

# Suicide postvention in the workplace

Supporting organisations and employees

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# Background:

- More than 5,642 suicides registered in England and Wales in 2022.
- Healthcare professionals and emergency services, vets and agricultural workers at greater risk.
- A strong focus on prevention needed – organisations should promote good mental health and offer accessible support.
- Most organisations (esp. smaller ones) will experience a colleague's suicide only rarely.
- Little known about how to help colleagues and organisations recover after a suicide; often stigma and silence occur.
- Incorporating suicide postvention into workplace policies is vital for individual healing and organisational resilience.





# What is Suicide Postvention?

- *Actions taken by an organisation to provide effective support after a death by suicide in a sensitive manner.*
- Aims to promote recovery, preventing further adverse outcomes.
- Focuses on supporting affected employees, preventing further suicides, restoring workplace stability, and reducing stigma
- Also relevant to unexplained deaths of colleagues for any cause.

# Existing suicide postvention frameworks

- NHS employees
- Primary healthcare organisations
- Anaesthetists
- Veterinarians
- Police
- Fire fighters



The  
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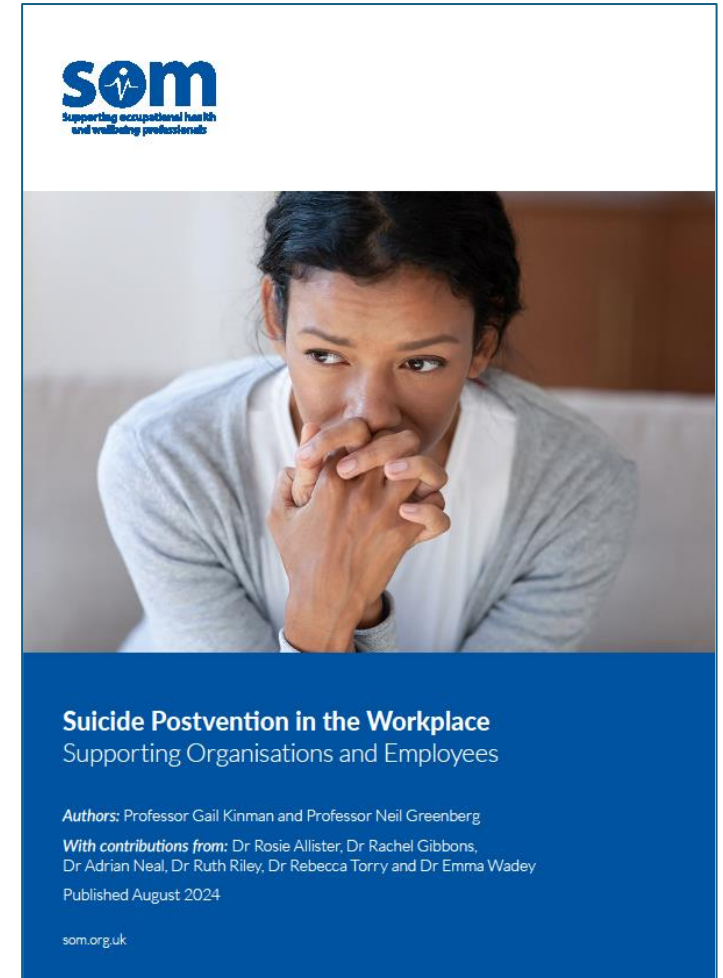
Supporting Doctors' Mental Health



# Our aims

- To synthesise current knowledge to provide practical, evidence-informed recommendations to assist any organisation to respond to the death by suicide of colleagues – or the unexpected death from other causes.

<https://www.som.org.uk/suicide-postvention-workplace-new-som-resource>



# Our approach

Drew upon high-quality, research informed sources and contributions from experts from various disciplines.

## Key steps:

1. Reviewed existing postvention guidelines and other relevant sources.
2. Organised a workshop to gather expert perspectives.
3. Identified a series of 'core' tasks and timelines.
4. Used a Delphi method to reach consensus.
5. Identified ten recommendations from the process.



# Key recommendations for suicide postvention: Summary

**1. Plan response in advance**

**2. Ensure plan is practical and deliverable**

**3. Offer a timely, caring and considerate response for all who need it**

**4. Avoid blame or scapegoating, promoting mutual empathy and compassion**

**5. Pause and reflect. Recognise that people will respond differently**

**6. Communicate clearly and frequently, providing information on support options**

**7. At all stages, consider the wishes of the family/loved ones**

**8. Pay careful attention to boundaries, encouraging a balanced involvement**

**9. Avoid initiatives that are not evidence-based**

**10. Decide how best to remember and honour the person who has died**

# 1: Ensure your organisation is prepared

*“It would have been very helpful at the time to have had guidance. Looking back, it would have been great if there was a policy ... something written down somewhere that you could refer to.” (Riley et al.,2023)*

- Although death by suicide is rare, organisations are legally required to plan how to manage any outcome that significantly threaten workers’ mental health.
- All organisations should plan their response to a potential death by suicide - larger ones should establish a trained, resourced postvention team in advance.
- All organisations should foster a compassionate, suicide-aware culture.
- *“Failing to prepare is preparing to fail”*



## 2. Ensure the plan is practical and deliverable

*“We need standard paragraphs to use in this situation. Because of individual circumstances, you might tweak it, but you have something on which to base communication without having to think of it from scratch.” (Luce et al., 2024)*

- Develop and implement a response plan, including protocols for communicating the news to all relevant parties (inc. family, colleagues, wider workforce).
- Be aware, some staff who need to be informed may be on leave, have left the organisation, or be on placements.
- Existing guidelines/proformas can be helpful, but every situation is unique.
- Arrange time off for the funeral and the processes that follow.
- Consider how to manage any media enquiries (if relevant).

