



Work and Suicide NEU guidance for reps and local officers

What to do if someone is threatening imminent suicide

Call 999 and stay with them until the emergency services arrive.

[Rethink Mental Illness](https://rethink.org/carers-family-friends/what-you-need-to-know/suicidal-thoughts-how-to-support-someone) (rethink.org/carers-family-friends/what-you-need-to-know/suicidal-thoughts-how-to-support-someone) advises that if a person is saying they want to end their life now, or has already tried, it may help to talk to them and take the following steps until professional help arrives:

- Be supportive and accept what they are telling you.
- Ask whether they are thinking about ending their life now or soon.
- Try and get a better understanding of why.
- Ask about their reasons for living and dying, and listen to their answers. Try to explore their reasons for living in more detail.
- Ask whether they have tried to kill themselves before.
- Ask if they have plan for how they would do it in the future.
- Try to make them safe and be open to making reasonable steps to help them.
- Follow up any commitments that you agree to.
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If you are in the same room as the person, you may also be able to remove things that they could use to take their own life. This could include sharp objects and knives, cleaning products, medicines and belts.

If a person is in crisis, Rethink Mental Illness recommends not leaving them alone. However, if you feel that you may be harmed, remove yourself from the situation and call 999.

Introduction

The suicide of a colleague is a tragic event that thankfully, most reps and local officers will never encounter. While it is not always possible to determine why someone attempts to take their own life, problems with work or money can contribute to suicidal thoughts, so there are steps that unions can take to support members experiencing in these situations.

Union reps can obviously work to ensure that working practices are not contributing to employees' mental health conditions – for instance, by tackling bullying and harassment and the causes of work related stress. Union representatives can also work with employers to address the issue of suicide specifically, by developing policies in this area. However, a NEU representative may also be the person that a member experiencing difficulties will seek out. It is important that NEU reps and officers do not feel expected to act as counsellors or in place of qualified professionals. Union reps can, however, offer support to members in accessing the professional help they require.



What are suicidal feelings?

Rethink Mental Illness advises that people who feel suicidal may have some of the following thoughts:

- I have let myself and other people down.
- What is the point in living?
- I will never find a way out of my problem.
- I have lost everything.
- Things will never get better for me.
- Nobody cares about me.

What are the warning signs of suicide?

There is useful [NHS advice](#) on this area. People may be at high risk of suicide if they threaten to hurt or kill themselves; if they actively look for ways to kill themselves (stockpiling tablets, buying equipment that could be used to suffocate themselves); or if they talk or write about death, dying or suicide.

A person may also be at risk if they:

- report feelings of hopelessness
- have episodes of sudden rage and anger
- act recklessly and engage in risky activities with an apparent lack of concern about the consequences
- self-harm – including misusing drugs or alcohol, or using more than they usually do
- noticeably gain or lose weight due to a change in their appetite
- become increasingly withdrawn from friends, family and society in general
- appear anxious and agitated
- are unable to sleep or they sleep all the time
- have sudden mood swings – a sudden lift in mood after a period of depression could indicate they have made the decision to attempt suicide
- talk and act in a way that suggests their life has no sense of purpose
- lose interest in most things, including their appearance
- put their affairs in order, such as sorting out possessions or making a will.

Who is at risk of suicide?

The NHS estimates that around 90 per cent of the people who attempt, or die by, suicide have one or more mental health conditions, although it may not have been formally diagnosed. The conditions that are associated with the biggest risk of suicide include: severe depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, borderline personality disorder and anorexia nervosa.

The NHS also advises that certain things determine how vulnerable a person is to suicidal thinking and behaviour, including:

- life history – including having a traumatic experience during childhood or a history of sexual or physical abuse
- lifestyle – for example, drug or alcohol misuse
- employment – eg poor job security or low levels of job satisfaction
- relationships – being socially isolated, being a victim of bullying or having few close relationships



- genetics and family history.

The CPR acronym may be useful when considering who may be at risk of suicide:

- Current plan – are they thinking about suicide, have they made preparations to do so, including the means, have they made arrangements?
- Prior behaviour – have they attempted suicide before, self-harmed or engaged in risk-taking behaviour? (Note: prior behaviour alone is not a current sign of risk.)
- Resources – do they have personal support (such as friends, family, hobbies, work) and/or professional sources of support (eg if already in treatment for mental health issues) they could access or turn to?

Every year, there are around 5,000 suicides in England and Wales. Data on occupational suicides published by the [Office for National Statistics](#) in March 2017 show a greater than average incidence of suicide among female primary and nursery school teachers. Between 2011 and 2015 there were 139 suicides among female teachers and nearly 75 per cent (102) of these were primary or nursery teachers. Evidence suggests that work-related stressors such as Ofsted inspections have been connected to teacher suicides in recent years.

Research reported by [Hazards Magazine](#) found that there is an increase in suicides at times of restructuring and job losses.

What is the role of employers in relation to suicide?

