



Skills
Development
Scotland

Supporting apprentices around suicide and self-harm

WELCOME

Many people experience thoughts of suicide. Not everyone who does will go on to actively consider suicide and take action to attempt to take their own lives, but many will, and two people die by suicide every day in Scotland. Suicide remains one of the leading causes of preventable death in Scotland and the tragedy of any suicide also affects a very wide range of people known to the person. In most workplaces, it is likely that at any time some employees will be experiencing thoughts about suicide and may be at risk of acting on this. Suicide can also be an area where many people feel anxious about how to approach the subject, and what actions to take if they are worried about someone.

You may become aware of someone being at risk of suicide directly through them disclosing it, or it could be from less direct ways such as concerns about someone's behaviour, gut instinct about how they appear in their wellbeing or because work colleagues have flagged a concern. It is vital that staff in your organisation feel able to have conversations with colleagues about suicide. They do not need to be experts, but a compassionate conversation can sometimes make all the difference to saving a life.

The key action to take if you are concerned about someone being at risk of taking their own life is to ask the question directly, "have you been thinking about suicide?" or "have you had thoughts of taking your life?". It is best to ask this question directly and not to use euphemisms or minimising statements such as "You're not going to do anything daft are you?". Many people worry that asking so directly may create a negative reaction, or even put the idea in to someone's mind. This is usually not the case and there is no evidence that asking is likely to put the idea into someone's mind. Most people who experience thoughts of suicide find it extremely hard to tell someone and a direct question is the best chance of supporting them to share their feelings. It is better to ask and be wrong than for someone to be left alone with thoughts of suicide.

If the person responds that they are feeling suicidal, there are a few steps you can take:

- Simply listen with compassion and kindness. You do not need to have answers to any problems the person discusses. Simply listening and showing you care can make a huge difference. It is best to avoid statements such as "well, everyone feels like that sometimes". It can seem helpful to try and put the person's situation in context, but everyone is unique and statements like this can make the person feel their problems are being minimised or misunderstood. Listen and offer to make time to meet again if the person would find it helpful.
- Encourage the person to speak to their GP urgently. You can offer support from work to make this possible such as time off at short notice. You could offer to go to the GP with them if they would find that helpful.
- You can provide them with details of the support organisations identified at the end of this resource.

- You can discuss what support you can put in place as their employer/training provider to help with their wellbeing.
- If you are very worried about someone's safety, it is important to take immediate action. Do not leave the person alone. If you believe that someone is actively planning to take their own life imminently, you can call 999 and request emergency support from health professionals.

You can watch a short video here which gives an overview of having a conversation about suicide:



Supporting people who self-harm

Self-harm is when someone deliberately carries out an act likely to cause them injury. This can take many forms such as deliberate cutting of arms or other body parts, biting or hair pulling. It is frequently associated with younger people but can be present across age groups. The reasons why people self-harm is complex, but it is generally associated with creating an experience where the pain of the harm helps to reduce feelings of emotional distress.

You may become aware of someone in your organisation who you think may be harming themselves. Some indicators that this could be the case can be:

- Unexplained cuts, marks, bruises or burns.
- Only wearing long sleeved clothing.
- People often making space for privacy, e.g. long periods in the bathroom.

There are many myths about self-harm such as:

| Myth | Fact |
|--|--|
| People who self-harm are manipulative and attention seeking. | Self-harm is a way of coping with emotional distress. People usually self-harm in secret. |
| People who self-harm are trying to end their lives. | People self-harm as a means of managing their emotions and trying to cope and survive with difficult thoughts and feelings. It is not usually a suicide attempt. The distinction is in the intent. |
| Only teenage girls and “hysterical” women self-harm. | Self-harm can affect people of all ages, races, genders, sexual orientations, and economic backgrounds. |
| The severity of the harm is reflective of the level of distress. | Self-harm is about the person and how they use it to cope and does not mean that one person’s problem is “worse” than another’s – we all have different levels of resilience |

If someone in your organisation is self-harming, it can create a lot of anxiety, no one likes to think that someone is hurting themselves. However, it is important to stay calm and not to assume that simply stopping the self-harming is a first priority. Self-harm fulfils a purpose for people and attempting to force someone to stop can be counter-productive and create more distress, and sometimes the risk of more dangerous behaviours.

As with concerns about suicide, the first priority should be to have a direct, but compassionate conversation with the person, asking, “are you doing things to hurt yourself?”.

If the person acknowledges this, communicate that you would like to help but that you are not going to try and make them stop. Provide a compassionate listening ear and signpost them to their GP and to organisations such as Penumbra who provide support to people who self-harm in **several areas of Scotland**. If the person is harming at work and you are aware of this, you will need to carry out a risk assessment to manage this, but this should be done in a collaborative and supportive way with the person, with a strong communication that they are not being judged. Again, organisations like Penumbra can support you to do this in ways that ensure you are fulfilling your duties but supporting the person compassionately

You can access a range of resources on self-harm from **Penumbra**.

Getting support

If you are struggling with your mental wellbeing, the key thing is to ask for help. As well as your employer, learning provider and GP, there are many organisations who provide support for emotional and mental wellbeing. Some of these organisations are listed below.

Penumbra

Penumbra provide a wide range of mental health support services across Scotland.

0131 475 2380

Breathing Space

Breathing Space is a national telephone support service run by the NHS. It provides emotional support 24 hours a day and can be called by anyone needing someone to talk to.

0800 83 85 87

Mental Health Support Service (Access to Work)

This confidential service is available at no charge to any employees with depression, anxiety, stress or other mental health issues affecting their work.

0300 456 8114

Samaritans

Samaritans provide a non-judgemental listening space for any kind of emotional distress, including, but not only feelings about suicide. You can call Samaritans free at any time of the day on **116 123**.

SAMH (Scottish Association for Mental Health)

SAMH also provide a wide range of mental health support services.

0344 800 0550

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