

At Your Side

Suicide Bereavement UK Guide for Families

When someone may have died by
suicide during or after military service

*“You’ve got to look for every bit of...
positivity that you possibly can.
If you can make anything better
or feed into something that’ll
make anything better for anybody
else, then that is just the biggest
positivity that I can take away from
this. So that helps me enormously.”*

Mary, mother, lost her serving daughter



KENSINGTON PALACE

At times of national and international crisis we look to our Armed Forces to provide help, support and stability. Members of our Armed Forces never shy away from a challenge - harnessing their skills and working together to help others. But in times of great challenge, it can be tempting to hide one's own needs.

Few of us will go through our lives without experiencing the loss of someone we love. Thankfully suicide is rare within the Armed Forces community, but for those bereaved by suicide, this loss can be a complex and long-term experience. Often the stigma surrounding suicide can prevent those affected from speaking out and seeking help.

I hope this guide will act as a vital source of guidance and support, helping those who are impacted by suicide to process their loss, during what can be dark days of grief.

Thank you to everyone whose experience has informed this guide and to the team who produced such a meaningful and helpful series. It is essential that the voices of those bereaved by suicide are heard.

There is no time limit to processing grief, but Catherine and I have met many bereaved families over the years and know the power that comes from sharing experiences, even in the most tragic of circumstances.

I hope you find this resource helpful. Please know that you are not alone.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Lily'.

The At Your Side Suicide Bereavement UK guides

The At Your Side guide for families is one of three Suicide Bereavement UK guides written by the bereaved for the bereaved.

They offer guidance when someone may have died by suicide during or after their military service. Each guide in the *At Your Side* series is written for different users bereaved by suicide:



**At Your Side
Suicide Bereavement UK
guide for serving personnel**



**At Your Side
Suicide Bereavement UK
guide for veterans**



**At Your Side
Suicide Bereavement UK
guide for families**

Where can I access the guides?

The *At Your Side* guides are available from the Suicide Bereavement UK website: suicidebereavementuk.com/armedforces.

Suicide Bereavement UK is an internationally recognised organisation specialising in suicide bereavement research and the development of evidence-informed support materials for people bereaved by suicide. The contents of the guides have been informed by the experiences of individuals bereaved by suicide and high-quality research and practice.

Why do we need a suicide bereavement guide for families?

This *At Your Side* guide has been designed for families bereaved or affected by the suicide of a relative during or after the person's military service. It is also relevant for anyone who supports these families. The guide demonstrates that no family member bereaved by suicide need feel alone. There are organisations with knowledge, skills, and desire to provide support (see *Section 6* for details).

If you are feeling suicidal and feel unable to keep yourself safe, please call 999 or go to your nearest NHS Accident and Emergency Department (A&E).

You can also call NHS 111 if you are worried about an urgent mental health concern. The NHS 111 service is staffed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by a team of fully trained advisers. **Call free on:111.**

Samaritans is also available 24/7 and can be called free on 116 123 or email jo.@samaritans.org

Contact details for further support organisations are listed in this guide in *Section 6*

Who informed this guide?

This guide has been co-produced with families of the UK Armed Forces community, who, as part of the Armed Forces Suicide Bereavement study (suicidebereavementuk.com/the-development-of-an-armed-forces-suicide-bereavement-pack), shared their experiences of losing a spouse, adult child, parent or sibling during or after the person's military service.

Quotations in this guide are from family members who participated in the study. Some participating family members were 'veteran' or 'serving' at the time of their bereavement and are described as such in their quotations. **Names and some identifying features associated with quotations have been changed to protect participants' identities.**

Wording used in this guide

In this guide we use the wording 'died by suicide' rather than the term 'committed' suicide. Although both terms are still widely used, the older 'committed' term originated from a time when someone who died in this way was viewed to have committed a crime. As suicide is no longer a criminal offence in the UK, we use the newer, more accurate terminology. Suicide also has a specific legal definition and the advice in this guide may also be helpful where 'open verdicts' have been reached.

This guide is endorsed by the Forcer Protocol CIC



Authors

Dr Sharon McDonnell^{1,2}, Dr Pauline Nelson¹, Angela Samata¹, and Liz Koole¹

¹ Suicide Bereavement UK

² The University of Manchester

Dedication

This guide is dedicated to all families bereaved by suicide and those they have lost.

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Section 1: Suicide and its impact



“Suicide has to be talked about doesn’t it? Because otherwise, we’re just doing what everyone else does and shoving our heads in the sand.”

Maggie, ex-RAF Corporal, lost her veteran husband



The people on this page are all bereaved by suicide



With the help of families bereaved by suicide, we have put together information that we think you will find helpful during this difficult time. This section of *At Your Side* explains some of the facts about suicide, who might be affected when someone dies and where to seek help if you or someone you know is feeling suicidal.

The main messages about suicide and its impact are listed in Box 1.

Box 1. Main messages: suicide and its impact

- There is no single reason why someone dies by suicide. Rather, it is often that the person experiences a build-up of stressors that create a sense of hopelessness and despair.
- Suicide bereavement is more common than many of us realise.
- The suicide of a relative can be devastating for the person’s immediate family and loved ones.
- Many other people can be impacted when a relative dies by suicide during or after their military service, for example, friends, current and ex-colleagues, neighbours, anyone who is caring for the person’s children including school/college staff and pupils, professionals and even strangers.
- The impact of suicide and feelings of loss can differ depending on your relationship with the person that has died.
- Asking someone directly if they are feeling suicidal will not put the idea in their head or increase their risk of dying by suicide. It is much more likely to generate a meaningful conversation that has the potential to save their life.

- If a person feels suicidal, it does not mean they will always feel this way. Suicidal thoughts and behaviours may be present for a short duration and can vary in intensity over time.
- If you or someone you know may be feeling suicidal there are sources of support that can help. See **Section 6** or details.

When a family member dies by suicide

When a relative dies by suicide during or after their military service, there are challenges for bereaved families and the people around them. A suicide is an individual tragedy and a loss to the person’s family and to society. The impact can be devastating to relatives, friends and colleagues past and present. Those left behind can experience intense and sometimes conflicting emotions with many unanswered questions.

An added stressor is the potential public and press coverage when a serving or veteran family member dies by suicide.

Suicide has no boundaries and can affect anyone at any time regardless of age, gender, rank, social or educational background or perceived standing in society. At any one time, one in five people in the UK experiences suicidal thoughts¹. These types of thoughts are common when you are bereaved by suicide. Most people bereaved by suicide never act on these thoughts but looking after yourself and those you care about is important.

If you are feeling suicidal, or know someone who is, please see **Section 6** of this guide for contact details of organisations you can talk to now.

¹ McManus S, Bebbington P, Jenkins R, Brugha T. (eds.) (2016). Mental health and wellbeing in England: Adult psychiatric morbidity survey 2014

The complexity of suicide

Suicide is complex. There is no single reason why someone dies by suicide. Rather, it is often that the person experiences a build-up of stressors that create a sense of hopelessness and despair. They may have made previous suicide attempts; they may have been behaving erratically or in a challenging way; you may have been supporting them for a long time. Some families are unaware that their relative was at risk of dying by suicide and their loss can come as a great shock.

Being made aware that a family member has died

Families may learn of their relative's death in a number of ways. They may be informed by the emergency services or an MoD notifying officer, they may have been there when their relative died, or they may have found them.

It is important to remember that finding out about your relative's death is extremely difficult and any feelings you experience are understandable. There are many organisations that can help you and others affected, and you can find their details in [Section 6](#).

Being there when a relative ends their life or finding them

It may be that you were there when your relative ended their life or that you found them afterwards. This is a deeply traumatic experience and can further complicate the grieving process. The shock and disbelief can be overwhelming, and the pain and grief that follow can be intense and long-lasting. These feelings are understandable.

Most people who end their lives die in their own home, in the area they live or in a private location. You might have been aware that your family member was in crisis and have been searching for them and mentally prepared for what you might find. However, most people who find someone after they have ended their life discover the person unexpectedly.

If you were there when your relative died or you found them, it is important to let your GP know so that they can help with further support if needed.

Informing others that your family member has died

Telling family, friends, colleagues and acquaintances that a family member has died by suicide is difficult. You may find it helpful to prepare what you might say to tell others. It may be particularly helpful to have something ready to say if you are unexpectedly asked about how they died. For example, to people you don't know so well you could say something like:

'My husband took his own life/died by suicide. It's hard for me to talk about it but I really appreciate your support.'

For those you feel closer to you could say something like:

'Dave took his own life/died by suicide. It's really hard for me to think about why he might have done it, and I don't know all the details, but I'll tell you more when I can.'

Sometimes you may experience people's questions or comments as intrusive or inappropriate. Having some phrases ready for those times can help you feel more in control.

[Section 5](#) provides guidance on what to say to children and young people bereaved by suicide.

How many people are affected when someone dies by suicide?

Families of the UK Armed Forces community often have geographically wide friendship circles with extremely close bonds. This means that more than 135 people may be impacted when someone dies by suicide during or after service².

Who might be affected when someone dies by suicide during or after military service?

When someone dies by suicide it can affect many people including:

- spouse, partner, parent, wider family and loved ones

² Cerel, J., Brown, M. M., Maple, M., Singleton, M., van de Venne, J., Moore, M., & Flaherty, C. (2019). How many people are exposed to suicide? Not six. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*. 49(2), 529-534. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sltb.12450>

- friends, colleagues, or ex-colleagues
- emergency services personnel
- neighbours
- anyone responsible for the person's health or welfare
- anyone informing or supporting the bereaved family or reviewing the circumstances of the death or gathering information for the coroner
- strangers

It is important to note that this is not a complete list and others may also be impacted.

The impact of suicide and feelings of loss when a family member dies by suicide can differ as each person has a unique relationship with the person and will experience unique grief reactions to their loss.

The person's family/loved ones

When a person dies by suicide it is deeply traumatic for their family and/or loved ones. This includes the person's spouse, partner or parent, children (including adult children), sisters or brothers, wider family members and girlfriend or boyfriend.

No matter your family circumstances, it is important to seek support and guidance during this time, both for yourself and your family if needed. [Section 6](#) provides useful sources of support.

Close relationships to the person that may not be acknowledged

There are occasions when a relationship with the person who has died is neither recognised nor acknowledged. Bereaved people in this situation can feel excluded, isolated, and sometimes blamed for the person dying, including in press reports.

This can lead to 'disenfranchised' grief, which complicates the grieving process because the loss is not openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported.

This kind of grief might be experienced by:

- a spouse or partner who had recently separated from the person who died
- someone who was having or had in the past an undisclosed relationship with the person
- someone who was in an LGBTQ+ relationship with the person and who was unable to be open about their sexuality
- friends and/or girlfriends or boyfriends who may not be granted bereavement or compassionate leave
- ex-spouses or ex-partners, especially if they are caring for the person's children

It's been really weird for my mum... because people have got this judgement that because they weren't married at the time, 'oh why she's crying, it's only her ex-husband'? Because it really hit my mum like a ton of bricks... it really hit her hard. Like, because even though they weren't married, that's the father of her children, that's someone that she spent, you know, decades with... her first love."

Alison, daughter, lost her serving father

Multiple losses: when more than one suicide occurs in a short time frame

A suicide is devastating, and the impact can be widespread across the military family. The impact is increased if there is more than one suicide in a short period of time. It can bring up a whole range of painful thoughts and feelings that are difficult to manage and ways of coping that may be unhelpful.

Transitions: through grief and from military to civilian life

All families bereaved by suicide experience a period of transition as they deal with the emotional, practical, and legal changes resulting from the loss of their relative. These transitions can be challenging and can create uncertainty and confusion.

There may be specific challenges for the families of service personnel who have died as some must make an unplanned transition to civilian life, possibly involving loss of home, income, identity, community and/or relationships or friendships and a need to move schools.

Remember to take care of yourself and allow time and space to process your emotions and adjust to the changes. Seek help if you need it. See **Section 6** for sources of support.

What if I am feeling suicidal?

Some people bereaved by suicide may experience suicidal thoughts and feelings themselves. However, it does not necessarily mean they will act on these thoughts. There are many organisations that understand how you might be feeling and are able to support you.

If you are feeling suicidal and feel unable to keep yourself safe, please call 999 or go to your nearest NHS Accident and Emergency Department (A&E).

You can also call NHS 111 if you're worried about an urgent mental health concern. The NHS 111 service is staffed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by a team of fully trained advisers.
Call free on: 111.

