

Managing Risks - Social Media in the Aftermath of a Suspected Suicide

Introduction

Death by suicide has a profound impact on families and communities and is a critical risk factor for subsequent suicide. It can cause a ripple effect, reaching everyone that had a connection with the person who died. Schools have a vital role in responding appropriately in the aftermath to help the process of recovery amongst affected communities.

News of a suicide can spread rapidly via social media. Our research has shown that activity often prompts multiple users to respond, sharing posts and ruminating publicly about the nature and reasons for the death. Important positive and negative effects arise from this. The ways in which people post, comment and respond about suicide has the potential to increase distress and increase the risk of further suicides in the community. Young people in particular are susceptible to this. Our work also established that social media can be harnessed to manage trauma and alleviate distress.

This policy brief is aimed at people who work in colleges and universities with a potential responsibility toward managing risks and supporting communities in the event of a suspected suicide. It provides policy and practice recommendations for mitigating against harmful effects and promoting protective effects of social media use following a suspected suicide.

Practical recommendations for Colleges, Universities and Student Unions

1. Create a clear and comprehensive social media policy that outlines guidelines on how to address and respond to content about a suspected suicide.

Ensure that this policy emphasises empathy, privacy and safe communication. Review your policy regularly and update it as required. You may wish to circulate the policy to existing employees, members, volunteers etc., and incorporate it into onboarding exercises, with additional training where appropriate.

[More information: Samaritans responding to a death that is suspected to be a suicide](#)

[More information for schools, colleges and universities: Samaritans Step by Step](#)

2. Identify who is responsible for monitoring social media channels for mentions of suicide.

Ensure they have adequate training and support to carry out this role effectively. Remember, this must also include social media channels and forums associated with clubs, societies and any other associated channels that your social media team does not run or moderate directly. They should all be familiar with the policy and receive appropriate training, although you may wish to instruct these members to report any mention of suspected suicide to permanent members of staff and hand over these responsibilities.

Tip: even for well-trained employees or volunteers, this may be a daunting task with consequences for their own mental health. Ensure they feel supported and promote any resources and programmes available.

3. Monitor your channels and respond promptly to mentions of suspected suicide.

Actively monitor social media channels for any mention of suspected suicide or related topics in posts or comments. Early detection enables swift intervention, helping to prevent the potential escalation of harmful discussions and the risk of additional suicides. Active moderation offers the opportunity to post preventive content. Pre-determined 'cookie-cut' responses can be helpful in preventing the escalation of harmful discourse. For example:

Example Response: 'We ask that all who comment here consider those who are bereaved and demonstrate respect and empathy. Please consider who may read and be affected by negative comments.'

Provide training and educational resources for team members who manage social media accounts and content, even if they are not directly responsible. On some platforms, tools or bots that flag potentially distressing content can help in early identification, but this should not replace human moderation. If a suspected suicide is reported on your social media channels, respond promptly with a pre-determined protocol. Express condolences, encourage support resources, promote protective content and discourage harmful discussions or speculation (see 5).

4. Discourage, hide and delete harmful content.

Trolls, who post intentionally inflammatory content, can often be easy to identify, report and remove, and respond to with disciplinary actions where appropriate. However, this is not the only kind of harmful content you may encounter. Any content that sensationalises or dramatises suicide can be potentially harmful, as can details that reveal specific methods and locations. Remove and discourage posts that describe specific methods, locations or other unnecessary details.

Where someone who may also be vulnerable responds with a negative anecdote or lived experience, signpost them but limit engagement. You may wish to lock or restrict comments on posts.

Discourage and remove posts that involve speculation or blame in response to a suspected suicide: these are harmful and can even interfere with a subsequent investigation. Be aware of news outlets sensationalising or dramatising the suspected suicide, which can in turn be shared by social media users, fuelling harmful discourse.

Remember: many of those posting may be well-meaning or expressing legitimate frustrations with systems that they do not believe are working. However, the evidence shows that this is not the place for this content as this can be harmful to other users. Direct them to more appropriate forums – such as the school counselling options - and reiterate your organisation’s position while maintaining an empathetic tone.

Why is reducing speculation so important?

Reducing online speculation is vital to prevent toxic discourse, sensationalism, discourage the glorification of suicide, and support safe reporting. Unfounded rumours and misinformation heighten the risk of harm and stigma surrounding suicide, posing a threat to affected individuals and communities. Unsubstantiated speculation also intrudes upon the privacy and dignity of those involved. By reducing speculation, we can work towards establishing a more responsible, ethical, and compassionate online environment in the wake of such sensitive events.

5. Promote protective content and provide support information.

It is important to discourage people from becoming too involved and trying to help others directly. Instead, organisations should work to promote protective content, including links to support services such as [Hub of Hope](#) and [Samaritans](#).

Encourage educational content on seeking help amid difficult circumstances, emphasising actionable steps. Providing links to suicide prevention organisations and support services is essential. You may wish to list services in your area or those aimed at a specific audience, such as men, young people, or BAME and LGBTQ+ communities. These can be listed alongside national and even international services. While it is important to highlight those most relevant to your audience, it is important to acknowledge that social media content can often be seen by anyone anywhere in the world.

Tip: Hub of Hope is available to users across the UK to enable them to find relevant services in their area - <https://hubofhope.co.uk/>

Example Responses – *“We understand that in the wake of _____’s death, feelings of shock, anger, and confusion may be expected. Expressing these emotions is part of the healing process; we recommend [insert details of place / service where people can talk / write openly or seek help]. We ask that all who comment consider the bereaved and demonstrate respect and empathy. Please pause and consider who may read and be further affected by your comments.”*

“If you or someone you know is feeling desperate help is always available. The best way to honour [person’s name] is to seek help if you or someone you know is struggling. If you’re feeling lost, desperate or alone please get in touch. [Insert details of help and support organisations].”

6. Beyond crisis management: engage in prevention.

Consider participating in suspected suicide prevention initiatives, such as awareness campaigns or partnerships with mental health organisations. Look for local campaigns and those that may appeal most to those engaging with your channels. Publicise other relevant training opportunities, such as mental health first aid training.

If you have found these tips useful, please share with other organisations in your area and direct any feedback to the contact details below!

Written by Dr Jo Bell, Dr Christopher Westoby and Dr Katie Cunnah.

For additional information and engagement contact -

Dr Jo Bell

Telephone: 01482 464687 & Email: j.bell@hull.ac.uk