

At Your Side

Suicide Bereavement UK Guide for Veterans

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

*“We can’t change
what’s happened
to us but we can
change it for others.”*

Maggie, ex-RAF Corporal, lost her veteran husband





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.



The At Your Side Suicide Bereavement UK guides

The At Your Side guide for veterans 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 veterans**



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



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

Where can I access the guides?

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

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

Why do we need a suicide bereavement guide for veterans?

This At Your Side guide has been designed for veterans affected by the suicide of someone who has died during or after the person's military service. The guide is also relevant to anyone who supports veterans. It demonstrates that no veteran need feel alone after losing someone to suicide. There are organisations with the knowledge, skills, and desire to provide support (see **Section 5** 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 5**.

Who informed this guide?

This guide has been co-produced with veterans and serving personnel 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 being bereaved by the suicide of a friend, ex-colleague, acquaintance or family member during or after the person's military service.

Quotations in this guide are from study participants described as 'veteran' or 'serving' according to whether they had left the Armed Forces or were still in service at the time of their bereavement. Quotations from serving personnel are also included if they had lost a veteran friend or ex-colleague to suicide. Some quotations from bereaved family members are also included.

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.

We use the word 'veteran' in this guide to describe anyone who has served in the UK Armed Forces whatever their service length.

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 veterans 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... shoving our heads in the sand, saying there’s not a problem.”



Maggie, ex-RAF Corporal,
lost her veteran husband



*The people on
this page are
all bereaved
by suicide*



With the help of veterans and service personnel 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 an ex-colleague, friend or acquaintance (either veteran or serving) can be a devastating experience for many veterans.
- A wide range of people can be impacted when someone dies by suicide during or after their military service.
- 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 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 5* of this guide for details.

When someone dies by suicide

When someone dies by suicide during or after their military service there are challenges faced by anyone who is bereaved and the people around them. A suicide is an individual tragedy and a loss to society and to the Armed Forces family. The impact can be devastating. Those left behind can experience intense emotions with many unanswered questions.

“I’m very open about my past experience regarding mental health and suicidal thoughts... and that lent itself to others opening up to me.”

Jerry, ex-Navy Captain, lost veteran and serving friends

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 your mental fitness and those you care about is important. If you are feeling suicidal, or know someone who is, please see Section 5, page 48 of this guide for contact details of organisations you can talk to now.

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 or may have been behaving unpredictably or in a challenging way. You may have been supporting your friend/ex-colleague for a long time. If you were unaware that they were at risk of dying by suicide, their loss can come as a great shock.

Being made aware that someone has died

Many people learn that a person has died through word-of-mouth or social media, or by reading about it in a newspaper. This can be a difficult thing to process, but any feelings you experience are understandable.

Section 5 gives details of organisations that can help you and others affected if you need support.

Finding a friend or ex-colleague who has died

It may be that you were in the same location when your friend or ex-colleague died, or you were the first to find them. This is a deeply traumatic experience. 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 find someone after they have ended their life discover the person unexpectedly and the impact should not be underestimated. Remember that support is available to help you cope with what has happened.

It is important to let your GP know that you were present or first on the scene when your friend or ex-colleague died so that you can get further support if needed.

How many people are affected when someone dies by suicide?

Veterans often have geographically wide friendship circles, with extremely close bonds that may last a lifetime. Many consider those they have previously served with to be their chosen family. This means that more than 135 people² may be impacted when someone dies by suicide during or after service.

“Because of the job I was in... I... got exposure to quite a lot of people who had died by suicide... so... it wasn’t like I went to one unit and stayed with them I went to different places. So, the exposure to people dying has been quite big for me.”

Steph, ex-Army Corporal, lost veteran friends and serving colleagues

Who might be impacted when a veteran dies by suicide?

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

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

Veterans bereaved by suicide: friendship circles and connections

The impact of suicide and feelings of loss can differ depending on your relationship with the person who has died.

The UK Armed Forces community often has geographically wide friendship circles and when a veteran dies by suicide this community can be deeply affected. You may have lost a peer with whom you had a very close bond, whether you were in regular contact or not; or perhaps the person was more of an acquaintance but still connected to your service life or veteran community.

Whatever your relationship with the person who has died, it is important to seek support if you need it. Section 5 has details of organisations that can help.

If a family member has died, or you are supporting the family of someone who has died, the *At Your Side* guide for families may also be useful.

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, or cannot, be 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

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 UK Armed Forces community. The impact is increased if more than one veteran dies by suicide in a short period of time.

Being bereaved by suicide more than once in a short period of time can bring up a whole range of painful thoughts and feelings that are difficult to manage and ways of coping that may be unhelpful.