Samaritans is also available 24/7 and **can be called free on 116 123 or email jo.@samaritans.org**

Contact details for further support organisations are listed in this guide in **Section 6**.

If I am concerned that someone may be feeling suicidal, how should I respond?

If you are concerned that someone who is bereaved by suicide may be feeling suicidal:

- if possible, have ready some ways that you can guide the person to appropriate support before you have the conversation. See **Section 6** to help you identify sources of support.
- let the person know you are concerned about their wellbeing.
- if possible, don't leave them alone.
- ask them directly but calmly whether they have been thinking about suicide.
- start a conversation. Tell them they matter. Talking about suicide may give them a chance to get the help they need.
- get support for yourself to manage the situation – tell someone and don't keep it to yourself.

Practical guidance on how to respond to someone who may be suicidal

Free, online practical guidance is available that will help give you the skills and confidence to respond to someone if they are feeling suicidal. This includes videos of people bereaved by suicide talking about their experiences:

- 20-minute suicide prevention training (relevant to anyone bereaved by suicide) www.zerosuicidealliance.com/suicide-awareness-training
- 30-minute veteran suicide awareness training (also relevant to serving personnel) www.zerosuicidealliance.com/suicide-awareness-training-veteran-edition

“In the early stage, it's absolutely normal to be feeling different things... nobody's journey is the same... you are all different, you are all unique, you will deal with this grief in your own way, but please be reassured that whatever you are feeling is absolutely normal.”

Sara, service wife, lost her serving husband



Section 2: How you might respond to your loss when you are bereaved by suicide



The people on this page are all bereaved by suicide

This section of the *At Your Side* guide focuses on how we grieve when we are bereaved by the suicide of a family member. It also explains that in these circumstances, our thoughts, feelings, physical reactions, and ways of behaving can be much more intense.

The main messages about grief responses are listed in Box 2.

Box 2. Main messages: grief responses

- Grief is as individual as your fingerprint. We all grieve in different ways. This means that although we may have lost the same person, the way we grieve or cope can vary.
- If you are bereaved by suicide of a family member, your grief reactions may be much more intense.
- You may find yourself experiencing a mix of powerful thoughts, emotions, physical reactions and/or ways of behaving.
- There is no set pattern for these reactions. All the ones you experience, in whatever order, are understandable.
- Grieving for a family member who has died by suicide is a painful experience, and you may find that you need some extra help to cope with your loss. It is a good idea to ask for help if you are, for example:
 - Feeling overwhelmed by shock, numbness, guilt and/or anger
 - Unable to sleep and/or having nightmares
 - Feeling anxious and/or having panic attacks
 - Feeling alone and isolated with no one to talk to

- Using unhelpful ways of coping (such as drinking alcohol to excess)
- Fearing that you may harm yourself or act on suicidal thoughts
- Fearing that others may harm themselves or act on suicidal thoughts
- Sources of help and support are listed in **Section 6** of this guide.

How we grieve

Bereaved people experience a wide range of grief reactions. These are all understandable ways of experiencing grief.

“People deal with grief differently.”

Sara, service wife, lost her serving husband

Grief is as individual as your fingerprint

We all grieve in different ways. This means that although we may have lost the same person, the way we grieve, or cope can vary.

People in a family or household can experience different emotions at the same time and sometimes we are confused by our own or others’ responses to the loss.

If you are bereaved by suicide your grief reactions may be much more intense.

“Being bereaved by suicide... it’s not a normal bereavement. It is really misunderstood and really underestimated.”

Rita, service wife, lost her serving husband

“People will be at different stages in their grief journeys... they may very well be traumatised without realising it. They need to understand people are not going to act like they think they ought to act, if they’re traumatised. If they’re overwhelmed themselves, they’re not going to behave like somebody who’s... thinking logically. They’re in survival mode. So that’s important for people to understand.”

Gemma, sister, lost her serving brother

Below are some common reactions to bereavement by suicide. However, you may react to your loss in other ways. There is also no set sequence to these reactions, and it is entirely normal to have conflicting emotions at the same time. Some days these reactions can be more intense than others.

Thoughts (beliefs about your loss)

We can be consumed by a whole range of confusing thoughts. Common thoughts include:

- denying the person has died.

“Part of my brain really believed that he was still going to come back, even though I knew that he was dead, and we’d had his funeral.”

Penny, veteran wife, lost her veteran husband

- believing your relative has rejected you.
- thinking that you might be responsible for the person’s death.
 - remember the choice was theirs, not yours. No one has that much influence on another person’s life.
- believing that you don’t deserve to be cared for by others.
- thinking that life has lost all meaning.
- doubting your judgement in other important aspects of your life.
- believing that others are judging and blaming you.
- having suicidal thoughts yourself.
 - remember, having suicidal thoughts does not necessarily mean you will act on the thoughts. Ask for help if you are having such thoughts or thinking of acting on them. Reach out to your GP, your medical officer, a mental health professional, a suicide bereavement organisation or someone that you trust.
- wanting to join or be with the person who has died. This is a common response and does not mean you are suicidal.

Emotions (feelings associated with the loss)

Emotional reactions to bereavement by suicide can be extremely intense. Having mood swings or experiencing conflicting emotions at the same time is entirely normal.

Common feelings that may arise for you include:

- shock and ‘numbness’
- intense sadness
- confusion
- helplessness
- anger towards:
 - yourself
 - the family member who has died

- others, including:
 - your family member's employer
 - carers and professionals that had been looking after your relative
 - the world
 - your faith/religious beliefs

Remember, it's OK to express anger in a way that is not harmful to yourself or others.

“Anger is one of the things – anger with yourself, and not spotting there might have been a problem, anger with them for doing this stupid thing, anger with the military for letting it happen. Eventually, you get over it... people do say time will heal, and it does.”

Frank, father, lost his serving son

- becoming mentally unwell yourself with, for example, anxiety and/or depression
- feelings of helplessness and/or hopelessness
- feelings of loneliness, isolation or rejection
- fear that:
 - you or others will die by suicide
 - you are losing your sanity
 - you are being harshly judged by others
 - you may experience stigma (feel judged, left out and/or isolated)
 - you may have to attend the person's inquest and/or service inquiry
 - you will be bombarded by the media

- guilt, including feeling guilty for what you think you did or did not do
- feelings of blame (towards yourself or others for your relative's death)
- regrets and questioning, 'Why?' 'What if?' 'If only?'
- feelings of shame about the way your relative died (this can be intensified if your culture or religion considers suicide to be a sin)
- feelings of relief because you no longer have the pressure to support the person or deal with their suicidal thoughts, urges or attempts. These feelings can be extremely difficult to deal with and talk about as they are mixed with guilt about having them. However, these feelings can also be common when you are bereaved by suicide

There are people and organisations who understand and will support you. See **Section 6** for sources of support.

“You can randomly, at any time of the day, think to yourself, ‘what didn't I do or what could I have done better? What was it that was so bad that...?’ And then you just don't have the answers... when someone dies like that, and they didn't need to die, you just can't comprehend. I'm thinking, ‘what if I'd called an ambulance earlier, what if I had done CPR before, what if?’ And for me, it's a massive, long list of what ifs.”

Debra, service wife, lost her serving husband

Physical reactions (body sensations)

We often react to a loss in a physical way. This is the body's way of expressing distress. It is completely normal to experience a range of body sensations that are directly associated with your grief.

Common physical reactions you might experience include:

- lack of energy and extreme fatigue
- inability to sleep
- having vivid dreams about the person who died and/or bad dreams/nightmares
- increase in or loss of appetite
- upset stomach or nausea
- panic attacks
- forgetfulness, brain fog or difficulty concentrating
- breathing difficulties or tightness or choking sensations in the throat and/or chest
- pain including headaches, back ache, neck ache or muscular tension
- dizziness
- palpitations (feelings of having a fast-beating, fluttering or pounding heart)

“My brain was a complete fog. When they're in the military they often go away for months at a time... but for a long time I was so shocked and I just thought he's going to come back, he's going to walk back through the door.”

Penny, veteran wife, lost her veteran husband

Ways of behaving (things you do or actions you take)

Sometimes, the way we behave when bereaved by suicide can be out of character or surprising to ourselves and others who know us. Again, these ways of behaving are understandable responses to a profoundly upsetting experience.

“When I look back on it, I think, wow, my behaviour was a bit extreme, but every person I've spoken to has done things that they would consider out of character to try and make sense of what's happened.”

Sara, service wife, lost her serving husband

Common ways that you might behave include:

- having difficulty trusting others
- rejecting offers of support when you want or need to accept them
- masking your emotions to protect yourself and others by pretending you're OK (you might also worry about looking vulnerable or feeling that you need to be strong for others)
- crying (remember, this is a basic physical expression of grief and a natural way to grieve)
- needing to repeatedly talk about aspects of your relative or the way they died
- refusing to talk about your family member or the way they died
- constant longing or searching for the person (e.g., in crowded places)
- keeping yourself to yourself (socially isolating)

- being argumentative with others (at home, with friends, with those supporting you in the workplace)
- being aggressive and taking risks, such as driving dangerously
- turning to alcohol and/or drugs as a solution
- hurting yourself

Understand that processing this type of loss takes time. If you are feeling suicidal, please seek help. **Section 6** will signpost you to sources of support.

“I kind of went right into myself and I stopped socialising and stopped going out. I stopped doing anything, more or less.”

Debra, service wife, lost her serving husband

Will I experience these grief reactions straightaway?

You may have many of these grief reactions during the early stages of your loss. However, you may experience these and others months or even years later. There is no set pattern for these reactions. All the ones you experience, in whatever order, are understandable.

There are some circumstances in which you may feel you have to delay or suppress your grief. For example, if you:

- do not feel safe to tell others about your loss
- have separated from the person who died and your sense of loss is not acknowledged and/or not accepted by others
- feel the need to suppress emotions until after the practical aspects have been dealt with (for example a transition into civilian life)

What can complicate grief?

Several factors can complicate grief and lead to us getting ‘stuck’ and unable to move forward.

These include:

- the circumstances of your relative’s death, particularly if you or one of your children were present when they died or found them
- other losses happening to you at the same time (e.g., financial losses, loss of relationships and/or friendships, or loss of home/identity)
- having a complex relationship with the person who died
- having been personally bereaved or affected by suicide before
- having no opportunity to express your grief openly (e.g., if your loss is not acknowledged and/or accepted by others)
- having difficulty expressing your emotions
- using unhelpful ways of coping (e.g., excessive drinking or being argumentative)
- lacking support networks
- experiencing traumatic symptoms associated with the loss (e.g., flashbacks, nightmares, repetitive images or feeling constantly on edge)
- feeling suicidal yourself

When is it time to get help?

Grieving for someone who has died by suicide is a painful experience, and you may find that you need some extra help to cope with your loss. If you are experiencing any of the following difficulties, it is a good idea to ask for help:

These include:

- being overwhelmed by intense feelings associated with the person having died (for example, shock, numbness, long-lasting guilt and/or anger)
- having strong physical reactions (such as inability to sleep, recurring nightmares or panic attacks)
- feeling alone and/or isolated with no one to talk to
- using unhelpful ways of coping (such as excessive drinking/gambling or taking drugs)
- fearing that you may harm yourself, others or act on suicidal thoughts
- fearing that others may harm themselves or act on suicidal thoughts

“I speak really openly with people, saying, look, I do have PTSD, I’m a functioning human being, it doesn’t make any difference to how I interact with you, but I live my life a bit differently.”

Sara, service wife, lost her serving husband



Section 3: Coping after suicide – what has helped others?

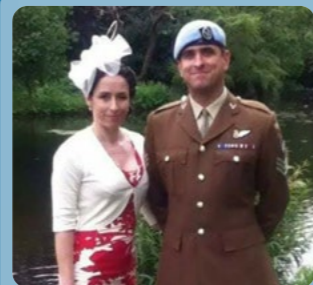


“There’s lots of support out there and it’s not until you get well into this journey, well along this horrible road, and this exclusive club that nobody wants to be in, that you actually find that everybody needs different help at different stages. I think that is such a critical thing.”



The people on this page are all bereaved by suicide

Mary, mother, lost her serving daughter



This section of the *At Your Side* guide focuses on coping with your grief after the suicide of a family member during or after their military service. Grief is often described as a journey and this section aims to help you prepare for what might lie ahead.

