

# **Policy Report: Suspected Suicide and Social Media**

Managing Risks Associated with the use of Social Media in  
the Aftermath of a Suspected Suicide

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# Summary

This document outlines key considerations for organisations who have a role responding in the aftermath of a suspected suicide. It provides recommendations for mitigating against harmful effects and promoting protective effects of social media use following a suspected suicide and encourages reflection upon current policy and procedures. The purpose of doing so is to prevent suicide contagion and clusters (further suicides).

## About

This policy report draws upon research undertaken by Dr Jo Bell and Dr Chris Westoby at the University of Hull in collaboration with the Humber and North Yorkshire Health and Care Partnership between 2020 – 2023. The research aimed to shed new light on how social media exposure to suspected suicides impacts on communities. Our findings revealed that:

- News of a suspected suicide spreads rapidly on social media.
- Multiple users often respond by sharing posts and speculating about the death, with both positive and negative effects.
- Shared content and public comments can influence how people perceive and respond to suicidality.
- Discussions on social media can increase distress and the risk of more suicides, particularly among young people.
- Social media can also be used to manage trauma, ease grief, and reduce the risk of further suicides.

## Background

**Each year between 700,000 – 800,000 people die by suicide globally (World Health Organisation, 2023). In England and Wales estimates are between 5000 – 6000 deaths (Office for National Statistics, 2022).**

Death by suicide has a profound impact on society, affecting families and communities over generations. It is a critical risk factor for subsequent suicide. Suicide prevention involves a wide range of activities that varies from provision of optimal conditions for healthy growth and development, to timely support and treatment for mental health conditions, to the restriction of the means of suicide and more. Responsible reporting about suicide is also a critical component in suicide prevention. It is now widely accepted that exposure to suicide via media can play a vital role in shaping public understanding of suicide and can in turn influence behaviours.

The effects of exposure to media coverage can be both positive (protective) and negative (harmful, e.g., ‘copycat’ suicides); both have been recognised as an important public health issue for many years. However, in recent years, media has changed significantly. Traditional media now exists alongside instantaneous interactive methods of information sharing (social media) that can be created and controlled by anyone. The ways in which we are exposed to suicide-related content has consequently become much more complex and dynamic. The recently updated National Suicide Prevention Strategy for England and Wales (2023 - 2028) acknowledges this in a new priority for action: to promote online safety and responsible media content to reduce harms, improve support and signposting, and provide helpful messages about suicide and self-harm.

Guidelines for safe and responsible media reporting of suicide highlight the ways in which content could be harmful (i.e. could trigger further suicides or distress). Harmful content can include stories that romanticise, sensationalise (exaggerate to provoke strong emotional reaction) or normalise suicidal behaviour, promote suicide as a possible solution to problems or share methods and locations used. Instead, guidance encourages the promotion of positive mental health stories and details of local support resources for those affected. However, these guidelines are primarily tailored for media professionals; they do not adequately address the issue of content generated and circulated by the broader public. When the public at large are responding to and producing content in this way then it becomes a public health issue. This is new and requires different types of coordinated responses that go beyond current established guidelines.

**This report is aimed at those who work in suicide prevention and organisations responding in the immediate aftermath of a suspected suicide such as: Police, Public Health, Mental Health Services, Schools, Colleges, Universities.**

# Considerations for Development

**1. Monitor social media for content:** Organisations have a responsibility to identify and address harmful and sensational content to prevent it from spreading and to mitigate the risk of it negatively impacting others. Responsible monitoring and intervention demonstrate an organisation's commitment to the well-being of its community members, helping protect its reputation and public trust. Actively monitoring social media (within and outside of its own channels) and addressing content sends a clear message that the organisation values its duty to foster a safe and supportive environment, contributing to broader efforts in suicide prevention and mental health support.

**2. Engaged Social Media Monitoring:** Regular monitoring of social media allows organisations to identify and respond to mentions of suspected suicides in real-time. Early detection enables swift intervention, helping to prevent the potential escalation of harmful discussions and the risk of additional suicides, especially amongst those who are already in crisis. Active moderation offers the opportunity to post preventive content and narratives such as positive stories, resources, and messages of hope. It helps reduce the risk of sensationalism, misinformation and speculation. When a suspected suicide is reported on social media, organisations can act promptly with pre-determined 'cookie-cut' responses. For example:

***"We ask that all who comment here consider the bereaved and demonstrate respect and empathy. Please consider who may read and be further affected by negative comments"***

**3. Reducing Online Speculation:** Our Research shows addressing online speculation helps to prevent the spread of false narratives, fueling toxic discourses and leading to worsened distress with the potential for additional suicides. We found that unsubstantiated speculation also intrudes upon the privacy and dignity of those involved, extending beyond emotional distress. Reducing online speculation helps to prevent sensationalism, discourage the glorification of suicide, and support responsible reporting, minimising the risk of harmful narratives and copycat incidents. By reducing speculation organisations can help establish a more responsible, ethical, and compassionate online environment in the wake of sensitive events and pave the way for a more informed public discourse on mental health.

**4. Provision of Support Information:** While reducing online speculation relating to suspected suicides, it is important to discourage people from becoming too involved and trying to help people directly. Instead, organisations should work to promote protective content, including links to crisis lines and support services such as [Hub of Hope](#) and [Samaritans](#). This can provide a way of reaching out to people who are bereaved and affected. Studies reveal that offering supportive resources and promoting healthy discourse can contribute to reduced suicidal behaviours and increase help-seeking.

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## Conclusion

This document sets out why it is important for organisations to respond to content and narratives generated by the public on social media in the aftermath of a suspected suicide, and how this should be done. Our research emphasizes the importance of real-time social media monitoring, early intervention to prevent harmful discussions, and addressing online speculation to curb false narratives. The evolving media landscape necessitates responses beyond traditional guidelines, urging organisations to actively engage in the promotion of protective content.

Organisations need to: monitor social media in the aftermath; report harmful content to providers; remove harmful content where possible and appropriate; and signpost users to help and support services and other protective content.

By simultaneously reducing harmful speculation and promoting supportive information, organisations contribute to responsible reporting and play a vital role in broader suicide prevention efforts, aligning with their duty to prioritise community well-being in the aftermath of a suspected suicide.

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***"The post went out and people started to panic and it got shared... thousands and thousands of times... It was very, very traumatic for everybody ... different rumours and different stories ... It was pretty chaotic"***

*Bell and Westoby (2022), p4.*

# References

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## Additional Information

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Additional information for prevention around social media and suicide can be found at [www.passhub.org.uk](http://www.passhub.org.uk)

Additional information about the University of Hull can be found at [www.hull.ac.uk](http://www.hull.ac.uk)