In the UK, workplace suicide is not recognised in legislation and Health and Safety Executive (HSE) reporting requirements specifically exclude suicides from workplace death statistics. However, this does not mean there are no legal requirements on employers in relation to suicide prevention.

Employers have a legal duty to protect the health, safety and welfare of their employees at work. This duty covers all aspects of the role and includes risks to both physical and mental health. Issues such as stress, bullying and workload, that may cause some workers to have suicidal thoughts, must be addressed by the employer. This process involves assessing the workplace hazards, establishing who may be at risk, and taking steps to remove or reduce the risks as far as possible. Comprehensive guidance on tackling stress, bullying and harassment, and [workload](#) are available on the NEU website.

Employers should also have a specific suicide prevention policy that is integrated into the wider policy framework. Public Health England in conjunction with Business in the Community has produced a comprehensive [toolkit](#) for employers on suicide. It contains advice on key strategies for suicide prevention; how to identify employees at risk of suicide; how to respond to warning signs; suicide prevention; and links to further resources. The toolkit sets out how employers can achieve a safe and healthy workplace by:

- promoting good mental health and de-stigmatising mental health problems
- reducing stress at work
- preventing and taking action against bullying and harassment
- extending support and psychological health services



- educating and training managers and other key staff.

What can safety reps and local officers do?

If you are approached by a colleague who is distressed, displaying warning signs or saying they are feeling suicidal, the NHS advises that one of the best things to do is encourage the person to talk about their feelings and listen to what they have to say.

Do not make judgements about how they are thinking and behaving. Instead try asking direct questions, which could help them talk about how they are feeling. For instance, the NHS advises asking things such as 'where did that happen?' and 'how did that feel?' rather than using statements such as 'I know how you feel'. However, union reps and local officers are not expected to act as counsellors or provide expert advice. As well as letting the person talk about their feelings, you will most likely wish to encourage them to seek help, for instance from their GP, mental health professional, or a helpline or support group (details below).

You can seek to negotiate an effective suicide prevention policy with employers. Signposting employers to the Public Health England [toolkit](#) could form the basis of this process.

You can also take steps to deal with work-related problems that may be contributing to someone's suicidal feelings. This will also have the benefit of improving working conditions for the wider workforce. Issues that can be addressed include:

- Stress – the NEU offers an online stress survey for use in schools and across workplaces. This allows reps to establish the extent of, and causes of, stress and can be used as part of a stress audit. Information about the survey is contained in the NEU briefing Tackling Stress. Once a union stress audit has been undertaken, reps and local officers should present the evidence to management. The employer has a legal responsibility to undertake a stress risk assessment and implement control measures to remove the causes of work-related stress. Guidance for school leaders on preventing work-related mental health conditions by tackling stress is available on the NEU website.
- Workload – this is a significant cause of work-related stress. The NEU has produced a [guide](#) to tackling workload together, which includes a ten-step guide to developing a workload campaign in schools.
- Bullying and harassment – NEU guidance on bullying and harassment is available on the NEU website. In addition, there are model questionnaires which can be used in schools to establish the extent of bullying behaviour. There is also a bullying and harassment model policy that reps and local officers can use in negotiations on this issue with employers. (Note that you will need to be logged into the website to access these documents).
- Violence – guidance on violence and assaults against staff, and a model policy are available in the health and safety section of the NEU website. The NEU also offers an online violence survey, and the request form for accessing this is also in the health and safety section of the NEU website.

You can request that one or more of these issues are discussed at safety committee meetings or joint consultative committee meetings, both at school and employer level.



Further advice and information

[Work and suicide – A TUC guide to prevention for trade union activists](#)

Helplines and support groups

[Samaritans](#)

Helpline: 116 123, a free 24-hour service available every day of the year

email: jo@samaritans.org – if you prefer to write down how you're feeling or if you're worried about being overheard on the phone

[Childline](#)

Helpline: 0800 1111, for children and young people. Calls are free and the number won't show up on your phone bill.

[PAPYRUS](#)

A voluntary organisation supporting teenagers and young adults who are feeling suicidal. Tel: 0800 068 41 41

[Students Against Depression](#)

Website for students who are depressed, have a low mood or are having suicidal thoughts.

[Bullying UK](#)

Website for both children and adults affected by bullying. Helpline: 0808 800 2222

[Switchboard LGBT+](#)

Information, support and referral service for LGBT+ people – and anyone considering issues around their sexuality and/or gender identity. Provides information and support, both phone, email and instant messaging.

0300 330 0630 (10am-10pm daily) email: chris@switchboard.lgbt

Help for men

Around three quarters of suicides are male. The NHS advises that men may be more likely to avoid or ignore problems and many are reluctant to talk about their feelings or seek help when they need it.

[Campaign Against Living Miserably \(CALM\)](#)

Support group for young men who are feeling unhappy.

Helpline: 0800 58 58 58

[Survivors UK](#)

Offers web chat and support to men, including trans and gay/bisexual men, who have experienced sexual assault and rape.

[Mankind](#)

Offers support for men who have been sexually abused.

Helpline: 01273 911680