The main messages about coping after suicide are listed in Box 3.

Box 3. Main messages: coping after suicide

- When you are bereaved by the suicide of a family member, your grief reactions can be more complicated. Navigating your grief journey is essential.
- Self-care is your first aid kit; it’s there as an immediate response when needed.
- Look after your physical health (get regular physical activity, sleep, food, water/hydration, and time outdoors if you can).
- Look after your mental health (if possible, create a routine; take one day at a time; balance time for grieving/having a break from grieving; rest; don’t allow anyone to tell you what you should/should not feel; ask for help if you need it).
- Navigate setbacks; these are inevitable (e.g., going over unanswered questions, emotions when approaching significant dates, feelings of blame and anger, experiencing rejection or stigma).
- Recognise and move away from unhelpful coping strategies (e.g., excessive alcohol or being argumentative with others).
- Connect with others whom you trust (e.g., family, friends and/or support organisations).

- Seek other sources of support if you need them, for example:
 - Your GP
 - Military sources (e.g., any MoD support personnel that might be allocated to you, military friends or colleagues of your relative, the chaplaincy team, military charities or associations)
 - Peer support (groups or online or telephone support for suicide bereavement, suicide prevention and/or mental health)
 - Support from charities (military and civilian)
 - Professional support (to talk through or come to terms with your loss)
- **Section 6** lists helpful sources of support.
- The diagram ‘10 grief journey essentials’ on page 32 provides practical guidance on how to look after yourself when you are grieving.

Coping with your grief journey

Grief, regardless of the cause of death, is often described as a journey. It can sometimes take a long time to process the loss and come to terms with living in a new reality without your family member. On the way, grief reactions will come and go, like waves. Most of the waves are manageable, but some are stronger than others. Sometimes, you will be hit unexpectedly by a wave that you don’t feel prepared for, and this is entirely normal.

When you are bereaved by suicide, your journey through grief can be more complicated. There will be times when you are coping well and times which feel overwhelming. The key is being aware of the difficulties you might face and preparing for them as best you can. Navigating your grief journey is essential.

Ways of coping

Coping with loss includes all the things we do, as much as is realistically possible, to make sense of what has happened and get ourselves back on a level footing.

Just as we all grieve differently, each of us has different ways of coping, and you may need to do different things to cope at different times.

Generally, we cope with difficulties in two main ways:

- problem-solving and/or
- managing our thoughts and feelings

To cope through problem-solving, you might seek out relevant information from a reliable source that will help you navigate the situation.

To cope through managing your thoughts and feelings, you might talk to someone you trust about what has happened.

“I’ve got a lot of good people around me. I think that’s the key, to be open with people. Because I find that really difficult, especially with family; you have to pick and choose who you speak to. And accept that I can say terrible things to my therapist that I can’t say to one of my daughters.”

Penny, veteran wife, lost her veteran husband

“I really don’t know what advice to give to people, but talking is key to it.”

Frank, father, lost his serving son

Even if you feel you are resilient and managing well on your grief journey, we do best when we combine problem-solving and managing our strong thoughts and feelings. Both types of coping are equally important along the way and help us adjust to life without our family member.

Remember, coping is as individual as your fingerprint so cope in ways that feel right for you and try not to compare yourself with others who may be doing things differently.

Looking after your physical and mental health: some basics of self-care

Navigating your way through grief after the suicide of a family member starts and continues with ‘self-care’ or looking after yourself. Self-care is your first aid kit. Taking as much care of yourself as possible despite the challenging circumstances will benefit and sustain you on the journey. Just as a physical wound needs care and attention to heal, your grief does too.

Although it may be difficult to prioritise your own needs when you are bereaved by suicide, it is important to focus on your physical and mental health.

Consider the following self-care suggestions in Boxes 4 and 5 and try to do at least one thing from each list every day to support yourself in challenging times.

Box 4. Physical health

- Listen to what your body needs.
- Eat regularly; your body needs fuel to function.
- Keep hydrated; it will help you think more clearly.
- Get rest where and how you can, to preserve your energy.
- Spend some time outdoors each day; getting regular daylight can lift your mood.

- Be as active as you can – this can reduce feelings of anxiety, anger, and tension, as well as helping to improve your sleep and energy levels.
- Avoid doing things that might make you feel worse, such as drinking too much alcohol or taking drugs.

“I walk for miles, lots of miles every day... walk with my dogs... with my woofers, they are my saving grace, so many, many times.”

Mary, mother, lost her serving daughter

Box 5. Mental health

- Give yourself time to heal and space to reflect; this will help you to process your loss. Be patient with yourself. Understand that you might experience setbacks and that it takes time to heal.
 - Try to take one day at a time rather than fast-forwarding into the future. Do things in your own time when you feel ready.
 - Create a structure and routine in your day to help to steady you.
 - Find ways to relax/unwind that allow you to think about something else and give you a break from grieving; don’t feel guilty – it is necessary to take time out.
 - Find some quiet space each day but try not to be on your own for too long.
- Avoid making any major decisions during the early stages of your loss.
 - Acknowledge and accept your thoughts and feelings.
 - Find ways to express your grief, rather than keeping it bottled up; some people find writing thoughts and feelings on paper helps get things out of their system.
 - You don’t have to cope alone. Connect with others you feel positive towards and who you trust.
 - If you can, be clear with others about what you need/don’t need.
 - Keep in touch with family and friends; they are important, especially in difficult times.
 - Don’t be afraid to ask for help. Remember that help is available if you need it – there are many organisations that can and will support you.
 - When you feel you want to, it might help to express your feelings openly to those who care for you.
 - It may also help just to be with others if you can’t or don’t want to talk.
 - You can also chat via email or text anonymously to support services who understand (see **Section 6** for details).
 - Be kind to yourself and others but set healthy boundaries and don’t allow people to tell you what you should and should not feel.

The diagram ‘10 grief journey essentials’ on page 32 provides guidance on the most important ways to look after yourself when you are grieving.

“You need to look after yourself. You may need to get in touch with some sort of therapy so that you can tide yourself over, or at least get that organised for yourself; but somebody appropriate.”

Rita, service wife, lost her serving husband

Facing difficulties along the way

If, as best you can, you take steps to look after your physical and mental health, you are already doing a lot to support yourself through your grief journey. At points along the way, you may find yourself on unfamiliar ground with unexpected obstacles, twists, and turns. This can take its toll. The key is being aware that setbacks might arise and planning ahead for these times.

When you meet a particularly difficult point:

Consider what worked before

Try to recall the things that helped you cope when you had challenging times before. Remember what helped get you back on track and if it feels right, do the same now to support yourself.

“No one therapy has the answers to all the things... and you might have to do multiple different things. You have to go on a journey of self-discovery.”

Rita, service wife, lost her serving husband

Understand that setbacks are normal and be patient with yourself

Setbacks can come and go without warning. Try to be patient and give yourself time.

Here are some common setbacks that you might experience when you are bereaved by suicide and how you might handle them:

Going over unanswered questions

Be patient if you find yourself repeatedly questioning why your family member died or what you could have done differently. When someone dies by suicide, there are so many questions and thoughts that come up again and again. The most common questions are: ‘why?’ and ‘what if...?’. One of the most common thoughts is: ‘if only...’.

The reality is, nobody really knows why someone ends their life, except the person who has died. Despite this, many of us bereaved by suicide will spend a considerable amount of time (sometimes weeks, months, or years), asking these questions and searching for answers. Give yourself permission to keep questioning until you no longer feel the need to.

Navigating significant dates

Anniversaries, birthdays and other significant events or occasions can be especially difficult. Some of us find the anxiety leading up to the date to be the most difficult; others find the date itself to be the most challenging. It is entirely normal to experience either or both reactions. Allow yourself to acknowledge that the important date is coming up. This can help you take charge from a safe distance by thinking about how you might feel and making decisions about what you might do on that day. You might do something specific to remember your relative or you may decide to do nothing, and this is OK; it is a decision you have thought about in advance, rather than regretting what you haven’t done on the day.

Experiencing blame and anger

When we are trying to make sense of why someone has died by suicide, we might blame ourselves or others. Sometimes others might even blame us. Often, blame and anger go hand in hand. Things are said that cannot be taken back.

When feelings of blame and/or anger come to the surface, remind yourself that in reality:

- there is no single reason why someone dies by suicide. Rather, it is a build-up of stressors that create a sense of hopelessness and despair.
- you are human and make mistakes like everyone else, but you are doing your best.

Feeling rejected

Feeling rejected and isolated are common and understandable when you are bereaved by suicide. Many of us can feel rejected by the family member who died. We may also feel rejected by our friends or community, who may avoid us. Their negative responses do not mean they do not care; it is more likely that they do not know how to respond. You could share with others the booklet [Finding the Words \(suicidebereavementuk.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Finding-the-words.pdf\)](https://suicidebereavementuk.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Finding-the-words.pdf). It offers useful guidance on ways to reach out and speak to someone bereaved by suicide and may help others to support you.

Feeling stigmatised, ashamed or judged

When we are bereaved by suicide and people are uncertain how to respond, we can feel judged, and/or isolated, which is sometimes called feeling stigmatised. Although a lot has been done to challenge the stigma associated with suicide, stigma still exists. Consequently, we can be fearful of being judged because of the way the person has died, leading us to feel anxious and uncertain about what to say to others. It can be helpful to practise what you might say to people about your bereavement. You don’t have to say the same to everyone about how your relative died and how you are feeling. You may wish to give those closest to you more information, but it’s still helpful to decide what you may want to say.

For example, to people you don’t know so well you could say something like:

‘My husband took his own life/died by suicide. It’s hard for me to talk about it but I really appreciate your support.’

For those you feel closer to you could say something like:

‘Nick took his own life/died by suicide. It’s really hard for me to think about why he might have done it, and I don’t know all the details, but I’ll tell you more when I can.’

If you are able to, tell those closest to you that your relative died by suicide; it’s an important step in helping to reduce any stigma and in opening up supportive conversations.

Some families want to keep the way their relative has died a secret, especially if they have children, or if their religion/culture still considers suicide to be a sin. This can complicate the grieving process. It is difficult to keep suicide a secret and it is better for anyone you think should know to be given information by you than to find out through gossip, rumour or social media.

Section 5 offers guidance on how to talk to children about suicide. If you feel unable to reach out to friends, family, or your social or faith networks, remember that there are organisations and services that support people bereaved by suicide, regardless of culture or religion (see **Section 6** for details).

Feeling suicidal

If you are bereaved by suicide, you may at times think about suicide or feel suicidal yourself. It does not necessarily mean you will act on these thoughts and feelings. Most people who are bereaved by suicide never do. You may have been feeling suicidal before your family member died and find that you are struggling.

If you are feeling suicidal and feel unable to keep yourself safe, go to Section 6 for contact details of organisations that can help you now.

Recognise and move away from using unhelpful coping strategies

Everyone struggles to cope at times, and it is normal to want to block out or numb the painful thoughts and memories associated with suicide. At these times, watch out for unhelpful ways of coping which can hinder rather than help you. For example, using alcohol more than usual to block out or to 'self-medicate' is one way that some bereaved people attempt to cope. While these strategies may provide temporary relief, they often increase rather than lower anxiety and stress levels.

Drug and excessive alcohol use can also impair our judgement, reduce our sleep quality and affect the way we think, feel, and behave. With substances in our system, the emotions that we were trying to push away (painful feelings such as distress and anger) can rush to the surface, lowering our ability to control our actions. This increases the risk of behaving in ways that could harm ourselves or others, for example by driving dangerously. Alcohol and drugs can also lead to depression or make it worse if we are already feeling low.

Sometimes people will struggle to express the feelings associated with their loss. It can feel that the only way of relieving distress is to become argumentative or physically aggressive with family, friends, and even strangers.

Risking harming yourself or being harmed by others in this way could negatively impact on relationships and your own wellbeing.

In short, these ways of coping can complicate the grieving process and even lead to increased isolation at a time when we may need family and friends around us.

If possible, recognise when you might be using unhelpful strategies to cope. These might be what you have used in the past and feel familiar, but they are likely to cause harm.

Be flexible in how you cope. It's OK to drop strategies that are not helping.

“And that isolation you feel at that time, you know... not all families come together at these different times and that's happened to my family... so... if this guide helps anybody not feel isolated, then it is absolutely the best thing to do.”

