



Support After Suicide Partnership

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SASP Members' Briefing

Number 1 – Overview of guidance, evidence and best practice supporting the importance of suicide bereavement support.

As part of SASP's ongoing commitment to provide members with up to date, practical guidance and information, we have developed this briefing paper which we hope will form part of a series of briefing papers on different topic areas. The focus of this paper is to bring together some of the supporting guidance, evidence and best practice to provide an overview of why timely and appropriate suicide bereavement support is essential.

The information in this paper has been gathered from a range of sources as well as discussions during SASP member meetings, where attendees were invited to share views on what differentiates our services from generic bereavement support.

1. Why is suicide bereavement support essential?

'When someone dies by suicide, the shock is profound and widely felt - by families, of course, but also by friends, colleagues and professionals. They describe profound distress, guilt, searching for explanations and stigma. They may struggle with work or relationships. They may develop their own mental health problems. They may themselves feel suicidal.'
Support after a Suicide: a guide to providing local services (Public Health England)

The impact of suicide can be far-reaching, with as many as 135 people affected by one death by suicide.¹ Evidence shows that people who have been bereaved or affected by suicide are almost three times more at risk of suicidal ideation². It is estimated that as many as 1 in 10 people attempt suicide after losing someone to suicide and 8% drop out of work or education³.

Bereavement after suicide can be complicated and unpredictable. There are specific factors that complicate how people may cope after suicide loss.

The role of stigma

"People who have been bereaved by suicide are more likely to describe poor social functioning ref, stigma, shame, responsibility and guilt ref compared with those bereaved by other causes of sudden death."

¹ Cerel, J. et al. (2018). How many people are exposed to suicide? Not six. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behaviour*. DOI: 10.1111/sltb.12450

² Hill, N., Robinson, J., Pirkis, J., Andriessen, K., Krysinska, K., & Payne, A. et al. (2020). Association of suicidal behaviour with exposure to suicide and suicide attempt: A systematic review and multilevel meta-analysis. *PLOS Medicine*, 17(3), e1003074. doi: 10.1371/journal.pmed.1003074

³ Pitman, A. L., Osborn, D. P. J., Rantell, K., & King, M. B. (2016). Bereavement by suicide as a risk factor for suicide attempt: a cross-sectional national UK-wide study of 3432 young bereaved adults. *BMJ Open*, 6 (1), ARTN e009948. doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2015-009948



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Support after a Suicide: a guide to providing local services (Public Health England)

Suicide and death by suicide remain issues that many find difficult to discuss. Bereavement by suicide can lead to feelings of shame and rejection, as people fear the reaction or judgement of others.

Not only may the bereaved person feel unable to talk about how they feel, but others may avoid talking about what has happened, leaving people feeling they have nowhere to turn. Increased social isolation after suicide bereavement is known to cause difficulties in education and employment.

People bereaved by suicide are 80% more likely to drop out of education or work than their peers. In a 2016 study, almost 1 in 10 young adults bereaved by suicide were found to have dropped out of education or a job since the death.⁴

The challenges of the inquest process

After a suspected death by suicide in England and Wales, a coroner will investigate the cause of death. The inquest process can be confusing and upsetting for people who are already struggling with day-to-day life. The involvement of police and the investigatory nature of the process can add to the feeling that death by suicide is stigmatising compared to other deaths.

Supporting people through this process requires knowledge of the inquest system and understanding of how the process intersects with bereavement by suicide. The process can take more than six months, during which people can feel that they cannot properly deal with their grief.

No 'one size fits all'

It is often said that suicide bereavement is like 'grief with the volume turned up'. As well as the complexity of emotions and processes involved after death by suicide, the type of support needed can differ hugely depending on individual circumstances. Support can include emotional support and practical help, for example, with housing or finances. There is no set pattern to how or when people might need support.

There can be no time limit placed on when someone is ready to 'move on' and we know from our partners that some people continue to access support long after the bereavement. Anniversaries, birthdays, and other milestones events can continue to be difficult for many years.