¹ McManus S, Bebbington P, Jenkins R, Brugha T. (eds.) (2016). Mental health and wellbeing in England: Adult psychiatric morbidity survey 2014 <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/23646/>

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>

What if I am feeling suicidal?

Some people bereaved by suicide may experience suicidal thoughts and feelings themselves. However, it does not 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 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 5**.

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

If you are concerned that someone else 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 5: 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 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.

30-minute veteran suicide awareness training (also relevant to serving personnel)

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

“Suicide doesn’t discriminate, and anyone can face it and any time, so the more that I’m equipped for others, the better... when we come to face having to talk about it or support people, if we’re not equipped, we’re not being able to provide the best support.”

Steph, ex-Army Corporal, lost veteran friends and serving colleagues

“If I can pass on my experience and it saves just one more life, then wow, what an amazing thing to do.”

Sam, ex-Army Sergeant, lost veteran friends and serving colleagues



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

“It’s really important for us to say that you’re going to feel bad, you’re going to feel low, you’re going to feel depressed – and that’s perfectly normal.”

Matthew, Army Major, lost a veteran friend



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. It also explains that when the person may have died by suicide, 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 can vary.
- If you are bereaved by suicide (of a friend, ex-colleague/colleague or acquaintance) your grief reactions may be 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 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. 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, gambling or taking drugs)
- 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 5

How we grieve

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

Grief is as individual as your fingerprint

“There is no one size fits all.”

Tony, ex-Army Major, lost veteran friend and colleague

“You’re going to feel like a bag of s**t... that’s normal, that’s OK.”

Steph, ex-Army Corporal, lost veteran friends and serving colleagues

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.

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.

Below are some common reactions to losing someone to suicide. However, you may react to your loss in other ways. Some days these reactions can be more intense than others.

“It’s the extremity of emotion, particularly around shame and guilt... is an extreme response – but it’s not an abnormal response to whatever the stresses are.”

Andy, ex-Army Major, lost a close serving friend

“People might feel a range of emotions, that either they feel they shouldn’t or... they can’t control, or necessarily understand. I think it’s important to say that it could include their own suicidal thoughts.”

Tony, ex-Army Major, lost veteran friend and colleague

Thoughts (beliefs about your loss)

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

- denying the person has died
- believing the person has rejected you
- thinking 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 life has lost all meaning
- doubting your judgement in other important aspects of your life
- believing that others are judging and blaming you
- thinking your military experience means you should be unaffected by the person's death
- having suicidal thoughts yourself
- remember, having suicidal thoughts does not mean you will act on the thoughts. Ask for help if you are having these thoughts or thinking of acting on them. Reach out to your GP, a mental health professional, a suicide bereavement organisation or someone you trust.
- wanting to join or be with the person who has died. This is a common response and does not necessarily mean you are suicidal.

“Part of the thing is... just... I know she’s dead... but you can’t believe it...”

Mark, ex-Army, lost his serving daughter

Emotions (feelings associated with the loss)

Emotional reactions to a loss by suicide can be extremely intense. Experiencing mood swings or conflicting emotions at the same time is entirely normal.

Common feelings that may come up include:

- shock and 'numbness'
- intense sadness
- confusion
- helplessness
- anger towards:
 - yourself
 - the person who has died
 - others, including:
 - the person's employer
 - carers and/or professionals that had been looking after the person
 - the world
 - your faith/religious beliefs

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

"I used to be very calm – or shutters up and I'm raging... and there's no, you know, in-between... it's like a fire alarm you know? It's there, you're calm and then you can go from nought to a hundred extremely quickly."

Jake, ex-Army Sergeant, lost veteran friends

- becoming mentally unwell yourself with, for example, anxiety, 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
 - 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 the person's death)
- regrets and questioning: 'Why?' 'What if?' 'If only?'
- feelings of shame about the way the person 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, they can be common feelings when you are bereaved by suicide.

"Even to this day, there's still questions – could I have done something, if I'd spotted something, what was it – do you see what I mean?"

Tony, ex-Army Major, lost veteran friend and colleague

"One of the things maybe we don't realise, is numbness but I'm starting to understand my things, right? What we mean with numbness, it's about our feelings, our emotions. So, I think with a lot of us, we don't realise that we have that numbness, and that we're not in touch with our feelings."

Jake, ex-Army Sergeant, lost veteran friends

"It's normal to feel low. It's normal to go through these emotions. In the Army we don't say that very often, we don't say that it's normal. We train people to feel and do certain things. And I think sometimes it's really important for us to say, 'you're going to feel bad; you're going to feel low; you're going to feel depressed and that's perfectly normal."