Mary, mother, lost her serving daughter

The importance of connecting with others

Being bereaved by suicide is emotionally and physically exhausting. People often feel overwhelmed and confused by the way they react to the loss and want to avoid contact with others. Some men in particular might struggle to connect with other people. This can sometimes complicate the grieving process.

Staying connected with people you trust will help you in difficult times. When we are dealing with stressful events, we do best when we have support from our social network. Practical and emotional support from others is protective because it strengthens our physical and mental health.

Reaching out and asking for help is a strength not a weakness.

Who can I connect with and how?

Support networks can include informal connections with family, friends, neighbours, work colleagues and wider acquaintances, as well as support from UK Armed Forces community connections and a range of services (such as peer support groups, charities, professional talking support, your GP and other medical services).

Whoever you choose to connect with, it is important to know that we benefit most when, if possible, we are clear with others about what we need. Although it can be very difficult to tell someone what you need when you are bereaved by suicide, if you can, be open and honest with those around you about how you are doing and what might help. Remember, people can be unsure how to help and might need you to guide them.

“The very early days are completely...shock and trauma... that's what it is in the beginning. And it's very, very tough to navigate. So, you've got to be able to reach out, you've got to be able to include people and get people to do things for you and not be afraid to ask.”

Penny, veteran wife, lost her veteran husband

UK Armed Forces community connections

When a family loses a relative, they will have different needs or wishes and points of access in relation to the type and degree of their connection to the UK Armed Forces community.

Should you wish to link with or maintain a connection with the UK Armed Forces community, there are different ways you can do this, and they are noted in **Section 6**.

If your relative was serving when they died

MoD support

If a person dies when serving, a Visiting Officer will be allocated to provide support and advice to the family. Their role is to provide help and advice following the person's death. They are the first port of call for any questions during this time.

“I was really conscious of having a professional responsibility as Visiting Officer to the family as a member of the forces. But that was all mixed up with, as a person... I want to make sure I do the right thing for them. I want to be able to support them properly... so all the way through, it was very much a trying to make sure... I was doing the right thing, which often meant asking some really tough questions, but doing it in a way that it wasn't the blunt military... and understanding that there's actually a grieving family at this, and it's a horrible or stressful emotional event that has basically forced me onto them... But actually, I'm just here to help you. I'll be as open and honest with everything as I can and if I can't... If you say I'd like to have x, y and z and I say I can do two of those but I can't do the third, all I can be is honest with you.”

Paul, RAF Visiting Officer, lost a serving family member

“The bereaved family said, ‘what are you doing here? We don’t need you’. And I’d say, ‘look... you can use me if you want... I won’t overstay my welcome, but I am a decent asset if you want it. ‘Well, what can you offer?’ And I turned round and said, ‘treat me as a military Google! Military is a complicated thing at times, that I don’t understand half the time after 20-odd years... but if you ask a question, I’d know who I can go and ask’. So that’s how it worked.”

Dave, Army Visiting Officer, lost serving colleagues and a civilian family member

In addition, the Visiting Officer will put you in contact with the Welfare Officer, who is provided by the Veterans Welfare Service to help you find out about entitlements and other support. They offer lifelong support to bereaved service families beyond the first few months.

“If you’ve got something there in front of you and it’s got a bit... overwhelming what the military have got, what they offer and what they should offer... if you’re not up to reading the guidance and stuff like that, the welfare are there to go through it with you.”

Daniel, Army Sergeant and Welfare Officer, lost serving colleague and a civilian family member

The chaplaincy team can be a vital source of support whether you have a religious belief or not, providing spiritual, pastoral support and guidance.

See **Section 4** for more information about MoD support with practical matters after a family member’s suicide.

Connecting with your relative’s military friends and/or colleagues

When a serving person dies by suicide, a wide circle of friends and colleagues might also be affected. It can feel to them like losing a family member and can hit everybody hard. Many families who are bereaved by the suicide of a serving relative find comfort in maintaining links with their relative’s military friends and/or colleagues.

“I found it very comforting that so many people wanted to reach out to me and let me know what my brother had meant to them. So that’s been a huge help for me. The ones that have maintained that support are actually those who’ve been bereaved by suicide themselves, whether it’s a mate or a brother.”

Gemma, sister, lost her serving brother

“I’m still in contact with some of the boys, they send me flowers. I get flowers from my son’s friends on his anniversary and stuff like that.”

Isabelle, mother, lost her serving son

It’s not just about talking. Sometimes, actions speak louder than words, especially for those who struggle to open up. A sense of belonging, feeling cared for and getting practical support without being asked counts for a lot.

“I knew husband’s military colleague as a friend of a friend, and she turned up at my house in civvies and she was like, is there anything I can do for you? And she was like, ‘oh mate, I’m absolutely devastated for you. Anything I can do, I will’. Do you know what? She helped me cook, she helped me clean, she babysat my kids. She helped me get my car serviced. And she retired out of the military, and we are still really good friends now.”

Sara, service wife, lost her serving husband

“There’s a group of us... we formed a WhatsApp group to support for one another and to show support for Luke’s kids.”

Matthew, ex-Army Officer, lost a close serving friend

Connecting with military charities or associations

You may find it helpful to connect with other bereaved families who have made similar transitions. Military charities or associations may be a valuable way to connect with the UK Armed Forces community. See **Section 6** for details.

“Thursday is the day I go to veteran charity club and I do pottery and clay building and stuff like that. You’re part of a kop, you’re part of a little gang.”

Isabelle, mother, lost her serving son

*“It’s far more effective to have someone’s story, someone who’s been through it, who can say, ‘yeah, do you know what? It will always be s**t, but it isn’t always s**t!’ And getting to the point of being able to understand that weird subtlety... and that person, that lived experience, the testimony, whatever you want to call it. Because it is being able to say, ‘do you know what? There might be a million and one things that we’ve got nothing in common, but there’s one piece we do’”*

Paul, RAF Visiting Officer, lost a serving family member

If your relative was a veteran when they died

If your relative was a veteran when they died, there are veteran charities who will be able to connect you to military and non-military associations for support. See **Section 6** for details.

Peer support

Peer support or self-help groups are often run and attended by people who have had similar experiences and understand what you are going through. Peer support offers the chance to talk about your loss with others if you want to.

You can generally join a group directly. They are usually free to attend and held in a confidential, supportive, and non-judgemental setting.

People who attend peer support groups say it can be an empowering experience. This is because peer support can enable you to understand and normalise your reactions and see how other people cope. Support groups can help you feel less alone and misunderstood. Strong bonds are often created which can help you cope with your loss.

“I find that I go to peer support mostly when I need to talk about it, because I don’t really talk about him... I don’t really talk about it to anybody but if I ever need to talk about any of that then I find I’m always drawn there, on anniversaries and things like that.”

Debra, service wife, lost her serving husband

“It’s nice to be able to talk and be heard.”

Alison, daughter, lost her serving father

“It’s very difficult to find people who you dare voice your pain to. You don’t have to watch what you’re saying... you know, people in a suicide bereavement support group understand and know that pain, so they’re not going to be shocked by it, ‘cause they know exactly what you’re talking about.”

Mary, mother, lost her serving daughter

“The person running the event put me in touch with somebody with similar experience to me. And that was like a complete relief, the first time I’d spoken to somebody like me that had had a similar experience... when I spoke to this lady, oh, my gosh, the similarities... so many analogies, it was incredible.”

Rita, service wife, lost her serving husband

Telephone helplines or online support

If you prefer to get support by telephone or online, **Section 6** lists organisations that provide helpline or online support.

Professional support

It can be common to think that professional support is not for you and, of course, not everyone will need it. However, when you are bereaved by suicide, professional support to talk through and make sense of what has happened can help you cope better.

If you feel you would like to talk to someone professionally, seek help via your GP.

“Talking to a counsellor was amazing. I’ve been on a psychological journey ever since. I had about half a dozen sessions... but that was brilliant because... I really struggled with dealing with a lot of the guilt I felt as [a mum], blaming myself, you know, questioning how I had been as a mother... and it helped me deal a lot with that. It’s a mother’s guilt, isn’t it?”

Isabelle, mother, lost her serving son

10 grief journey essentials



Grief is a complex journey. Like any journey, remembering to take the essentials with you can help you look after yourself.

Here are 10 essentials of self-care that others bereaved by suicide have found useful on their grief journeys to help them cope better and process their loss. They may be helpful for you too.

1. First aid kit – Like a medical first aid kit, a basic ‘self-care’ first aid kit is there as an immediate response when you need it. It could be an app, or a 24/7 helpline number stored on your phone.

2. Connection – Keep in touch with people you trust. Spending time alone can be healthy, but it’s also important to stay connected.

3. Boundaries – Establish healthy boundaries and priorities. Looking after yourself first will enable you to support others.

4. Food – Grief can often affect your appetite. The food we eat can have a direct impact on how we feel. If possible, eat regularly as your body needs energy to keep going. Eating with others can help you stay connected.

5. Hydration – Drink water to stay hydrated. While alcohol can be part of socialising, it is a depressant and can lead to low mood.

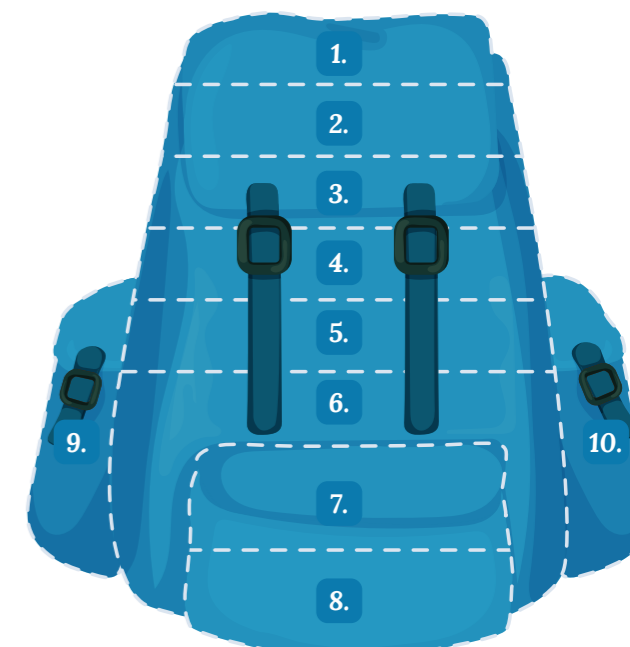
6. Sleep – Good sleep can help you to process grief. Avoiding caffeine or alcohol before you want to sleep can help you rest.

7. Exercise – Grief can have a physical effect on your body. Regular exercise will support your physical and mental health.

8. Outdoors – Spending time outdoors improves physical and mental health

9. Routine – A daily routine gives structure and balance.

10. Key resources – The grief journey can be challenging. If you can, be aware of what you need and reach out to organisations that are available.





Section 4: Practical Matters



“You need to have people around you who can help you to navigate through all the logistics of it, the paperwork, the planning, the organisation, the arranging.”

Penny, veteran wife, lost her veteran husband



The people on this page are all bereaved by suicide



This section of the *At Your Side* guide touches on practical matters that you may need to attend to when a family member has died by suicide during or after their military service.

The main messages about practical matters are listed in Box 6.

Box 6. Main messages: practical matters

- When someone dies there are standard procedures that take place, but if your relative was serving when they died there may be some additional procedures.
- If a person dies when serving, a Visiting Officer will be allocated to provide support and advice to the family.
- If your relative was a veteran when they died there are military or civilian charities and organisations that will support families.
- If a serving person dies overseas, then different procedures may apply for bringing them back. The Visiting Officer will be able to advise on this. If a veteran dies overseas then private arrangements will need to be made.
- If your relative was serving when they died, a military funeral will be paid for by the MoD. If a private funeral arranged by the family is preferred then the MoD will provide a funeral grant.
- For sudden or unexplained deaths, a coroner is required to conduct an inquest; the purpose is to establish the cause of the person's death. It is a civil matter, and not a trial.

- If your relative was serving when they died, a service inquiry may be held to explore and understand the circumstances around how they died and provide recommendations to improve procedures, policy, and practice.
- If your relative left a final message it will be taken away as evidence but will be returned.
- There is often a lot of media attention when someone dies by suicide particularly if they were serving. The MoD will support with addressing media enquiries and the Visiting Officer will guide you. If your relative was ex-service when they died, military charities may be able to advise you on dealing with the media.
- Sources of support are listed in **Section 6**.

