

Reducing online harms – A national approach

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Suicide and the online environment



Molly Russell: Did her death change social media?



CHILLING CHALLENGE What is the Blue Whale suicide game and how many deaths are linked to the challenge?

Graphic video of suicide spreads from Facebook to TikTok to YouTube as platforms fail moderation test



Suicide and the online environment

Content and use across multiple platforms

Social media, forums, mental health communities, factual websites, blogs and gaming sites to name a few.

Reasons for online use

- Raising awareness
- Viewing help materials or support
- Express difficult feelings
- Reading stories or connecting with others with similar experiences
- Searching for information about suicide
- Information and evaluation of methods



What can research tell us?

Role of the online environment is mixed – both positive and negative outcomes for users.

Benefits

- Connection with others
- Hearing stories of hope and recovery
- Feelings of being accepted and understood
- Reduced feelings of isolation
- Immediate support in a crisis

Risks

- Access to information about methods
- Graphic content
- Normalisation
- Contagion
- Competitive behaviours
- Promotion and encouragement



Types of internet use

Lower severity: 'Pessimistic browsing communicating'

- Purpose: mixed - understand and manage feelings & explore suicide
- Gathering: broad and unstructured
- Processing: browsing stalled by emotional responses

- 'Put off' of suicide by emotional response to content but low mood not resolved.

Higher severity: 'Purposeful researching'

- Purpose: specific – find/ research methods
- Gathering: deliberate, structured and specific
- Processing: 'mining' of details, used to evaluate and 'shop' between methods

- Quest to develop expertise/ perfect method
- Information suggests undesirable details leading to 'ruling out' some methods.
- Implementation/ 'trying out' methods

Distressed. Ambivalent/ uncertain about suicide

- Emotionality
- Sociability (desire to connect)
- Interest in Help

Decision to pursue suicide
Avoidance of help

Highly distressed

Detachment



Are young people at increased risk?

A national inquiry into suicides by young people found suicide-related internet use in nearly 1/2 of suicides by young people (NCISH, 2016).

Data on self-harm/suicide related internet use collected by clinicians from 1198 adult patients and 315 child/adolescent patients during psychosocial assessment.

Rates of self-harm/suicide related internet use:

- 8.4% of adult hospital presentations
- 26% of young people hospital presentations

(Padmanathan et al., 2018)



What needs to happen?

Content that can be harmful is abundant and easily accessed from popular information sites, medical sites, online forums and social media. **We need a multifaceted approach.**

- **Improved platform practices**
- **Developed evidence base**
- **Improve tech** to detect and respond to harmful content
- **Regulation** to hold platforms to account – ensuring this covers the most harmful content relating to self-harm and suicide. Also measures to address content not covered by this regulation
- **Better education for users** – on navigating the online space
- **Support for parents** – to help them talk to young people about online use
- **Support services** that understand how people use the online environment and ask them about it.
- **Innovation in suicide prevention** – explore how we can use the online environment to develop new methods of suicide prevention



The Online Excellence Programme

A three year programme developing a hub of excellence in suicide prevention.

- Research and insight programme exploring what makes content harmful and to whom.
- Best practice guidelines for industry
- Resources for vulnerable users and people around them
- Online harms advisory service
- Influencing policy



Department
of Health &
Social Care



Research & Insight Programme



Research questions

- What content is most likely to cause harm or benefit and for whom?
- What is the impact of discoverability of content and support on users?
- How do users interact with self-harm and suicide content over time?
- What is the impact of removing or blocking content on vulnerable users?

Also exploring online conversations around suicide during covid to identify new risks and emerging harms.



Industry guidelines

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Managing self-harm and suicide content online

Guidelines for sites and platforms hosting user-generated content

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Reducing access to harmful self-harm and suicide content online

This information sheet provides guidance on how self-harm and suicide content plays an important role in how it can also carry potential risks by providing methods of harm and content that can be used to harm others. It also provides guidance on how to proactively limit access to harmful content to protect users from harm.