Matthew, Army Major, lost veteran friend

"Suicide bereavement is a club nobody wants membership to, isn't it?"

Maggie, ex-RAF Corporal, lost her veteran 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
- vivid dreams about the person who died and/or bad dreams/nightmares
- increased or reduced 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)

Ways of behaving (things you do/actions you might 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 deeply upsetting experience. 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 feel that you need to be strong for others.)
- using humour inappropriately
- crying (remember, this is a basic physical expression of grief and a natural way to grieve)
- needing to repeatedly talk about aspects of the person or the way they died
- refusing to talk about the person or the way they died
- constant longing/searching for the person (e.g., in crowded places)
- keeping yourself to yourself (socially isolating)
- being argumentative with others (at home, with friends and in the workplace)
- being aggressive and putting yourself in danger (e.g., wanting to fight with others or driving dangerously)
- turning to alcohol and/or drugs as a way of coping
- hurting yourself

Understand that processing this type of loss takes time and if you are struggling or feeling suicidal, please see Section 5, page 48 of this guide for contact details of organisations you can talk to now.

“I get why people don’t talk about it because it’s vulnerable, it’s scary, you don’t want to have all them feelings and all them bad emotions coming back up. But then, how do you move forward if you don’t deal with the past?”

Jake, ex-Army Sergeant, lost veteran friends

“Our military way is dark humour, you know, our coping strategies, our coping mechanisms... without being disrespectful to that person, the humour and how we deal with it is... make a joke out of it, laugh about it, and take the piss almost, in a way. But it isn’t in a disrespectful way, it’s in a... ‘if we don’t laugh about this we’re going to cry, and we can’t let ourselves fall off our perch because we all need to be strong’. So, it’s the dark humour of the military, but it isn’t about humour, if that makes sense?”

Steph, ex-Army Corporal, lost veteran friends and serving colleagues

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 other reactions months or even years later. There is no set pattern for these reactions. All the ones you have, 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
- feel the need to suppress emotions until after practical aspects have been dealt with

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 the person’s death, particularly if you were present when they died or found them
- shared history with a person you served with
- other losses happening to you at the time (e.g., financial losses, loss of relationships and/or friendships, or loss of home or identity)
- having a complex relationship with the person who died
- having been personally bereaved or affected by suicide before
- being aware of more than one suicide, even if you did not know the individuals involved (this is sometimes called a ‘cluster’ because more suicides than expected occur in terms of time, place, or both)
- having no opportunity to express your grief openly (e.g., if your loss is not acknowledged by others)

- having difficulty expressing your emotions
- using unhelpful ways of coping (e.g., excessive drinking of alcohol, fighting)
- lacking a support network or being unable to connect with your usual support network
- 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, panic attacks, or recurring nightmares)
- 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 must have absorbed all the grief, never let it out, and at some point, it comes out.”

Tony, ex-Army Major, lost veteran friend and colleague



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



“It’s kind of twofold... so it’s about acknowledging that mental health is actually a thing, just like physical health is. How do you cope with... bereavement? It’s about mental resilience.”

Jez, Army Captain, lost veteran friend

The people on this page are all bereaved by suicide



This section of the At Your Side guide focuses on coping with your grief after losing a veteran to suicide. 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 suicide, your grief reactions can be more complicated. Just as you would have prepared for going on exercise/tour, 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 fitness (get regular physical activity, sleep, food, water/hydration, and time outdoors if you can).
- Look after your mental fitness (if you can, create a routine; take one day at a time; balance time for/ having a break from grieving; rest; set boundaries and don’t allow anyone to tell you what you should and 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, using drugs, being aggressive with others).
- Connect with others (family, civilian and military friends).

- Seek other sources of support if you need them, for example:
 - Veteran community social networks
 - Peer support (groups or online or telephone support for suicide bereavement, suicide prevention and/or mental health)
 - Support from charities (veteran, military or non-military)
 - GP or NHS support and/or other professional support to help you come to terms with your loss
- 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 the person left a suicide note it will be taken away as evidence for the inquest

Section 5 lists helpful sources of support. The diagram ‘Your Grief Journey: Bergen Essentials’ on pages 32 and 33 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 the person who died. 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 grief journey can be more complicated. Just as you would have prepared for going on exercise/tour, preparing to navigate your grief journey is essential.

Ways of coping

Coping with your 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.

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 the person who has died.

“It’s not just about practical advice – go to here, go to there – but also ‘you may feel this, you may feel that you may want to do this, you may want to do that’”

Tony, ex-Army Major, lost veteran friend and colleague

“For me I’d rather show people that I’m stressed and get that stress out than build it on, build it up.”