Practical matters and suicide

When a relative dies by suicide it can generate uncertainty, unanswered questions and practical matters that need to be addressed. Dealing with these can be particularly challenging for families of serving personnel or veterans due to the unique circumstances of military life.

This section is to help you understand some of the practical matters that might come up when a family member has died by suicide, guiding you on the likely process depending on whether your family member was serving or veteran at the time they died. Box 7 shows the main steps that are likely to happen. It is intended as a guide only and does not include any additional MoD procedures that may happen if your relative was serving when they died.

Box 7. What can I expect when a family member may have died by suicide during or after their military service?

Every loss is unique and timeframes or circumstances differ. However, there are practical steps and processes following a sudden unexpected death such as when someone may have died by suicide.

The person is found (sometimes by their family)

Emergency services are contacted

They attend the scene and initiate an investigation.

The person's family or nominated emergency contact is informed

by the police or Armed Forces notifying officer.

The person who has died is taken to the mortuary

Formal identification of the person who has died takes place

It may be the person's spouse, partner or parent or another appropriate person who identifies them.

The coroner is informed that the person has died

Coroners are required to investigate all sudden deaths that are reported to them to determine the cause of the person's death.

The coroner decides if a post-mortem is required

An inquest is opened and an interim death certificate is issued for administration and legal purposes. The inquest is adjourned. A funeral can then be held.

Information is gathered for the inquest

The police and coroner begin to gather information such as witness statements and the medical records of the person who has died. The investigation continues until the coroner has sufficient information to hold a formal inquest.

The deceased person is taken to the funeral director

The funeral director is responsible for the care of the person and for arranging for those who would like to spend time with their loved one to do so until the funeral is held.

The funeral is held

The inquest is re-opened

When all necessary information is collated, the coroner re-opens the inquest. The coroner decides on the cause of the person's death. At the end of the inquest the cause of the person's death is recorded.

Death certificate

The coroner's office will inform the registrar of the cause of death. The registrar will formally register the death. The bereaved family can request a death certificate from the registrar.

For more information about the Coroner Service, including post-mortem examinations and inquests, refer to the Ministry of Justice document entitled *A Guide to Coroner Services for Bereaved People* (see page 57 for details.) In addition, there are organisations that can help you through this process.

What happens if your relative was serving when they died?

When someone dies there are standard procedures that take place, but if your relative was serving when they died there may be some additional procedures.

If your family member was found on a military site, the police will attend just as they would any unexplained death. The civilian police or the Notifying Officer may inform the nominated Emergency Contact (who may be the next-of-kin).

If your relative was not found on a military site, the civilian police will attend. Civilian police may inform the next-of-kin or hand over to the military to do this.

Support for families who have lost a serving family member

The MoD's Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre (JCCC) oversees the management of all British Armed Forces casualties and compassionate cases affecting military personnel worldwide. They manage the practical requirements for families if a relative was serving when they died.

If a person dies when serving, a Visiting Officer will be allocated to provide support and advice to the family. The Visiting Officer is a source of practical support and serves as the link between the family and the military, helping with questions and requests for information. They will guide and support the family through to and including the inquest. They will provide the family with the Purple Pack, a bereavement guide covering immediate practical issues you might be facing such as funeral planning, entitlements or benefits and support networks. (See page 51 for a link.)

Pastoral and welfare support teams can also be a valuable source of support and guidance to families.

“A Visiting Officer turned up at my door the following day... I took one look at him and thought, ‘Why have they sent you? I just want to be on my own!’ And you know what, he was a godsend in the end.”

Debra, service wife, lost her serving husband

What happens when a service person dies overseas?

If your relative was serving overseas when they died, a Notifying Officer usually informs the nominated Emergency Contact (who may be the next-of-kin) and an investigation will take place to ensure all relevant evidence is gathered for the coroner.

The Joint Casualty Compassionate Centre is the MoD's lead organisation that manages and coordinates practical requirements following the death of a service person overseas (see page 51 for details of the Purple Pack). Within 24 hours of the person's death, a Visiting Officer is appointed. They then become the main contact with the family and will guide them through the process of bringing their relative back to the UK (repatriation) and planning a funeral. The Visiting Officer will give as little or as much assistance as the family wishes.

The process of repatriation is paid for by MoD and differs according to whether your family member was on operational or non-operational duties abroad.

Repatriation when a person dies abroad on operational duty

If your relative died abroad on operational duty, repatriation is by aircraft, through a designated service airport, usually RAF Brize Norton, accompanied by a military police officer. For operational deaths, repatriation may be accompanied by a military ceremony. Visiting Officers will normally support the family in what to expect before, during and after repatriation.

Repatriation when a person dies on non-operational duty abroad

If your relative died while on non-operational duty abroad, they will usually be escorted by plane by MoD-approved funeral directors and military police, through an appropriate airport.

If your relative died abroad while on holiday or non-military business, repatriation arrangements are normally made through their travel insurance. However, MoD can support the arrival of the person into the UK.

What happens if your relative was a veteran when they died?

If your relative died after their military service, their death is processed in a similar way to the death of any other person.

Support for families who have lost a veteran family member

There are numerous organisations and charities (both military and civilian) that can support families who have lost a veteran relative.

These organisations offer a range of services, including emotional support, counselling, practical and legal advice, and guidance on requesting military honours at the funeral.

“I don’t know what I was searching for. I was just in so much shock I just needed to reach out to people who would listen to me. And that was military charities mainly... it’s so massively overwhelming that you need to have people around you who can help you to navigate through all the logistics of it, the paperwork, the planning, the organisation, the arranging.”

Penny, veteran wife, lost her veteran husband

What happens when a veteran dies overseas?

If your relative dies overseas after their military service, the British Consulate in that country is usually the organisation that can give advice about registering the death, bringing your relative home, or arranging for the funeral to be in the country in which they died.

Unfortunately, the MoD or the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office are unable to help financially to cover any repatriation, burial or cremation expenses, or settle any debts your relative may have had. Repatriation arrangements are normally made through your relative’s travel or life insurance, or, if they were not insured, friends, family or the service charities may be able to help. The British Consulate can help transfer money from friends and family in the UK to pay these costs. To bring your relative home a certified English translation of their death certificate as well as permission to remove them from a coroner (or equivalent) in the country where they died are both needed; the British Consulate can help to arrange this.

Funeral planning

Planning your relative’s funeral (military or private) will depend on their wishes and/or the wishes of the person’s spouse, partner or parent and whether they were serving or veteran when they died.

Funerals or memorials for service personnel who have died

If your relative was serving when they died, a military funeral will be paid for by MoD. If a private funeral arranged by the family is preferred, then MoD will provide a funeral grant. A funeral provides an opportunity for friends and colleagues to pay their respects together with the person’s family. Your Visiting Officer will have further information and will help guide you through the process.

A military funeral and the ceremony do not have to be heavily militaristic, but there are several common ceremonial traditions that might feature, such as carrying of the coffin by members of the person’s unit or by Armed Forces companions; draping of a Union Flag across the coffin; performance of reversed arms; a military bugle call or gun salute.

Funeral services can be held in a place of worship or funeral venue in your relative’s hometown.

When you are bereaved, it may be difficult to make decisions. If possible, take time to discuss with the funeral director and Visiting Officer whether you would like a military funeral for your relative and if so what kind. If you do wish to have a military funeral, the funeral director will liaise with the Visiting Officer to ensure that the funeral follows protocol.

The chaplain can play a key role in supporting the family and may lead the service or support a person of the family’s choice to work through the components of a military funeral service. They will take time to honour the wishes of the family and discuss in detail what the service will be like.

“We’d got a funeral to plan, so all that needs to be sorted out... do we want, you know, for them to fire guns over the grave, and we said, ‘no’. If they’d asked me again, I’d have probably changed my mind and said, ‘yes’. Did we want the veterans to come... with their colours, and I said, ‘no’... but if we did it again, I’d say, ‘yes’ this time... at the time I thought, ‘why do I want... them there?’ But now, I think it would have been about them paying their respects to my son.”

Frank, father, lost his serving son

“I said I wanted [daughter] to have a military funeral and... bang, they got that into order straightaway... I wanted it to be done because I wanted her friends to be there... about a third of the regiment came... they travelled from far away.”

Mark, veteran father, lost his serving daughter

Returning the personal possessions of serving personnel who have died

The MoD will arrange for any of your relative’s possessions that are being held by the military to be returned to the Executor/Beneficiary of the estate as soon as possible. They will write to provide further information after the funeral. Please speak to your Visiting Officer if you require access to items of a sentimental nature.

Funerals for veterans who have died

If your relative was a veteran when they died, they can still have military honours at their funeral. However, the cost of the funeral and arrangements for any military rites are the responsibility of their family. The Royal British Legion can offer advice and help with contacting organisations that may, in some cases, be able to offer financial support for the funeral.

The Royal British Legion and other military charities can also help with arranging a funeral with military honours and can provide contact details of the veteran community locally who may wish to be part of the funeral service.

The Army Regimental Association and equivalents in the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force may also be able to help with drapes of regimental (or equivalent) flags for the coffin and some have access to trumpeters or buglers to play or sound the Last Post.

Inquests: when a serving or veteran relative has died

For any sudden unexpected death, a coroner is required to conduct an inquest. The purpose of an inquest is to establish the cause of your relative's death. It seeks to establish the facts, i.e., the identity of the person who has died, what happened, when it happened, how it happened, and where it happened. It does not seek to establish why your relative died, or to apportion blame. It is a civil matter, and not a trial. It is independent from MoD as coroners work under the Ministry of Justice.

Usually, a coroner will open an inquest, then pause it while information is gathered, and the person's funeral can take place. This can take some time. It may be helpful for families to liaise with the appointed coroner's officer during this time, asking as many questions, as many times, as they need to.

Once the coroner has received the police report and has all the evidence needed, they will set a date for the inquest. The coroner can request that anyone who was present when your relative died or has information about how they died, provides a written statement or attends the inquest as a witness, to help them establish the circumstances around how they died. The coroner will liaise directly with the person's spouse, partner or parent. Based on the evidence, the coroner is required to make a verdict, now known as a 'conclusion', on how they died. The conclusion is documented on your relative's death certificate. Inquests for 'in service personnel' may be attended by a member of the Defence Inquest Unit, which acts as a link between the coroner's office and the MoD to provide evidence for the inquest.

Inquests in all parts of the UK may be held in open court so any interested parties, including the press, are permitted to attend. Inquests can be emotionally charged. Some people find the inquest and investigation process helpful in trying to understand what has happened; it can be an important part of their grieving process. Others find it deeply distressing. Media reporting of inquests can be distressing for families. See **Section 6** for sources of support with inquests such as the Coroners' Courts Support Service.

Service inquiries

If your relative was serving when they died, a service inquiry may be held to explore and understand the circumstances around how they died and provide recommendations to improve procedures, policy, and practice.

What happens if my relative left a final message?

Many people who die by suicide do not leave a suicide note or final message; this can be difficult for families. If a note is left, it can take different forms. For example, it might be a handwritten note or an online message, such as a text, voice-note or video. Final messages can often be written impulsively and reflect your family member's mindset at the time of writing. Notes rarely give all the answers or explain all the circumstances of a person's death. Final messages can sometimes be addressed to a specific person. Some people who receive a note find it comforting, while others can be deeply distressed, especially if the note has been written in anger. If you receive a note, it will be included as part of any investigation into how your relative died. However, it is possible to request a copy. The original note can be returned after the inquest.

Dealing with mainstream media

If your relative was serving when they died

There is often a lot of media attention when someone dies by suicide particularly if they were serving. The MoD will support with addressing media enquiries and the Visiting Officer will guide you.

If your relative was a veteran when they died

If your relative was a veteran when they died, military charities may be able to advise you on dealing with the media

When all the formal processes are over

The period after a family member's funeral/inquest can be a very difficult time for families as many of the formal issues no longer need to be dealt with and some forms of support may start to be withdrawn. You may feel that this is the time when you want other forms of support or guidance. **Section 6** provides details of resources that may be helpful.

"My mum (who was divorced from my dad), explained to my son... that my dad had died by suicide. Obviously, she explained it in, like, child terms... because obviously I didn't want to have that chat with him in four- or five-years' time, 'well, actually this is what happened'. I'd rather he had like a 'PG' version now, so he always knows, so it's not like... in five years' time then he finds out he died by suicide and it's a double heartbreak."