Accessible information

Self-harm and suicide content that is harmful encourages or provides information to users to harm themselves. All sites and platforms have a proactive role in reducing access to potentially harmful content on their site. While one piece of content may not be harmful in isolation, engaging with volumes of self-harm and suicide content can have a substantial impact on user wellbeing.

For detailed information on what constitutes self-harm and suicide content and the risks associated with self-harm and suicide content, see our information sheet [Understanding self-harm and suicide content](#).

- Sites should consider:
- **Developing inbuilt safety functions** – sites should consider how to proactively block content based on themes, users, keywords and tags.
 - **Ensuring site algorithms don't push self-harm and suicide content towards users** – sites and platforms that make suggestions based on previous browsing should consider how to ensure that self-harm and suicide content is not pushed to users.
 - **Reviewing autocomplete searches** – sites and platforms should ensure that autocomplete searches should be turned off for self-harm and suicide content.

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Supporting the wellbeing of users online

This information sheet provides guidance for sites and platforms on how to support the wellbeing of their users. All sites and platforms should seek to promote helpful content, especially when potentially harmful self-harm and suicide content is being shared by users. Helpful content can help to shift the conversation and mood in the online community and can also encourage help seeking.

Promoting positive content online

To support the wellbeing of users, sites should establish ways of promoting positive and helpful content on their sites.

Examples include:

- Messages encouraging help seeking
- Content to raise awareness and dispel common myths or false news
- Stories of hope, support and recovery
- Tips on self-care and looking after your wellbeing
- Information and signposting to available support

Promotion of this content can be achieved in various ways, such as developing campaigns, offering free ad space for trusted support organisations and by reviewing how content is served to users through search features.

Signposting

Signposting to trusted support services is essential to ensure users in distress are directed to available support. Sites and platforms with high volumes of users should check before signposting to voluntary services to ensure the service has capacity to cope with potential demand.

Basic signposting

At a minimum standard, all sites and platforms should provide basic signposting, including:

- Emergency and non-emergency services.
- Support that can be accessed 24 hours a day, every day.

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encourage users to seek help.

- Trusted helplines and services specialising in the provision of support for self-harm and suicide.
- Encouraging users to speak to family, friends or other people they trust.

Gold standard signposting

To provide a better level of signposting, sites should:

- **Acknowledge the barriers to help seeking** – users may face. Reaching out for support can be difficult and users may have tried to get help before and had negative experiences. Try to remind users that support is available, and things can change for them.

Sites should also consider ways of promoting additional supportive content in response to emerging issues, such as:

- **When harmful content is being shared widely** – such as online hoaxes, games and challenges, or false information about self-harm and suicide.
- **When there are increases in self-harm and suicide conversations online** – such as after high-profile suicides or media portrayals in films, soaps or series.
- **Peak times when users may experience distress** – such as times where users are most likely to post about suicidal feelings eg, during anti-social hours or weekends.

This can shift the conversation and mood and encourage users to seek help.

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Resources for vulnerable users

Samaritans co-designed resources

- Tips on posting about suicide safely
- Sharing your personal experiences online
- How to support someone online
- What to do if you see harmful content online

Coming soon: resources for parents, schools and clinicians.

ChatSafe guidelines on talking about suicide.



Online harms advisory service

Who we can support

- online sites and platforms
- professionals working in the wider sector

How we can help

- Reviewing platform policies around self-harm and moderation processes.
- Concerns about specific websites or types of harmful content, such as online challenges and hoaxes.
- Partnerships with local networks to address specific online harms issues.

Get in touch

- Email: onlineharms@samaritans.org
- Phone: 020 3621 5096 or 07483 027824



Influencing policy & practice

- Working with government to ensure harmful content is addressed
 - not just illegal content but content that is 'legal but harmful'.
- Feeding into the law commissions review of the Malicious Communications Act.
- In discussion with Ofcom about forthcoming regulation.
- Pushing platforms to improve policies.
- Working with online safety groups, including UKCIS early warning group and vulnerable users group.



Thank you

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