Matthew, Army Major, lost veteran friend

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 fitness: some basics of self-care

Navigating your way through grief after a suicide starts and continues with ‘self-care’ – or looking after yourself. Self-care is your first aid kit. 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 after losing someone to suicide, it is important to focus on your physical and mental fitness.

Consider the 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 fitness

- 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 in whatever way is manageable. Any physical activity can help reduce feelings of anxiety, aggression, and tension, as well as helping to improve your sleep and energy levels.
- Avoid doing things that might make you feel worse in the long run, such as drinking too much alcohol or taking drugs.

“One of my coping mechanisms is – get to the gym, go climbing.”

Jake, ex-Army Sergeant, lost veteran friends

Box 5. Mental fitness

- Give yourself time to heal and space to think; this will help you 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 – this might help to steady you.
- Find ways to relax or unwind that allow you to think about something else and allow 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.

“I’ve dug my head out of the sand and put my hand up and gone ‘actually, you know what, I need to speak to someone’”

Jez, Army Captain, lost veteran friend

Facing difficulties along the way

If, as best you can, you take steps to look after your physical and mental fitness, 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 have an impact on you. The key is being aware that setbacks might arise and planning ahead for these times.

When you meet a particularly difficult point in the road:

Consider what worked before

Try to recall the things that helped you cope when you had challenging times before.

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 ways that you might handle them:

Going over unanswered questions

Be patient if you find yourself repeatedly questioning why the person 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. 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 the person or you may decide to do nothing, and this is OK; that is a decision you have thought about in advance, rather than regretting what you haven't done on the day.

“The human factor kicks in and you kind of go – ‘why’s he done that?! Does he know what he’s left behind?”

Jez, Army Captain, lost veteran friend

“No one will ever know why people die by suicide, ‘cause the people who know aren’t here anymore.”

Steph, Ex-Army Corporal, lost veteran friends and serving colleagues

“What I do is on Remembrance Sunday, I lay a wreath at our local cenotaph ... and that is the one day of the year that I get sad. I deliberately save it all up for that day and I allow myself to be unbelievably sad.”

Sam, ex-Army Sergeant, lost veteran and serving colleagues

Experiencing blame and anger

When we are trying to make sense of why someone has died by suicide, we might blame ourselves or others. 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 creates 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 person who died. We can also feel rejected by our friends or community, who may avoid us. Their negative responses do not mean they do not care, rather 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).

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. It can be helpful to practise what you might say to people about your bereavement.

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 friend took her 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:

‘Sarah took her own life/died by suicide. It’s really hard for me to think about why she 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 the person died by suicide, it's an important step in reducing any stigma and opening up supportive conversations.

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

Feeling suicidal

If you are bereaved by suicide, you may at times think about suicide or feel suicidal yourself. It does not mean you will act on those thoughts and feelings. Most people who are bereaved by suicide never do.

You may have been feeling suicidal before the person died and find that you are struggling. If you are feeling suicidal and feel unable to keep yourself safe, please see **Section 5**, page 48 for contact details of organisations that can help you now.

“While you may think about suicide, the most important thing is to recognise those feelings and elect to do something about it rather than... think they’ll just go away.”

Tony, ex-Army Major, lost veteran friend and colleague

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 and/or using drugs to 'self-medicate' is one way that some people bereaved by suicide 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 attempting 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.

"You may be depressed or even suffering mentally. It's quite easy then to just go back to your house, your home, your room, whatever, drunk. But alcohol is a depressant in itself."

Jerry, ex-Navy Captain, lost veteran and serving friends

Sometimes people will struggle to express the feelings associated with bereavement. It can feel that the only way of relieving distress is to become argumentative or physically aggressive with family, friends, colleagues and even strangers. Putting yourself at risk of harming yourself or being harmed by others in this way could negatively impact on relationships and your wider life, including work if you are in employment.

"When the suicide happened, I was trying to get beaten up myself. In reality, I used to attack groups of two, three, four people, hoping that it would go wrong... that went on for years... and I would antagonise people so it would happen."

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

These unhelpful ways of coping can complicate the grieving process and mean that we push people away, leading to increased isolation at a time when we may need family and/or friends around us.

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

The importance of connecting with others

People often feel overwhelmed and confused by the way they react to their loss and want to avoid contact with others. You may have had a special bond with the person who died. Those outside the UK Armed Forces community may not understand the close ties that exist between you, which can sometimes complicate the grieving process.

Staying connected with people you trust will help you in difficult times. Practical and emotional support from others is protective because it strengthens our physical and mental fitness.

