-shirts, football tops etc**

Another type of memorial is the creation of clothing (t-shirts, sweatshirts or football tops) with the name and/or a picture of the deceased. For the individuals who create the shirts, the intent is likely to remember their deceased loved one or peer. There is potentially a negative impact on vulnerable individuals causing further distress. In order to minimise risks, community leaders need to identify the individuals who organised the printing of the shirts, meet with them, and explain the potential inadvertent impact this can have on others. Also ensure that they have received approval from the family on when and where to wear these memorials. Families may wish for the memorials only to be worn on the day of the funeral.

### **A note about balloons**

A common act of remembrance is to use balloons either placed at a site or as a balloon release (this is where a number of inflated balloons are released together). If you choose to use a foil balloon at a particular site, we strongly advise that a balloon weight is used to minimise the chances of the balloon floating away. Foil balloons are not biodegradable and may harm the environment. If you wish to do a balloon release, we would advise only latex balloons are used as these are biodegradable, and helium gas is used as it is lighter than air and therefore ensures the balloons will float up. Balloons should be released singly and not tied together as this too may cause harm to the environment. If helium gas is being used, please ensure that it is used by a trained individual and appropriate care and attention is given.

### **Social media**

It is common for people to express their feelings and offerings of condolences through social media (such as Facebook or Twitter). It's important to note that some online sites are 'public', meaning anyone can see what you post; therefore it is important to consider those who may be particularly vulnerable.

As a community, you can use social media to highlight support services available. Members of the community should be encouraged to blog responsibly on public media sites and avoid giving misinformation or using language that will cause further distress to those bereaved or create a sense of hopelessness. If you see anything of concern or that may cause offence to the family, you can report the post and request its removal.

## Press

If you receive local press queries about a memorial, please refer the journalist to Samaritans Media Guidelines at [http://www.samaritans.org/media\\_centre/media\\_guidelines.aspx](http://www.samaritans.org/media_centre/media_guidelines.aspx) and seek advice from the Samaritans Press Team on 079 4380 9162.

## Missing persons

When a loved one is missing, social media is being increasingly used to help locate the person. Sometimes families may call for people to help in the search for their loved one. **It is important to note** that people who post messages in public online spaces are legally liable for the content of messages posted. If you call on volunteers to support a search or an event and one of the volunteers is injured, you are legally responsible and could be subject to civil action.

To avoid safety issues when organising a search for a missing person, we recommend that you link with the PSNI and local search and rescue organisations, and arrange specific times and locations. If you request volunteers, highlight that they will be required to sign-in at the outlined times and places so that you know who is involved in the search. Your sign-in sheet should also include a disclaimer to state that individuals undertaking the search are responsible for their own personal safety.

## Advice for schools: Q&A

### **Should funeral (or memorial) activities ever be held in a school?**

Ideally, funerals are best held in places other than the school, like religious settings. However, in some communities, especially in rural areas, the school is the normal centre of all activities and funerals are no exception. When it is a common practice to hold a funeral or memorial in the school gym or auditorium, and it is at the request of the family, individuals may be less unnerved by this custom than those who attend communities where an in-school funeral would be an exceptional event. It's a good idea, regardless of custom, to reach out to vulnerable individuals after a funeral to check-in on their reactions. A common memorial act in schools is the opening of a book of remembrance. If you wish to do this, you should consult the family in advance and agree the length of time in which the book will remain open and also the long term storage of the book, ie if the family wish to receive and store the book at home or if the book should remain within the school setting.



### **Isn't it best to hold a memorial assembly for the entire school so we know everyone gets the same messages?**

The evidence shows that the 'same messages' can be delivered more effectively and safely in classroom formats. Teachers can read a prepared statement that is simple, direct and to the point: *'the school has lost a valuable member of its community to a sudden and tragic death'*. In a classroom, the teacher can gauge reactions and identify individuals who may need additional support. This is more difficult to do in a large assembly. There are also fewer opportunities for the situation to become intensely emotional and/or distressing in the small group format of a classroom. In most places, it is not the school's responsibility to hold a memorial service – it may be more suitable in a community setting, such as a place of worship.

### **How do we handle issues like yearbook pages or graduation ceremonies?**

This situation needs to be handled carefully with respect and in line with the school's established policies and procedures. It is important to recognise that yearbook tribute pages risk sensationalising and glamorising a death by suicide, and may therefore pose a risk for vulnerable individuals (who may be prompted to act impulsively). To address this risk, 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 not 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 – acknowledgement of the individual as a member of the graduating class.

### **Is it acceptable to hold memorials for some individuals and not for others?**

While it is true that not every death has the same impact on the members of the community, it is important that the official policy of settings such as schools and colleges reflect a similar response to all deaths. When the approach is differential, it can be perceived that the establishment values the life of one individual more than another or, even worse, that there is a stigma to deaths that occur under certain circumstances, like suicide.

## Local support information

If you, or someone you know is in distress or despair, contact **Lifeline** on **0808 808 8000** or **Samaritans** on **116 123**.

Both numbers are free from UK landlines and mobiles. The Samaritans number is also free in the Republic of Ireland.

If you are concerned about your mental health it is important that you seek help immediately. Talk to a friend or family member and make an appointment with your GP. You can also call Lifeline or Samaritans on the numbers listed above.

If you would like information on the bereavement support services available in your local area, contact your local Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT).

Trust name	Council areas	Contact name	Contact
Western HSCT	Derry City & Strabane Omagh & Fermanagh	Fidelis Simpson Colette Cullen	Mob: 078 4156 9000 Mob: 078 2653 5199
Northern HSCT	Causeway Coast & Glens Mid-Ulster (parts) Mid and East Antrim Antrim & Newtownabbey	Danielle Gallagher David Olphert	Tel: 028 9441 3544 danielle.gallagher@northerntrust.hscni.net david.olphert@northerntrust.hscni.net
Belfast HSCT	Belfast City	Joanne Kidd	Tel: 028 9504 4163 078 5088 2424 Joanne.Kidd@belfasttrust.hscni.net
South Eastern HSCT	Lisburn & Castlereagh Ards & North Down	Fiona Dagg	Tel: 028 4461 1797 Mob: 077 3885 1807
Southern HSCT	Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon Newry, Mourne & Down Mid-Ulster (parts)	Liz McGrath	Tel: 028 3756 4461 Mob: 078 2562 7133 Liz.McGrath@southerntrust.hscni.net

Some resources such as Lifeline cards and leaflets are available through the Public Health Agency. Contact Amanda O'Neill by email on [Amanda.O'Neill@hscni.net](mailto:Amanda.O'Neill@hscni.net) for further information.



## Public Health Agency

**Public Health Agency**

12-22 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BS.

Tel: 0300 555 0114 (local rate).

[www.publichealth.hscni.net](http://www.publichealth.hscni.net)

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