⁴ Pitman, A. L., Osborn, D. P. J., Rantell, K., & King, M. B. (2016). Bereavement by suicide as a risk factor for suicide attempt: a cross-sectional national UK-wide study of 3432 young bereaved adults. *BMJ Open*, 6 (1), ARTN e009948. doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2015-009948



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The importance of timeliness

From Grief to Hope was a landmark survey of over 7000 people who had been bereaved by suicide. The *timeliness and flexibility* of support was highlighted as an important factor in that support's effectiveness.

Participants bereaved or affected by suicide told us that immediate proactive support was important. After initial contact with agencies in the days and weeks following the death, participants indicated that ongoing follow-up support should be available with a specialist suicide bereavement support worker. Having access to support when they needed it was widely requested.

From Grief to Hope: the collective voices of those bereaved or affected by suicide in the UK (2020).⁵

2. How can suicide bereavement support services address this need?

Providing what people need, when they need it.

People want a range of support options, with the flexibility to respond to their needs. Suicide bereavement support is non-linear, allowing people to move in and out according to their needs.

Because of the complicated nature of grief after suicide, services are there when needed, for as long as they are needed. This open, needs-focused level of service requires understanding, sensitivity and expertise, so we have developed [core standards](#) for suicide bereavement liaison services to ensure that they are developed to respond effectively.

Suicide Bereavement support Services follow a [pathway](#) which aims to ensure a timely and proactive first contact, but that follows a person's own personal journey to establish what that support needs to look like. A range of diverse organisations are part of this pathway, but support through a suicide bereavement single point of contact can help enormously in navigating through the pathway.

Local suicide bereavement support can include support with the inquest process, helping people to navigate the practicalities (such as what to ask a coroners' officer, or how to get a death certificate before the process has completed) as well as the difficult emotions that can be linked with a public hearing or potential media interest.

⁵ McDonnell S, Hunt IM, Flynn S, Smith S, McGale B, Shaw J. From Grief to Hope: The Collective Voice of those Bereaved or Affected by Suicide in the UK. Manchester: University of Manchester. November 2020



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Making connections locally

An effective suicide bereavement support service is an integral part of the local community's infrastructure. Support services are making connections with other organisations nationally and locally while remaining focused on individual need.

A service needs to be aware of the support in their locality so that people can be signposted and referred appropriately. Community connections are broad enough to cover the complexity of one person's life, and deep enough to form enduring and supportive local partnerships. Strong relationships exist with first responders, coroners and local partners, building relationships with organisations that offer support specific to different cultures, languages, sexualities, genders, and economic backgrounds.

Suicide bereavement services support people beyond their grief, with issues such as housing, finances, or signposting to specialist help for trauma, substance misuse, domestic violence, or other more complex situations.

At a time when they may be feeling overwhelmed with the weight of their grief, people can benefit from a single point of contact as a gateway to a range of bespoke and local support, connecting with other services where needed.

Tackling stigma

The stigma of suicide is a known barrier to bereaved family members seeking help, as well as to others offering support.

Pitman AL, Osborn DPJ, Rantell K, King MB. The stigma perceived by people bereaved by suicide and other sudden deaths.

Those working in suicide bereavement support are adept at talking about suicide openly and without stigma. Services face outwards, meeting with local organisations such as schools, colleges, workplaces to support and increase understanding of suicide.

Understanding stigma is essential to enabling those in need of support to access that support. Staff know how to engage people at the right time and in the right, most sensitive, way, including understanding of the cultural or faith-based implications of stigma in help-seeking.

Innovating and learning

Suicide bereavement support is a relatively new field but is growing every year,



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this has led to an agile, problem-solving and innovative group of organisations and services sharing and learning all the time. Staying in touch with peers and networks across the country through use of resources such as the [Support after Suicide Central Hub](#) helps to support continuing professional development with benefits for staff and clients.

3. Resources for more information

[From Grief to Hope: the collective voices of those bereaved or affected by suicide in the UK \(2020\)](#)

[Support After Suicide Partnership: A compelling case](#)

[Support After Suicide Partnership: Core standards](#)

[Support After Suicide Partnership: Case studies](#)

[Support after a suicide: a guide to providing local services – Public Health England and NSPA \(2016\)](#)

[NSPA Ten steps to delivering a service](#)

[Core Standards for Developing and Running a Suicide Bereavement Support Service](#)