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

"It's about learning to cope with these things... we've all got our hurts, we've all got our barriers, we've all had our struggles, no one is bigger than the other, but if we don't talk about these things, we never move forward."

Jake, ex-Army Sergeant, lost veteran friends

"You know, it's good to talk sometimes."

Tony, ex-Army Major, lost veteran friend and colleague

Family, close friends and immediate social network

Some people prefer to be supported by family members, close friends, and their immediate social network; the most important thing is that you feel positively towards and have trusting relationships with the people from whom you get support.

Veteran community connections

If you lose a friend to suicide during or after their military service, it may change the way you feel about the type and degree of connection you want to have with the veteran community. You may have had little connection to this community before the person died, but now wish to make and/or sustain those links; you might have already been well-connected and wish to stay connected; you might want to have little or no connection at all. Everyone is different and there is no right or wrong way to respond. Should you wish to link with or maintain a connection with the veteran community, there are support organisations that can help you do this. They are listed in Section 5.

In veteran/military circles, your friends can be like family. When someone dies by suicide, a wider circle of friends and colleagues might be affected. It can feel like losing a family member and can hit everybody hard.

"You are like a band of brothers really."

Matthew, Army Major, lost veteran friend

"It is a family, a family you are with 24/7. It's a relationship like no other."

Maggie, ex-RAF Corporal, lost her veteran husband

Using dark humour to cope even when really struggling is common. This is an understandable coping mechanism, but it can mask deep feelings of distress, especially for those close to the person who has died.

You might feel under pressure to look like you are coping even when you've lost someone. You may be reluctant to ask for help yourself or be uncertain how to reach out to help someone else. Sometimes it just takes one person in a group to take the first step and initiate a conversation, to enable you all to support each other.

Connecting with friends can help steady you and mean you feel less isolated.

“WhatsApp was emotionally helpful as well as being practical. On the group we were, ‘is everyone ok? Do we need to have a chat?’ We all called each other individually and had a quick chat and just made sure that we were OK and if there was any other support needed.”

Tony, ex-Army Major, lost veteran friend and colleague

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 friends stepping up without being asked counts for a lot.

“Sometimes it's awkward and people think... ‘it's not my place’ but the more people that's saying ‘whatever you want I'm here’, surely, even if they don't take advantage and don't get in touch with anybody... it's the fact that you've offered.”

Tony, ex-Army Major, lost veteran friend and colleague

“It's not just about you reaching out for that help, it's also about looking out for your muckers. So, be the one that does that initial WhatsApp of, ‘You alright fella? How're you doing?’”

Jez, Army Captain, lost veteran friend

Peer support

Peer support offers the chance to talk about your loss with others who have had similar experiences. Peer suicide bereavement support groups are generally run and attended by people who understand what you are going through. There are peer support groups for suicide prevention and mental health too.

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

Peer support can enable you to understand and normalise your reactions and see how other people cope. Strong bonds are often created, which can support you as you move through the grieving process.

If talking in a group is not for you, there are organisations (military and non-military) that offer other kinds of support such as the opportunity to come together for particular activities or events, long- or short-term. See Section 5 for details.

“Some of the groups I found really good. Do you know what? I rarely cry in front of other people but talking to others bereaved by suicide, because they got it, it made a massive difference.”

Maggie, ex-RAF Corporal, lost her veteran husband

Getting professional support

Registering with a GP

It is important to reach out and get professional support if you need it. If you haven't already, the first step is to register with a GP practice. Some GP practices have an understanding of the issues that might affect you after service and information on other health services that might be available to you. The important thing is to make sure you have registered with a GP.

Registering with a GP is important. Box 6 provides guidance on how to do this in England.

“Veterans should go and register with a GP, tell them that they're leaving the military and they will be a veteran... because obviously the GP will then have a better idea of some of the mental stresses and strains that these individuals have been under.”

Alf, Army Captain, lost serving colleagues

Box 6. Registering with a GP in England

Registering with a GP in England is a simple process and can help support your future physical health and mental fitness. The NHS website can help identify a GP in your local area and offers a step-by-step guide to registering. Following these steps can help ensure your records are transferred from military to civilian health care: www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/armed-forces-community/service-leavers-guide.

To find a GP in Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland please see the links in Section 5, page 39.

Once you register with a GP, let them know you that you are a veteran of the Armed Forces and ask them to record this on your GP patient record. This is often recorded as 'military veteran' but it means **anyone who has served in the Armed Forces either regular or reserve, whatever their service length**.