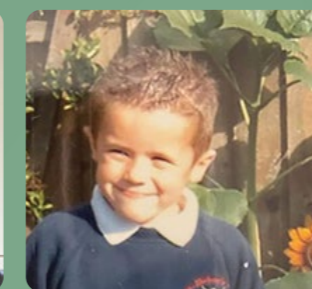
Alison, daughter, lost her serving father



Section 5: Explaining suicide to children and young people: guidance for parents and other adults



The children and young people on this page are all bereaved by suicide



If you are responsible for or supporting children or young people who are bereaved after the suicide of a family member during or after military service, this section of the *At Your Side* guide aims to help you understand what might help them.

The main messages about explaining suicide to children and young people are listed in Box 8.

Box 8. Main messages: explaining suicide to children and young people

A child who has been told the truth about their relative's suicide and has been able to talk about it with adults who remain open to their needs and questions is more likely to:

- Grow in confidence, self-esteem, and resilience
- Feel in charge of their own story and how to talk about it
- Have the tools to continue processing their bereavement as they grow up
- Strengthen their trust of those who care for them
- Be better able to cope in the future

Explaining suicide to a child or young person

You may be reading this because you:

- are the parent or stepparent of, or the adult responsible for, a child who has been bereaved by suicide
- have children of your own who know the bereaved family and are aware of what has happened
- are supporting someone who has been bereaved by suicide and who is trying to support a child at the same time

Explaining the suicide of a family member to a child or young person may feel like the hardest thing you have ever had to do. However, people who have been able to talk to children and young people about suicide say that it felt difficult to begin with, but afterwards, both they and the child/young person had benefited, and they felt closer as a result.

Remember, there's no such thing as a perfect parent. Just parents trying to do their best for their children.

Why it helps children to have honest information

Adults naturally want to protect children from difficult things, so your instinct may be to not talk about the suicide with the child or young person. However, research shows that children who are told about the suicide of a close family member in a sensitive manner by someone they love and trust:

- are better able to manage it
- feel closer to their family
- are more resilient
- have better mental health as they grow older

In today's world it is difficult to keep suicide a secret. It is better for children to be given information by you than to find out themselves through gossip, rumour, or social media.

Children and young people need to understand and try to make sense of things just as adults do. They can only do this if they are given honest, age-appropriate information. Because they aren't adults, the words used and the situations being talked about need to be explained in ways they understand.

It's easier for children to make sense of things if they have enough information and people who are willing to talk to them and answer questions:

- this helps protect them from misinformation.
- it helps to build trust between you and the child or young person and shows that open conversations are possible, even if difficult, so they feel able to ask questions in the future.
- it means they have the words to talk about it with others if they want.

Children and young people are sensitive to those around them and will know that something is wrong. They see, hear and are concerned by more things than we realise and not knowing makes this worse. They quickly pick up a sense of shame and stigma from what is present but not spoken about.

Finding the right words

It may feel impossible to think about talking with a child or young person about something as difficult as the suicide of a close family member when you yourself may be feeling confused and shocked, and struggling to cope.

It's important to think about how you can look after yourself both before and after conversations with other people, both adults and children. This might be by going for a walk, listening to music or just taking some time for yourself. Remind yourself what has helped you in the past; it will be different for each person.

There's no perfect way to have these conversations, but it can help to have a few guidelines to follow to help you navigate this difficult time with, and for, children.

Children need honest information given by someone they know and trust.

A few guidelines might help:

- try and choose a place and time which feels safe for you and the child or young person. Maybe you have someone both you and they trust to be with you.
- talk to children or young people in language they can understand, which will vary according to their age.
- if you have several children of different ages you may want to give a simple message all together, so everyone hears the same message at the same time, and then have further follow-up conversations with older children later.
- it may help to practise what you want to say first.
- go at the pace of the child or young person. They may be overwhelmed and find it difficult to understand everything you are explaining.

Often lost in the confusion of suicide is the most important thing for a child – that the person has died.

Starting honest and open conversations with children can mean that you will be able to add information as and when it becomes available, that will gradually make the picture clearer for them. It also means that you become the child's reliable source of trustworthy information.

Give honest information but don't burden children with unnecessary details that may be confusing or distressing.

"Everything one says should be true, but one need not say everything that is true."

Dr Atle Dyregrov, Clinical Psychologist

“Now, I can’t honestly remember how we... told our young children about the death... but I know that from the absolute first point onwards we both said no matter how difficult it is, we will always tell the truth to them. We were also clear that we weren’t going to push anything onto them... say, ‘right, come on then, it’s time to sit down now’. We had to give them the space to take things at their pace. But at no point have we ever said, ‘we’re not telling you because you’re not old enough’ or anything like that.”

Paul, RAF Officer, lost a serving family member

The important thing is to start the conversation. You don’t have to have all the answers.

Trying to make sense of it

You will be trying to make sense of what has happened, and children/young people will also need to do this. Putting pieces of information together in some kind of order will help.

For example, you might:

- give them information about where and when their relative died and how events fit together.
- draw a timeline of events/places for the child or young person. This will probably help both you and them and will show what pieces of information they still need.

Children and young people won’t be able to share their story with someone else if they haven’t been able to understand it in their own way and in their own words.

When a child has an accurate story for themselves of how someone died it may be helpful to have a conversation with them about whether they would like to share any of that story, and with whom. Sometimes children would like certain people to be aware of what happened, but don’t want to have those conversations themselves, and sometimes they benefit from thinking about the words they might use to talk to friends or relatives themselves.

If you are not bereaved yourself but have children who will be affected by a suicide in some way, it’s still important to think about how you can talk about what has happened in an open way. They will be trying to make sense of it, and their bereaved friends may well want to talk about it with them. This may feel difficult, but having open conversations will help all children find a good way through and will reduce any sense of stigma or shame.

Responding to difficult questions

Children learn by asking questions. If they have a question, they are usually ready to have an answer.

But you may not be ready or prepared to give the answer. That’s OK! Having a strategy for difficult questions will help. You may need ways to give yourself time to think about what you want to say.

For example:

‘That’s a really important question. I need to think about that. Let’s talk about it again tonight.’

You may not have all the answers; you may be confused yourself. It’s OK to say:

‘I don’t know’, or ‘I’ll tell you when I know more myself’.

Grief responses that children and young people may experience

Children and young people will have all kinds of feelings, many of them similar to yours. Consider how you are feeling; this may help you understand how the child is feeling too.

“I found it helpful to know that we all grieve differently, and a lot of it depends on the relationship that you had with that person, and that your own grief is individual and unique to you, and that is fine and that is how it works. And you seek what works for you. And I think that’s the same for kids really.”

Penny, veteran wife, lost her veteran husband

Coping with strong feelings

The key is keeping the conversation going with help and guidance.

They may be worried that you or other important adults in their lives might die and they may need to express this and/or need reassurance.

It may be painful for you to see children/young people express strong feelings, especially if you are experiencing complex emotions yourself. Try to acknowledge and validate their feelings if you can.

Help them find ways to name, express and be in charge of their feelings in ways that are not harmful to themselves or others. For example, give them an old pillow and agree they can write on it, punch it or throw it around; encourage them to undertake physical exercise like joining a sports class or going to the gym. Some young people find listening to music a useful expression of their feelings.

“When my husband took his life my son was angry. He felt like, ‘I’ve been betrayed’. And that’s normal... that’s all normal.”

Penny, veteran wife, lost her veteran husband

“I said, ‘but I need someone to talk to my children. I need someone to talk to my children about death. I am not qualified, or in a place to talk to them, ‘cause I’m too emotional myself and I need someone that the kids can talk to about how they’re feeling, and they can understand and process those feelings with that professional!’ And that’s what my contact did.”

Molly, service wife, lost her serving husband

Children and young people who are bereaved by the suicide of a close relative may be worried about their own or others’ safety and avoid talking about it. They can sometimes experience suicidal thoughts and feelings themselves. There are people who can help.

“A charity supported my children for over 10 years and both of my children have had suicidal thoughts in the past and they fast-tracked them to appropriate mental health support.”

Sara, service wife, lost her serving husband

Papyrus is a charity that provides support and advice to young people who are experiencing thoughts of suicide, or anyone concerned that a young person could be thinking about suicide.

Contact HOPELINEUK:

Call: **0800 068 4141**

Text: **07860 039 967**

Email: pat@papyrus-uk.org

Open 24 hours every day.

In **Section 6**, you will find details of some organisations that will be able to support and guide you in your conversations with children.

Delayed grief

Suicide can be more difficult for children to process when their relative was serving or had served in the Armed Forces. If military life has involved frequent or long separations, then initially when someone dies, it can feel similar to earlier separations from which their relative returned. It may only be when it continues longer than any previous separation that children are faced with the fact that this separation is permanent. Grief responses may not therefore be immediate and may happen at a later stage. Being aware of this possibility can help you to prepare.

“When my dad first died it was weird. So like... obviously I knew he was dead, but he wasn't dead to me if that makes sense? I'd see him weekly or monthly, so to me it was like, yeah, he died but it wasn't forever, like he was still coming back.”

Alison, young person, lost her serving father

It may be that the child or young person who is bereaved wasn't living with the family member who died. They may in the past have experienced family life with multiple separations, but now be living in a civilian setting, or may have spent a number of years at boarding school. Each of these situations may delay the realisation that their relative's death is a permanent separation, and consequently makes grieving more complicated.

Saying goodbye

Saying goodbye is always hard. Families may have done this many times during a relative's life in the Armed Forces. Saying goodbye after someone has died is even harder. Involving the child or young person in saying goodbye signals that their relationship with the person who has died is important and honoured. Talk with them about what you might do as a family or group. Exploring the options available and sharing these will help the child or young person to participate in what's right for them. Choice is important.

If you are supporting a friend or colleague who has been bereaved, they may find it helpful to talk through ideas for saying goodbye, particularly if you have experienced this yourself as part of service life.

Personal rituals

You may have done things in the past that helped you and the child or young person to manage the goodbye and separation that is part of service life, or the child may remember things that have helped in the past. Rituals help both adults and children when someone has died, so it's helpful for children and young people to be able to participate in events which enable them to think and talk about their relative, acknowledge their death and say goodbye; for example, planting a tree, sharing a meal, or visiting a special place. Remind yourself of things you might have done in the past to manage the goodbye as these may help you now as well.

Formal rituals

A formal ritual might be a funeral, memorial service or wider ceremonial event.

Children and young people may be able to be involved in some aspects of these events. If you have a Visiting Officer, they may be able to help with this. Children and young people can only make informed choices about what their involvement might be if information is given to them about what the funeral or service will be like, where it will take place, what will happen and who will be there. If they choose to attend, it is important that they know what to expect.

Before the event, it may be helpful to consider:

- where they might sit, for example, at the back or side rather than at the front, and who will support them
- whether they wish to attend for part or all of the event
- how they can leave before the end with someone supporting them if they wish to do so
- whether they might like some friends to share in part of the event, and how this might be possible

Planning for these possibilities will help reassure both you and the child or young person.

Remembering the person who has died

Sometimes, adults in a child's life may experience confusing emotions as a response to the person dying, such as anger or tension directed at a particular person or organisation.

Try not to let your own complicated feelings impact on the child's need to think about and remember their relative and the job they did.

As children get older, they will want to get to know and understand their relative who died better and in a more grown-up way. So, it will be helpful for them to be able to continue to ask questions, think about memories and learn new things about the person at different times in their life. Try to support them in this.

“One of the things about children is that they become curious about their dad and their dad's military experience and they become curious about the military. That can be very difficult for a mother who's conflicted about the idea of a child's interest in the thing that perhaps she blames for the death of the partner. So, I think that needs to be explored and talked about and help be devised for supporting that sort of conversation.”

Andy, ex-Army, lost a close serving friend

It's important children are able to remember the way the person lived and their relationship with them, not just the way they died.

You may live in a civilian setting and may not feel part of the military environment, so you may need support to access some of the things that might be helpful for the bereaved child. If you have a Visiting Officer, ask them or whoever is in contact with you from the military if they can help you.

The child or young person may be curious about their relative's service life and things they did. Finding ways to share the person's service life will help children/young people understand more about the person who was important to them.

These can include:

- big things, ordinary things and difficult things
- places their relative went to, trained and worked
- activities they took part in
- it might help if those who served alongside the person who died can add to these memories.