# 3: Leaders should respond with care

*“Suddenly I was in charge of everyone’s feelings but was expected to carry on as normal.” (Kinman & Torry, 2020)*

- Ensuring staff feel supported after a traumatic event facilitates effective coping mechanisms and aids recovery.
- All staff, including leaders, should provide timely, caring and considerate support to colleagues and, if needed, seek support themselves.
- Line managers should be trained how to speak to staff about their mental health and be adequately supported for this role.
- Signposting to support services and encouraging information sharing helps build a culture of mutual support.

# 4: Avoid blame and/or scapegoating

*“Death by suicide can be a potent cause of anger. People expect to feel sadness after the death of a person who is close to them, but anger can cause confusion, anxiety, and shame as it may be seen as inappropriate.”*  
(Kinman & Torry, 2020)

- Be aware that self-blame, blaming others, or blaming the organisation are common responses.
- Doubts about missing signs of distress, or failing to support their colleague, can amplify the already intense emotions linked to grief.
- Encourage mutual empathy and compassion.
- Emphasise that nobody is to blame and offer reassurance.

# 5. Accept that people will respond differently

*“In terms of support, the right person is needed at the right time in the right place. People’s reactions are different, so different input is needed.” (Kinman & Torry, 2020)*

- Avoid knee-jerk reactions. Take time for yourself and others to reflect and discuss how to best respond to the death.
- Understand a colleague’s unique perspective – not a relative or a non-work friend.
- Responses will be individual, so flexibility is essential. Some people may prefer to be with colleagues; others may choose to go home.
- Employers should carefully assess whether staff in safety-critical or emotionally demanding roles remain fit for work, even if they are willing.

## 6. Regular communication is essential

*Proactive communication with affected staff members must be continued in the weeks and months after the death, so they know how and where to access ongoing support.” (Riley et al., 2023)*

- Communicate clearly and regularly with the team, managers and wider colleagues, including information about available support options.
- Ensure people have access to support over the longer term and assist them with this if required.
- Provide ongoing guidance and reassurance about any investigations or an inquest. This may require legal advice.

# 7: Consider the impact on the family and their wishes

*“The family wanted to be open with everyone about the cause of death and the tragedy of it. They wanted the struggle of depression to be better understood.” (Kinman & Torry, 2020)*

- Always consider the family and loved ones. Make contact to identify their wishes regarding communications and ongoing contact.
- Be aware of cultural and religious sensitivities regarding suicide and grief, and the availability of support for family members.
- Identify who will maintain contact and the best method for doing so. A single point of contact can be helpful but ensure they are well supported.

# 8: Pay careful attention to boundaries

*“Stigma is often at the heart of some of the reasons why people do not take action. Because I think nobody would not want to support somebody, but often we are frozen by fear and stigma at all levels.” (Riley et al., 2023)*

- A desire to be under, or over-involved is common after a death by suicide.
- Concerns about saying or doing the wrong thing can cause hesitancy in offering or seeking support, causing confusion about appropriate involvement.
- A useful question to guide boundaries is “What would you do if the death was by another cause”?

# 9: Choose interventions with care

*“Knowing that support was there was very helpful and reassuring. We had a functional team and did a good job of supporting each other.” (Kinman & Torry, 2020)*

- Be wary of non-evidence-based initiatives (e.g. psychological debriefing), including those offered by well-meaning individuals.
- The impact on colleagues will depend on several factors – significant mental health problems are rare
- Consider whether formal interventions are necessary and, if so, when they should be delivered and to whom.
- Take advice from human resources or occupational health if needed.



# 10. Co-create a memorial with colleagues and family

*“We made a poster and got a condolence book. One of the team put flowers in our colleague’s room.” (Kinman & Torry, 2020)*

- Decide how best to remember and honour the colleague who has died, with input from staff (and family, if appropriate).
- Options include a condolence book, a memorial event, or fundraising to support a relevant charity, but sensitivity is needed regarding timing.
- Getting back to ‘normal’: Consider how to move on from the death, while still honouring and remembering the colleague.

# Conclusions:



- Effective suicide postvention helps to support staff, shows an organisation cares and helps foster a resilient organisational culture.
- By prioritising effective, frequent communication, providing appropriate resources, and addressing employees' diverse emotional needs, organisations can mitigate the impact of such tragedies and promote healing.
- Planning and compassionate responses are essential for creating a supportive environment to encourage open discussions of mental health and wellbeing.
- We hope this guide proves to be useful and effective. Feedback is welcomed!

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