The GP practice will then be able to request your complete military medical record from Defence Medical Services and any previous NHS medical records will automatically be sent to your GP. Everything transfers to your NHS health record so that any current treatment/care continues, and any future treatment/care is informed by any previous military health care. It may also help you to access any health and wellbeing services for veterans.

Other NHS help and support for veterans

Some parts of the UK have specific services for ex-service men and women. You can find details in [Section 5](#).

OpCOURAGE

Op Courage: The Veterans Mental Health and Wellbeing Service is available in England. This service provides a broad range of specialist mental health and wellbeing care and support for Service leavers, reservists, veterans and their families. The mental health or wellbeing concern does not need to be attributable to the person's time in service.

Individuals can self-refer to their local service or ask a healthcare professional, charity, family member or friend to do this for them. See [Section 5](#) page 40 for details.

Professional support for mental fitness

Your mental fitness is crucially important. By looking after this, you will be able to support yourself and anyone else who is important to you.

Some veterans feel unable to verbalise how they are feeling, even if they have access to support. Others are reluctant to ask for or accept support even if offered. This might be how you are feeling.

“Everybody’s different and it’s about finding somebody who can help somebody with a range of feelings.”

Maggie, ex-RAF Corporal, lost her veteran husband

When you are bereaved by suicide, professional support to talk through and make sense of what has happened can help you cope much better. It can be common to think that professional support is not for you but remember, being mentally and emotionally fit will not only serve you but will help you to live your life to the best of your ability.

If you feel you would like to talk to someone professionally, seek help via your GP or through military or non-military charities or associations that support veteran men and women.

“I went to counselling, and do you know what? I’m going to own this, yeah. I’m actually now with a psychiatrist and all that. And you know, with the psychiatrist I’ve got trust in him.”

Jake, ex-Army Sergeant, lost veteran friends

How do I ask for professional support?

It can be very difficult to ask for professional support if you are bereaved by suicide. The first step is to acknowledge that you need some help and give yourself permission to reach out and ask for it.

Organisations that you can contact for help are listed in [Section 5](#).

“My advice would be don’t be afraid if you’ve got mental health issues, don’t be afraid if you need to speak to someone.”

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

“It’s taken me that long to kind of now be more, I suppose, fair to myself, that actually to discuss these things does help. That’s another message people need to understand, especially within the military that... a problem shared is a problem halved, and never truer is that phrase.”

Jez, Army Captain, lost veteran friend

Practical matters

Inquests

For sudden or unexplained deaths, a coroner is required to conduct an inquest. The purpose of an inquest is to establish the cause of the person's death. It is a civil matter, and not a trial. Usually, a coroner will open an inquest, then pause it while information is gathered, and the person's funeral can take place.

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 the person died or who has information about how they died, provides a written statement, or attends the inquest as a witness, to help them establish the circumstances around a person's death. The coroner will deal directly with the spouse, partner or parent of the person who has died.

The role of the coroner is to determine the identity of the person, when and where they died, and the medical cause of their death. Based on the evidence, the coroner is required to draw a conclusion about how they died. The conclusion is documented on the person's death certificate.

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 can 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.

In particular, media reporting of inquests can sometimes be distressing for families. See [Section 5](#) page 49 for sources of support with inquests, for example, the Coroners' Courts Support Service.

What happens if the person left a suicide note?

Many people who die by suicide do not leave a suicide note or final message and this can be difficult for the people left behind. 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 the person'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. If you receive a note, it will be included as part of any investigation into how the person died. However, it is possible to request a copy and the original message can be returned after the inquest.

Your grief journey: bergen essentials



LPhot Kevin Walton
UK MOD © Crown copyright 2021

Your grief journey is like preparing for exercise. Think about what you need in your bergen and why, travel light and balance your load so you can respond to new terrain.

Everyone has their limits so it's important to pack well, prioritise, know your boundaries and connect with others.

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. Exercise – Grief can have a physical effect on your body. Regular exercise will support your physical and mental fitness, including helping your mood.

5. Sleep – Good sleep can help to process grief. Unwinding, and avoiding caffeine or alcohol before you want to sleep can help you rest and repair.

6. Food – The food we eat can have a direct impact on our mood. Eat regularly; your body needs energy to perform. Eating with others can help you stay connected.

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

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

9. Navigation – The grief journey can be challenging. Adapt and evolve according to the situation. Seek support if you need direction or guidance.

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





Section 4:

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



“Grief is personal to every single person going through it... and for that first year, it was so important to me to guide my son down the right path, and to deal with his grief in a way that he could cope with it.”

Maggie, ex-RAF Corporal, lost her veteran husband

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 by the suicide of someone during or after their military service, this section of the At Your Side guide aims to help you understand what might help them.