You might:

- put together a memory book for the child or young person, asking other people to contribute. For example, 'something I remember about your dad/mum/brother/sister is...'
- help a child create a memory box in which to put things which bring back memories of their relative, e.g., tickets from a shared family outing, favourite aftershave or fragrance, a tee shirt they liked to wear or their favourite piece of music (sensory things can be very important for memory)
- make a collection of photos
- help them choose something to keep that belonged to their relative; this may be a personal item or something that represents their work, e.g., medals or awards

Schools, colleges and other educational settings

Educational settings play a big part in the routine of a child's or young person's day. For many, returning to school or college after the suicide of a family member gives stability and a sense of normality at what can be a chaotic time. Others may be worried about returning and what to say about how the person died. Some may be anxious about leaving family members they are worried about.

If your family member was serving when they died and you live close to a large garrison, the military may have connections with the school through the welfare service. You may be able to access the service pupil premium for children of military families, which provides welfare support in school. See **Section 6** for details.

You may or may not have responsibility for the education of the child you are wanting to support, but it will help you understand things from their perspective if you can try and stand in their shoes and see how they may be impacted by the suicide. This is especially so if they are at boarding school and away from family, as this can feel very isolating and make it difficult for them to take part in all the processes that help grieving.

It is important for the child or young person's school or college and teachers or lecturers to know what has happened so they can understand if and why the child or young person might be struggling, upset or anxious and be prepared to offer support. Talking about suicide is difficult and teachers may also find it challenging to have this conversation, but by communicating directly with the school or college you will help reduce potential stigma for the child or young person, help teachers prepare the class for their return and reduce the chances of playground rumour, gossip and incorrect information. Schools may have a range of books and/or book suggestions to help with grief in general, however, you might find it helpful to signpost the school to this guide and other resources that can help guide them.

“The school have been absolutely fantastic. My son's got one teacher in particular, that has become like a father role for him. And I think, without his help at school, I would have struggled to get my son into school.”

Maggie, ex-RAF (Corporal), lost her veteran husband

If the child or young person needs to change school or college following their bereavement, there are things you can do to ease the transition. For example, it will help the child to settle and receive the support they need if you inform the new educational setting about the child's loss. Also remind yourself what has been helpful after earlier moves and try and do the same.

If the child or young person is at boarding school, it is essential to maintain good communication between school and home during this time and have clarity about what the child is told and by whom, so they are not confused. If possible, initial conversations about the death should take place within the family and home environment. This will enable the child to feel close to members of their family and will help them to process what has happened by allowing them to participate in conversations and events.

Learning of the death of someone by suicide can be difficult for those who are at university. It is likely they are living away from home and managing study and peer relationships. Thought needs to be given as to how they are informed and supported so they can be told by someone close to them and in an environment in which they can feel safe. Personal contact is best if possible and it's important to think about how the young person can be accompanied home if they want to return, as they are likely to feel shocked and distanced from all that has been happening.

Returning to university after being bereaved by suicide is also difficult. Help the young person to identify what support they need and from whom, and to think about who they want to tell and how they might talk about the death. They may be reluctant for the university to be made aware of their bereavement, but university staff will not be able to support them if they are struggling either academically or in their personal life if they are not informed of the death.

Most universities have a free, self-referral counselling service for students. The service may also specifically offer bereavement support. If this is not available, the service should be able to signpost to other sources of support locally.

“These gestures are important to give children the confidence that their father was valued independently of the way he died; it gives them the tools to face life.”

Rita, service wife, lost her serving husband



Section 6: Useful contacts and resources



The people on
this page are
all bereaved
by suicide

“People need to know
where to go for what.”

Mary, mother, lost her
serving daughter



We have gathered a selection of resources that others have found helpful and which may also be helpful to you.

The details of each resource are accurate at the time of publishing.

Box 9.

Resources listed in this section

- MoD’s Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre (JCCC) and Purple Pack bereavement guide
- Armed Forces websites
- Military charities and benevolent funds
- Widow(er) Associations
- Peer and group support
- Civilian bereavement support charities
- Talk to someone now (24-hour support)
- Inquest information and support
- LGBTQ+ support
- Information about drugs and alcohol
- Legal and financial advice
- Support for children and young people
- Suicide prevention support
- Online directories of support
- Books and leaflets
- Documentaries
- Training: practical guidance on how to respond to someone experiencing suicidal thoughts

A full list of the resources listed above (and more) can be found on the Suicide Bereavement UK website:

[www.suicidebereavementuk.com/
key-resources](http://www.suicidebereavementuk.com/key-resources).

MoD’s Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre (JCCC) and Purple Pack bereavement guide



The Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre (JCCC) is the lead organisation for managing all practical requirements following the death in service of a member of the Armed Forces. They oversee the management of British Armed Forces casualties and compassionate cases and may also be a source of guidance and support for the families of service personnel who have died regarding repatriation, funeral entitlements, marking of graves and estate issues.

Website: www.gov.uk/guidance/joint-casualty-and-compassionate-centre-jccc

Helpline: **01452 519 951 24** hours every day

Email: dbs-jcccgrouppmailbox@mod.gov.uk



The MoD **Purple Pack** bereavement guide provides practical guidance, information and signposting for families of personnel who have died in service.

Website: [assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/
government/uploads/system/uploads/
attachment_data/file/1140760/2023_Purple_
Pack_-_for_publication_online.pdf](http://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1140760/2023_Purple_Pack_-_for_publication_online.pdf)

Armed Forces websites

The Official British Armed Forces websites are a good source of advice, information and support for serving personnel, veterans and their families. Support offered includes deployment support, relationship support and financial and legal support information.



The Royal Navy

Website: www.royalnavy.mod.uk



The British Army

Website: www.army.mod.uk

ABF The Soldiers' Charity: www.soldierscharity.org/abf-the-soldiers-charity/what-we-do



The Royal Air Force

Website: www.raf.mod.uk

Family support: www.raf.mod.uk/community-support/serving-families/

Military charities and benevolent funds



The Soldiers', Sailors', and Airmen's Families Association (SSAFA) provides practical, financial and emotional support to service personnel, veterans and their families.

Website: www.ssafa.org.uk/get-help

Live chat: www.ssafa.org.uk/get-help/forcesline

Advice line: **0800 260 6780**
Monday to Thursday 9am - 5pm,
Friday 9am - 4pm



Naval Families Federation offers information, advice and guidance on a range of issues including bereavement, accommodation, education, finance, employment and relationships to Naval families.

Website: www.nff.org.uk

Email: contactus@nff.org.uk

Tel: **02392 654 374**
Monday to Thursday 9am - 5pm,
Friday 9am - 1pm



Royal Navy and Royal Marines Charity offers financial and emotional support to serving and former members of the Navy and their families. Their website also provides advice on a range of subjects including bereavement, the transition to civilian life, family, relationships and employment.

Website: www.rnrmc.org.uk

Email: theteam@rnrmc.org.uk

Phone: **023 9387 1520**



The Royal Marines Charity provide support, advice and friendship to serving and retired Royal Marines, their families, and those who wish to join the Corps with mental health support, respite breaks and financial support available. Completion of a free membership form is required.

Website: www.rma-trmc.org

Telephone membership: **023 9298 1922**

Telephone health and wellbeing support: **0800 468 1664**
Monday to Friday 9am - 4pm



Army Families Federation is an independent charity for Army families around the world. It offers confidential advice on bereavement, transition from serving to civilian life, housing, financial support and allowances, education and childcare.

Website: www.aff.org.uk

Email: contact@aff.org.uk

Telephone: **01264 554 004**
Monday to Thursday 8.30am - 5pm,
Friday 8.30am - 1pm



The Army Benevolent Fund is the Army's national charity offering grants and financial support to soldiers, past and present, and their families.

Website: www.soldierscharity.org

Email: info@armybenevolentfund.org

Phone: **020 7901 8900**



Royal Air Force Families Federation offers support on a range of issues including bereavement, education, healthcare, accommodation, benefits and visas to the RAF family around the world. The RAF Families Federation provides support to all personnel - single, married or in a partnership, and all families.

Website: www.raf-ff.org.uk

Email: enquiries@raf-ff.org.uk

Tel: **0178 078 1650**
Monday to Friday 10am - 3pm



Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund provides support to serving RAF personnel, veterans and their families including spouses, partners, dependent children and carers. The Fund will consider any request for assistance, providing a bespoke approach to each situation. The Fund can provide practical funeral support, financial help, confidential counselling and bereavement support.

Website: www.rafbf.org

Helpline: **0300 102 1919**
Monday to Thursday 9am - 5pm,
Friday 9am - 4pm

Service Pupil Premium

The Department for Education introduced the **service pupil premium (SPP)** in recognition of the specific challenges children from service families face. State schools, academies and free schools in England which have children of service families in school years reception to year 11 can receive SPP funding. It is designed to assist the school in providing additional support that children may need including counselling and attending support groups. For more information about the eligibility criteria and what SPP can be used for, please visit the website.

Website: www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-service-pupil-premium/service-pupil-premium-what-you-need-to-know

Widow(er) Associations



The War Widows' Association of Great Britain works to improve the conditions of war widows and their dependants in Great Britain.

Website: warwidows.org.uk

Email: info@warwidows.org.uk

Tel: **0845 2412 189**



The Royal Navy, Royal Marine Widows' Association aims to provide friendship, support, guidance and comfort to those who have experienced bereavement.

Website: rnrwidows.org

Email: contact@rnrwidows.org

Tel: **07462 376850**



The Army Widows' Association aims to offer comfort, support and friendship to the widows and widowers of Army personnel.

Website: www.armywidows.org.uk/

Email: info@armywidows.org.uk

Tel: **0300 666 0136**



The RAF Widows' Association aims to provide comfort, support and practical advice to those who have lost a loved one in the RAF.

Website: www.rafbf.org/raf-widows

Email: raf.widows@gmail.com

Tel: **0800 456 1150**



WAY Widowed and Young offers a peer-to-peer support network for anyone aged 50 years or under who has a lost a partner, married or not, inclusive of sexual orientation, gender, race and religion.

WAY has an Armed Forces and also a suicide bereavement sub-group.

Website: www.widowedandyoung.org.uk

Tel: **0300 201 10051**

Monday to Friday 9am – 5pm

Contact Form: www.widowedandyoung.org.uk/contact-us

Peer and group support



The Soldiers', Sailors', and Airmen's Families Association (SSAFA) offers a suicide bereavement support group to families (18+) who have been affected by the loss through suicide of a serving or veteran loved one.

Website: www.ssafa.org.uk

Advice line: **0800 260 6780**

Monday to Friday 9am – 5pm



Facing the Future is a Cruse and Samaritans partnership which offers a series of free self-referral online support group sessions to those bereaved by suicide.

Registration: www.facingthefuturegroups.org/RegistrationPage



Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SOBS) is a national charity offering information, support group meetings and a helpline to those bereaved or affected by suicide.

Website: uksobs.org

Email support: email.support@uksobs.org

Helpline: **0300 111 5065**

Everyday 9am - 7pm

(call charges apply)

Online community forum free support accessible 24 hours a day. Users can register through the SOBS website.



Togetherall is a free online community where serving personnel, veterans and their family members over 16 years of age can access support. This free online forum is moderated by clinical professionals and people can give or receive mental health support anonymously. Users are required to register for a free account.

Website: account.v2.togetherall.com/register/uk-armed-forces

Civilian bereavement support charities



Amparo liaison teams provide free and confidential emotional and practical support to anyone who has felt the impact of suicide for as long as an individual may need support. A full updated list of UK areas covered by this service can be found on their website.

Website: amparo.org.uk

Tel: **0330 088 9255**

Weekdays 9am – 5pm



Cruse Bereavement Support has 80 branches across England, Wales and Northern Ireland that offer support. Cruse has specific resources available to anyone affected after a military death.

Website: www.cruse.org.uk

Armed Forces support: www.cruse.org.uk/organisations/grief-in-the-military

Helpline: **0808 808 1677**

Answered by trained volunteers Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday – 9.30am – 5pm
Tuesday – 1pm – 8pm



Cruse Scotland is an independent charity offering help and support to bereaved adults and children across Scotland.

Website: www.crusescotland.org.uk

Email: support@crusescotland.org.uk

Helpline: **0808 802 6161**

Monday to Friday 9am – 8pm,
weekends 10am – 2pm



StrongMen offers bereavement support to bereaved men. For those who enjoy being outdoors, StrongMen offers free weekends away and the opportunity to talk directly to trained volunteers using the Man2Man phones service. StrongMen also has a podcast available.

