

Helping you help others

Advice for veterinary professionals who would like to support a colleague who is feeling suicidal

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Suicidal thoughts or feelings are painful and traumatic for the individual experiencing them and for their family, friends and professional colleagues. Not knowing where to turn for help can add to an already distressing situation. If someone close to you needs emotional support or is feeling suicidal there are many advice lines you can contact for help and guidance. Below is some general advice to help you support colleagues, as well as links to a number of UK mental well-being helplines.

Look out for the warning signs

According to charities such as the Samaritans, most people who are feeling depressed or desperate enough to consider suicide give clues to how they are feeling. You can be the first step towards help for someone you care about by learning to identify and recognise the clues to suicide risk. The Mind guidance sheet [Supporting someone who feels suicidal](#) and the [Rethink Mental Illness Fact Sheet](#) provide clear guidance about helping someone with suicidal feelings and set out some of the common warning signs that you can look out for. These include:

- **A marked change of behaviour**
- **Sense of uselessness and futility**
- **Major setbacks**
- **Loss of self esteem**
- **Taking less care of themselves (e.g. diet or personal appearance)**
- **Sleep problems**
- **Isolation and hopelessness**
- **Losing interest in things they used to enjoy**
- **Lack of energy**
- **Talking about suicide or threatening suicide**

Let others talk about their feelings

Mental health charities and organisations also say that it is important to allow others to talk about their feelings. Often an important first step is to be with the person, listen to them and to try to understand what is going on for them. The NHS has produced concise guidelines on how to offer support to someone who is feeling suicidal and this includes advice on how to talk to someone experiencing suicidal thoughts.

You should not be afraid that talking about suicidal thoughts and feelings will encourage someone to act on them. The

Mind guidance sheet linked above is clear that talking openly about the possibility of suicide will not make it more likely to happen. Being there for your colleague and listening in a non-judgmental and accepting way can help the individual feel less anxious and isolated. One of the things you can do is encourage your colleague to talk about other options and sources of support.

Engage them to get professional help

Although it is important to be there for your colleagues and to talk about their problems, the issues are often complex and you should encourage your colleague to seek external professional support. A first step might be to suggest that your colleague gets in touch with their GP (or, for those who have already been diagnosed with a mental illness, to contact their care team or clinic where they were treated). There are also many mental health charities and organisations that will be able to offer advice and support (see contacts list overleaf).

What to do in an emergency

If you believe there is an immediate crisis, stay calm and try to make sure that your colleague is not left alone. You should also think about removing any immediate dangers, for example, by removing access to veterinary drugs, sharp objects and knives, or firearms.

Try to find out if the person has access to mental health crisis services (these are generally available for those with a diagnosed mental illness and who are likely to experience a crisis). If it is felt they are in crisis then you should try to get them to agree to attend the Accident and Emergency (A&E) department at a local hospital or, if you think someone is in urgent danger, you should dial 999.

On the next page of this document is a list of emergency and other useful contacts.

Getting the right support for yourself

Giving support to a person who is feeling suicidal can be stressful and you should not be afraid to ask for help to deal with your own emotional needs and the effect the situation is having on you. There are different options to consider: talking to friends and family, talking to your GP, joining a support group for carers, or seeking advice from a professional helpline service.

*This advice has been produced by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) in conjunction with the Veterinary Surgeons Health Support Programme (VSHSP)

List of emergency and other contacts

Medical and emergency contacts

NHS 111 Service

Dial 111 from any landline or mobile (free)

Textphone 18001 111

You should use the NHS 111 service if you urgently need medical help or advice but it's not a life-threatening situation.

Call 111 if:

- you need medical help fast but it's not a 999 emergency
- you think you need to go to A&E or need another NHS urgent care service
- you don't know who to call or you don't have a GP to call
- you need health information or reassurance about what to do next

Other useful contacts

Vet Helpline

T 07659 811118

Anonymous email service via www.vetlife.org.uk

Vet Helpline is a listening service for vets, vet nurses, students and any family or colleagues who are concerned about someone in the veterinary community. Calls and emails are answered by a group of trained volunteers who have experience of the profession. They will be there to listen and offer emotional support.

Veterinary Surgeons Health Support Programme (VSHSP)

T 07946 634220

E VSHSP@vetlife.org.uk

W www.vetlife.org.uk

Established by the veterinary profession in March 1999 to help combat problems of alcohol, drugs, eating disorders and other addictive and mental health issues amongst a proportion of its members. The service is confidential and every effort is made to protect the confidentiality of the person contacting the helpline.

The Farming Community Network

T 0845 367 9990

E mail@fcn.org.uk

W <http://www.fcn.org.uk/>

Service providing an opportunity to talk to a sympathetic person who understands farmers and rural life. FCN volunteers will listen and provide support. All calls to the Helpline are treated confidentially.

Samaritans

T 08457 90 90 90 (24-hour emotional support)

E jo@samaritans.org

W www.samaritans.org

Providing emotional support to anyone in emotional distress, struggling to cope, or at risk of suicide throughout the United Kingdom and Ireland, often through their telephone helpline.

Mind

T 0300 123 3393

(Monday to Friday 9am to 6pm)

E info@mind.org.uk

W www.mind.org.uk

Providing advice and support to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem.

Royal College of Psychiatrists

T 020 7235 2351

E reception@rcpsych.ac.uk

W www.rcpsych.ac.uk

The professional body responsible for education, training, setting and raising standards in psychiatry. Also provides Mental Health Information and advice for the public.

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

T 01455 883 300

E bacp@bacp.co.uk

W www.bacp.co.uk

Information about counselling and therapy. See sister website, www.itsgoodtotalk.org.uk for details of local practitioners.