The At Your Side **guide for families** has detailed advice and guidance on explaining suicide to children and young people that you may find useful. The information in that guide may be helpful when talking to children of friends or colleagues, as well as to children or young people you are responsible for.

The main messages about explaining suicide to children and young people are listed in Box 7.

Box 7. 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 the death 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

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

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

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

Dr Atle Dyregrov, Clinical Psychologist

“I can’t honestly remember how we... told young children about relative’s death... but I know that from the absolute first point onwards we 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 his serving family member

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

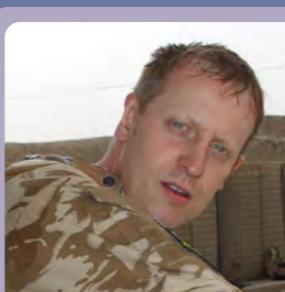
Open 24 hours every day.

“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, lost her veteran husband

In Section 5 of this guide, you will find a list of resources and organisations that can support you in the important task of helping children of all ages manage the difficult experience of being bereaved by suicide in a healthy and positive way.

The At Your Side **guide for families** contains more detailed advice and guidance on explaining suicide to children and young people.



Section 5: Useful contacts and resources

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



The people on this page are all bereaved by suicide

This section of the At Your Side guide lists some of the organisations that offer advice and support to veterans bereaved by suicide.

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

Box 8. Resources listed in this section

- Key contacts for veterans
- Armed Forces websites
- NHS sources of support
- Military charities and benevolent funds
- Widow(er) Associations
- Civilian bereavement support charities
- LGBTQ+ support
- Peer and group support
- Information about drugs and alcohol
- 24-hour helplines
- Legal and financial advice
- Inquest information and support
- Practical guidance on how to respond to someone experiencing suicidal thoughts
- Support for children and young people
- Suicide prevention support
- Online directories of support

- Books and leaflets
- Documentaries
- Apps and online resources

A full list of these and more can be found on the Suicide Bereavement UK website www.suicidebereavementuk.com/key-resources.

Points to note:

- if you have formerly served but do not identify as a 'veteran' you can still contact organisations that provide support to veterans
- live chat options are usually for online one-to-one conversation
- email options may have a slower response time
- helplines and text services may have charges attached
- unless otherwise stated, the resources listed are available to those over 18 years of age

Key contacts for veterans



Veterans UK provides free support for veterans and their families, including a helpline, the Veterans Welfare Service, Defence Transition Services, and injury/bereavement compensation scheme payments.

Website: www.gov.uk/guidance/veterans-uk-contact-us

Email: veterans-uk@mod.gov.uk

Helpline: Freephone **0808 1914 2 18**
(UK only) Monday to Friday 8am - 4pm

Telephone (overseas): **+44 1253 866 043**

Armed Forces websites

The Official British Armed Forces websites are a good source of advice, information and support for veterans and their families. Help 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



The Royal Air Force

Website: www.raf.mod.uk

NHS sources of support



Accessing specialist support for veterans through a GP practice

Registering with a GP practice in England is a simple process which can have a positive impact on your future physical health and mental fitness. It will also enable you to access special support for veterans.

How to register: www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/armed-forces-community/veterans-service-leavers-non-mobilised-reservists

To find a GP practice in Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland go to:

Wales: app.nhs.wales

Scotland: www.nhsinform.scot/care-support-and-rights/nhs-services/doctors/registering-with-a-gp-practice/

Northern Ireland: www.nidirect.gov.uk/services/gp-practices

NHS Op Courage and other support for veterans

NHS England commissions several dedicated services and funds a range of initiatives to support the health and wellbeing needs of the UK Armed Forces community. The services listed below are specifically for veterans who live in England. If you are a veteran and live in Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales please refer to the following link for information about similar services: www.gov.uk/guidance/veterans-living-in-scotland-northern-ireland-and-wales.

OpCOURAGE

Op Courage provides a broad range of specialist mental health and wellbeing care and support for Service leavers, reservists, veterans and their families. The mental health or wellbeing concern does not need to be attributable to the person's time in service.

Individuals can self-refer to their local service or ask a healthcare professional, charity, family member or friend to do this for them.

Website: www.nhs.uk/opcourage

OpRESTORE

Op Restore is a physical health and wellbeing service for veterans. Op Restore has replaced the Veterans Trauma Network. You can only access this service via a GP referral.

Website: www.nhs.uk/oprestore

GPs can obtain a referral form by emailing imperial.oprestore@nhs.net.

Op Restore does not provide veterans with mental health support, but it works alongside Op Courage, the veterans' mental health and wellbeing service.