Website: www.strongmen.org.uk

Email: hello@strongmen.org.uk

Freephone: **0800 915 0400**

Talk to someone now (24-hour support)

SAMARITANS

Samaritans offer an anonymous and confidential 24/7 helpline. They have worked with MOD and other charities to provide support for serving personnel of the Armed Forces, veterans and their families.

Website: www.samaritans.org

Military support: www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/military

Email: jo@samaritans.org

Helpline: **116 123**, 24 hours every day

shout
85258
here for you 24/7

Shout offers 24/7 confidential crisis support via free text for times when you need immediate assistance. The Shout website offers resources and information about a range of subjects including bereavement support.

Website: www.giveusashout.org

Online resources: www.giveusashout.org/get-help/resources

Text the word **'SHOUT'** to **85258**

If you are feeling suicidal and feel unable to keep yourself safe, please call 999 or go to your nearest NHS Accident and Emergency Department (A&E).

You can also call NHS 111 if you're worried about an urgent mental health concern. The NHS 111 service is staffed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by a team of fully trained advisers.

Call free on 111.

Samaritans is also available 24/7 and **can be called free on 116 123 or email jo@samaritans.org**

For Serving Personnel and Their Families

If you need urgent support, please contact the following:

Support service available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Samaritans

Tel (UK): **116 123**

Tel (outside of the UK):
+44 (0)330 094 5717

Email (worldwide): jo@samaritans.org

Website: www.samaritans.org

You are not alone. If you are serving, please seek help, through your chain of command, welfare or pastoral support staff, or medical services.

Inquest information and support



The Coroners' Courts Support Service is an independent voluntary organisation whose trained volunteers offer emotional support and practical help to bereaved families, witnesses and others attending an inquest at a coroner's court in various locations across England and Wales.

Website: www.coronerscourtsupportservice.org.uk

Email: helpline@ccss.org.uk

National Helpline: **0300 111 2141**

Monday to Friday 9am – 7pm,
Saturday 9am – 2pm



A Guide to Coroner Services for Bereaved People

is produced by the Ministry of Justice. This guide explores what an inquest is, what the role of the coroner is and how to access legal advice and support.

Website: suicidebereavementuk.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/guide-to-coroner-services-bereaved-people-jan-2020-1.pdf

LGBTQ+ support



Switchboard provides a confidential helpline answered by trained volunteers who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans. The helpline is available to individuals, friends, parents or family members of LGBTQ+ loved ones who are looking for some independent advice and support about any issues of concern.

Website: www.switchboard.lgbt

Email: hello@switchboard.lgbt

Freephone: **0800 0119 100**

10am – 10pm every day

Information about drugs and alcohol

FRANK

FRANK provides information about drugs and alcohol with links to local advice, treatment, and confidential support.

Website: www.talktofrank.com

Advice line: **0300 123 6600**

24 hours every day

Text: **82111**

Live chat via website 2pm – 6pm every day

Legal and financial advice



Royal British Legion (RBL) supports serving members of the Armed Forces, veterans and their families with physical and mental wellbeing, financial and employment support including help with funeral costs and advice from experts on rights and pensions, housing and inquests.

Website: www.britishlegion.org.uk

Email: info@britishlegion.org.uk

Telephone advice line: **0808 802 8080**

Every day 8am – 8pm

From overseas: **+44 (0)20 3376 8080**



Turn2Us offers financial support, bereavement benefit advice, grants and other information, support and advice to serving personnel, veterans and their families. Specific support can be found on the Turn2Us website using the 'Your Situation' tab. Face-to-face advice sessions can be arranged through the website.

Website: www.turn2us.org.uk



Citizens Advice offers free and confidential advice to serving personnel of the Armed Forces (including reservists), veterans and their families/dependants. The service has an extensive website and can offer assistance on a wide range of issues including identifying what financial benefits individuals are entitled to in the UK and abroad, and offering legal advice and information about help with school fees, childcare costs and Forces' discounts. Use the Citizens Advice website to find a local branch.

Website: www.citizensadvice.org.uk

Armed Forces information: www.citizensadvice.org.uk/benefits/armed-forces-and-veterans/benefits-and-concessions-for-the-armed-forces-veterans-and-their-families



The **Centre for Military Justice** charity provides free, independent, expert legal services to serving or former members of the Armed Forces or their bereaved families.

Website: centreformilitaryjustice.org.uk

Telephone: **0203 848 6821**

Support for children and young people



Child Bereavement UK helps families when a child is bereaved or when a child dies. Support is available to children and young people up to the age of 25 years. Bereavement support resources are available in a range of languages.

Website: www.childbereavementuk.org

Email: helpline@childbereavementuk.org

Helpline: **0800 02 888 40**
Monday to Friday 9am – 5pm



Winston's Wish provides specialist suicide bereavement support for families, children and young people up to 25 years old when someone important has taken their own life. Winston's Wish has specific support designed for service families and children. The trained, professional helpline team can give advice and support over the phone.

Website: www.winstonswish.org

Armed Forces Resources: www.winstonswish.org/how-can-military-families-remember-someone-that-has-died

Email: ask@winstonswish.org

Helpline: **08088 020 021**
Monday to Friday 8am – 8pm



Scotty's Little Soldiers is a charity dedicated to supporting military children and young people (0 to 25 years) who have experienced the death of a parent who served in the British Armed Forces.

Website: www.scottyslittlesoldiers.co.uk

Email: families@scottyslittlesoldiers.co.uk

Telephone: **0800 092 8571**

Text/What's App: **07741 162 132**
(charges may apply)

Suicide prevention support



Papyrus is a suicide prevention charity which offers the free, confidential helpline HOPELINEUK, for children and young people/young adults up to the age of 35 years who are experiencing thoughts of suicide or anyone who has concerns that a young person is thinking about suicide. The Papyrus website also provides a range of useful resources, advice and information.

Website: papyrus-uk.org

Email: pat@papyrus-uk.org

Helpline: **0800 068 41 41 24**
hours every day

Text: **88247**
(charges may apply)



Samaritans have an anonymous and confidential 24/7 helpline and have worked with MOD and other charities to support serving personnel of the Armed Forces, veterans and their families.

Website: www.samaritans.org

Armed Forces information: www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/military

Email: jo@samaritans.org

Helpline: **116 123**
24 hours every day

Online directories of support



Suicide Bereavement Support Partnership online directory holds the details of over 100 organisations and individuals offering support to those bereaved by suicide.

Website: www.supportaftersuicide.org.uk



AtaLoss offers resources and information as well as a directory of support services for bereaved people through a national signposting website of bereavement services and online bereavement support. Users can locate support in their area using their location.

Website: www.ataloss.org



The Hub of Hope app is free to download and brings over 10,000 local, national, peer, community, charity, private and NHS mental health support organisations and services together in one place. Users are invited to enter their postcode to locate resources in their geographical area. Crisis text and helpline support can be accessed through the app too.

Website: hubofhope.co.uk

Books and leaflets



Help is at Hand is written by people bereaved by suicide for people bereaved by suicide and is a free resource with different versions for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Scotland has the After A Suicide booklet which is also free.

England: www.suicidebereavementuk.com/key_document/help-is-at-hand

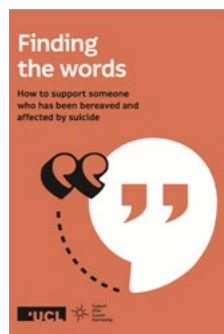
Wales: www.suicidebereavementuk.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Help-is-at-Hand-Wales.pdf

Northern Ireland: www.suicidebereavementuk.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Help-is-at-Hand_NI.pdf



After A Suicide

Scotland: www.suicidebereavementuk.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Scotland-After_a_suicide.pdf



Finding the words is a free downloadable leaflet looking at how to support a person bereaved by suicide. It includes guidance on what to say and how to listen effectively.

Website: www.suicidebereavementuk.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Finding-the-words.pdf



First Hand is a free downloadable guide written to help after the suicide of somebody you didn't know. It explores grief responses that may be experienced after an individual witnesses or attends the scene of a stranger's suicide.

Website: www.suicidebereavementuk.com/key_document/first-hand-booklet



The Family Has Been Informed is a specialist book offering information and guidance to military families and the professionals who

are supporting them after someone has died. This book offers practical guidance, ideas for activities and suggestions for helpful resources alongside details of where to find additional support.

Website: shop.winstonswish.org/products/the-family-has-been-informed



Beyond the rough rock is a guide for adults supporting children. It offers ideas about how to start and manage difficult

conversations with children after someone important to them has died by suicide. Practical ways to support children are suggested as well as activities such as creating memory boxes and coping with sleep issues and grief.

Website: shop.winstonswish.org/products/beyond-the-rough-rock



Walk With Us is a free guide for supporting children, young people and families bereaved by suicide. This resource is free to access and has been co-produced with children and young people.

Website: www.suicidebereavementuk.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Walk-With-Us-Toolkit.pdf

Documentaries

BBC Life after Suicide: Angela Samata explores why some people take their own lives and how those who love them can come to terms with their loss.

Website: documentaryheaven.com/life-after-suicide

BBC Suicide and Me: Rapper Professor Green takes a personal journey to uncover the truth behind the suicide of his father and explores why suicide is the biggest killer of men under 45 years old in the UK.

Website: www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06mvx4j

BBC Our Silent Emergency: Roman Kemp takes a deeply personal and candid look at suicide and young men in the UK.

Website: www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p098hsv6/roman-kemp-our-silent-emergency

Training: practical guidance on how to respond to someone experiencing suicidal thoughts



Zero Suicide Alliance provides free 30-minute online training for anyone 16 years and over about how to ask if someone is feeling suicidal. Developed with Help for Heroes, the training course features videos of people discussing suicide bereavement and a member of the Armed Forces who has experienced suicidal thoughts.

Website: www.zerosuicidealliance.com/

Training: www.zerosuicidealliance.com/suicide-awareness-training-veteran-edition

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Disclaimer

This guide is based on independent research carried out by Suicide Bereavement UK. The content reflects the views of the authors and people with lived experience who took part in the study and not those of the funders NHS England. It was not designed or written by MoD.

Approximately 80% of the UK Armed Forces community (serving, reservist, veteran and their families) are resident in England and most of the advice in this guide is England focused. Where possible the guide has sought to recognise the different circumstances for those who are elsewhere in UK, but you may need to seek specific advice on your circumstances if you are outside England (including outside the UK).

Research User Group and Expert Panel

Andy Bacon Health Consultant and Senior Health Service Leader, former Army Major and Professor of Armed Forces and Global Health, University of Chester

Jan Bacon Chair of School Governors, Former Headteacher and ex-Army Wife

Paul & Jan Baldwin Lost their son Simon, a RAF veteran, to suicide

April Dickens Operational & Business Delivery Manager, Catterick Garrison Defence Medical Welfare Service

Wes Dunn Former Soldier and Media Manager for Bury Veterans Hub

Phil Hoole Former Warrant Officer, Army Veteran

Madeleine Moon MP for Bridgend 2005-2019; Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Suicide and Self Harm Prevention; Former President of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly (2018-2019) and Member of the UK Defence Select Committee 2009-2019

Rev Fr. Patrick O'Driscoll Serving Army Chaplain (Major)

Wayne Palmer Former Squadron Leader in the Royal Air Force and previously Senior Lecturer and Military Programme Leader at Buckinghamshire New University

Andrew Powell Managing Director, Healthier Heroes CIC and ex-Army Infantry Colour Sergeant

Corinna Priest Recently retired Army Major and Mental Health Nurse who worked on suicide prevention during service and represented the UK Armed forces at NATO suicide prevention working groups for 10 years (2012-2022)

Carolyn Riches Ex-Army Reservist (Private). She lost her son Ben, a former soldier, to suicide

Kevin Riches Ex-Royal Air Force (Corporal) and ex-Army Reservist. He lost his son Ben, a former soldier, to suicide

Shirley Simmons Founder and Chair of Bury Veterans Hub; Founder of Radcliffe Veterans Breakfast Club and Co-ordinator of Bury Armed Forces and Veterans Breakfast Club

Contact us

Suicide Bereavement UK
6-8 Taper Street Ramsbottom
Lancashire
BL0 9EX

Telephone: **01706 827 359**

Website: suicidebereavementuk.com

At Your Side

Suicide Bereavement UK Guide for Families

When someone may have died by
suicide during or after military service