RCVS Mind Matters

Published April 2026

RCVS suicide prevention workplace guide

A guide for all veterinary professionals

Aligned with RCVS PSS Suicide Prevention Standard

RCVS PRACTICE STANDARDS SCHEME

Suicide prevention

Suicide risk is dynamic and not always obvious. Early peer intervention is a key protective factor in veterinary workplaces. You are not expected to diagnose or treat. Your role is to notice, engage, support and refer where appropriate to do so.

Act on changes, not certainty. If something feels wrong, check in.
Start a conversation, listen, and connect to help.

⚠ If someone is in immediate danger

Signs of immediate risk:

- Stated intent – talking about wanting to die or harm themselves
- Describing a plan or intention
- Having access to means
- Behaviour suggesting imminent harm

Required actions:

- Call 999 immediately (ask for an ambulance)
- Do not leave the person alone (if safe to do so)
- Remove access to means if safe to do so
- Stay calm and listen
- Do not use guilt, compare, or try to fix or solve
- Inform manager or responsible person

Preservation of life is the priority. Create trust, safety and support until help arrives.

If you are worried about someone (non-emergency)

Step	What to do	Why it matters
Create opportunity	Find a private, quiet space to talk	Reduces threat and supports openness
Open conversation	"Are you ok? I'm worried about you."	Signals care and awareness
Ask directly if needed	"Sometimes when people feel like this, they can be thinking about suicide. Are you having thoughts of suicide?"	Reduces stigma and enables disclosure
Listen actively	Do not interrupt or judge. Validate with empathy and compassion	Reduces isolation and emotional distress
Validate	"That sounds really difficult." Build trust. Be supportive	Builds psychological safety
Avoid fixing	Do not try to solve or fix. Listen without judgement	Prevents overwhelm and maintains trust
Encourage support	Suggest a GP, NHS services, Vetlife, or your organisations employee assistance programme (EAP), if you have one.	Connects to appropriate care
Explain limits of confidentiality	Be transparent that you may need to tell someone else, if risk is present. You can find out more about information sharing in mental health emergencies on the Information Commissioners Office website.	Ensures safe escalation
Follow up	Organise a check-in. Follow up consistently	Sustains connection

Important things to remember

- You are not expected to be a therapist – your role is support and signposting
- Asking about suicide does not increase risk – it reduces stigma and can save lives
- Listening is enough – connection is protective
- Trust your instincts – behavioural change is a key indicator
- Seek support if unsure – speak to your manager, responsible person, or Vetlife
- Supporting others can affect you – self-care is essential

Your workplace suicide prevention plan is available at:

Your responsible person for suicide prevention is:

Key contacts and where to get help

Service	What to do	Why it matters
Emergency services	Immediate risk to life or medical emergency, available 24 hours	Call 999 (ask for an ambulance)
NHS 111 (England, Scotland and Wales/ Cymru)	Urgent mental health support, available 24 hours	Call 111
Lifeline (Northern Ireland)	Urgent mental health support, available 24 hours	Call 0808 808 8000
PAPYRUS Hopeline247	Support for anyone under 35 years of age who are experiencing thoughts on suicide, or those who are concerned about them, available 24 hours	Call 0300 102 2470 Text HOPE to 88247
Vetlife Helpline	Non-judgemental and confidential peer support for anyone in the veterinary community, available 24 hours. Includes postvention support for any UK veterinary professional who has been affected by suicide or wants support for a veterinary workplace.	Call 0303 040 2551 or register via their website to contact anonymously via email
Vetlife Health Support	Confidential support about your own or a colleague's health	
Samaritans	Confidential emotional support, available 24 hours	Call 116 123
Shout (Crisis text line)	Free, confidential text-based support, available 24 hours	Text SHOUT to 85258
Your EAP	Confidential counselling if your workplace provides one	

When to escalate – understanding levels of concern

Not every situation requires escalation. Use the guide below to help you determine the appropriate response.

LOW LEVEL	**Indicators** • Changes in mood or behaviour • Withdrawal from colleagues • Signs of stress or overwhelm	**Actions** • Talk privately • Listen and validate • Signpost support • Follow up • Inform manager (if appropriate)
MODERATE	**Indicators** • Expressions of hopelessness or feeling trapped • Mental health difficulties, low mood, anxiety • Reduced ability to cope or engage • Loss of interest in work, absenteeism, apathy, emotional sensitivity	**Actions** • Encourage professional support (GP, NHS services, Vetlife, EAP) • Involve manager or responsible person • Ensure they are not left unsupported – stay with them, arrange for someone else to be with them, or ensure a plan of support • Record concerns appropriately
ACUTE / IMMEDIATE RISK	**Indicators** • Direct statements about suicidal thoughts, intent or plans • Expressions of intent to harm and signs of imminent risk • Direct access to means	**Actions** • Stay with the person – do not leave them alone • Call 999 without delay (ask for an ambulance) • Remove or reduce access to means if safe to do so • Get immediate support from manager or responsible person • Keep communication calm and simple • Do not keep this confidential if safety is at risk • Record actions taken afterwards

After any concern: Record what happened and the actions taken, to support continuity and accountability. Ensure this information is stored securely to maintain confidentiality. Follow up where appropriate to sustain connection and ongoing support.

What your workplace has in place

Information	Your workplace details
Your suicide prevention plan is kept:	
Your responsible person is:	
Your EAP provider (if applicable):	
Mental health first aider(s):	
How to raise a concern:	
Controlled drug access controls:	
Firearms and captive bolt access controls (where relevant)	
Post-incident Out-of-hours safety measures: support arrangements:	
Post-incident (postvention)* support arrangements:	

*'The term postvention describes activities developed by, with, or for people who have been bereaved by suicide, to support their recovery and to prevent adverse outcomes, including suicide and suicidal ideation' (Andriessen, 2006).

Looking after yourself

Supporting a colleague in distress can be emotionally demanding. Remember:

- It is okay to feel affected – this is a natural response
- Talk to someone you trust about how you are feeling
- You can contact Vetlife Helpline (call 0303 040 2551) or the Samaritans (call 116 123) for your own support
- Your workplace should offer a debrief after any distressing situation
- You did the right thing by acting on your concern

Creating a psychologically safe veterinary workplace is a shared professional responsibility. Supporting colleagues is integral to safe, ethical, and effective clinical practice.

This document is part of your workplace's suicide prevention arrangements under the PSS suicide prevention standard. For the full guidance, refer to the **RCVS Suicide Prevention Toolkit for Veterinary Workplaces**.

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How to feedback and contact RCVS Mind Matters
As part of our commitment to continuous improvement, we welcome feedback and suggestions for future updates to this guide.

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