OpFORTITUDE

Op Fortitude supports veterans at risk of or experiencing homelessness, supporting them either into suitable accommodation or to maintain their current home.

Website: www.riverside.org.uk/care-and-support/veterans/opfortitude

Helpline: **0800 952 0774**

OpNOVA

Op Nova provides emotional and practical support for veterans who are in contact with the justice system. Support is available pre, during and post-custody across all of England. Op Nova is delivered by the Forces Employment Charity and commissioned by the NHS.

Website www.forceemployment.org.uk/programmes/op-nova

Phone: **0121 262 3058**

NHS talking therapies support

If you live in England and are aged 18 or over, you can access NHS talking therapies for help with common mental health problems like stress, anxiety, and depression. A GP can refer you, or you can refer yourself directly without seeing the GP. The service is free on the NHS.

Help is available in person, by video, over the phone or as an online course.

Website: www.nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-an-NHS-talking-therapies-service

Military charities and benevolent funds



There are many charities dedicated to providing support, advice and aid for serving/veterans and their families on a range of issues. **Cobseo** has created a directory which lists military charities that support the UK Armed Forces community. The directory lists contact details of the charities and the type of support provided by each.

Cobseo armed forces directory: www.cobseo.org.uk/members/directory

Examples of charities you might find helpful are listed below. Some organisations are listed under a specific service but may offer information and support on a range of topics.



Royal Navy and 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 and relationships and employment.

Website: www.rnrmc.org.uk

Email: theteam@rnrmc.org.uk

Phone: **023 938 1520**



Royal Navy and 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 and relationships and employment.

Website: www.rnrmc.org.uk

Email: theteam@rnrmc.org.uk

Phone: **023 938 1520**



The Royal Marines Charity provides support, advice and friendship to serving and retired Royal Marines and their families. The charity offers a range of services including mental health support, respite breaks and financial support. 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 that 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 8am - 6pm,
Friday 8am - 3pm



Royal Air Force Families Federation offers support to veterans on a range of issues including bereavement, education, healthcare, accommodation, benefits, and visa support to the RAF family around the world.

Website: www.raf-ff.org.uk

Email: enquiries@raf-ff.org.uk

Tel: **01780 781 650**
Monday to Friday 10am - 3pm



Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund provides support to ex-service RAF personnel 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

Email: welfarenavigators@rafbf.org.uk

Helpline: **0300 102 1919**

Monday to Thursday 9am – 5pm,

Friday 9am – 4pm



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 731 4880**

Monday to Friday 9am – 5pm



Defence Medical Welfare Service (DMWS) offers practical and emotional support to all serving personnel, veterans, reservists, and their dependent relatives through difficult times including bereavement.

Website: www.dmws.org.uk

Helpline: **0800 999 3697**



Veterans Bereavement Support Service is a community-based organisation of volunteers providing free advice and information for veterans and their families.

Website: www.veteransbereavementsupport.com

Email: info@veteransbereavementsupport.co.uk

Helpline: **0788 549 8462**



Combat Stress offers veterans and their families information and support on mental health, grief and loss. Combat Stress offers a 24-hour helpline for those who need mental health advice and support.

Website: www.combatstress.org.uk

Grief webpages: selfhelp.combatstress.org.uk/grief

Email: helpline@combatstress.org.uk

Helpline: **0800 1380 1619**

24 hours every day

Text: **07537 173 683**

(charges may apply)



Walking With the Wounded offers employment, mental health, care coordination and volunteering programmes in collaboration with the NHS to veterans and their families.

Head Start is provided by Walking With the Wounded and offers one-to-one private therapy for veterans with mild to moderate mental health difficulties such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and adjustment issues.

Website: walkingwiththewounded.org.uk

Email: headstart@wwtw.org.uk

Tel: **01263 863906**

9am – 5pm weekdays



Icarus is a veteran-led tri-service charity offering free confidential online mental health therapy and counselling for veterans addressing a range of difficulties which often arise from trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, anger issues or excessive alcohol and drug use.

Website: icaruscharity.org

Email: hello@icaruscharity.org

Tel: **0333 987 5055**



Salute Her UK offers support for physical and mental wellbeing, relationships and wider social issues to military women transitioning to civilian life. Workshops, courses, group and individual counselling, mental health therapy and virtual support are available.

The Salute Her UK Suicide Prevention Group is a confidential group for female veterans who are experiencing suicidal thoughts or have attempted suicide. Support is also available for the families and carers of those who are experiencing a suicidal crisis.

Website: www.saluteher.co.uk

Online contact form: www.saluteher.co.uk/contact

Tel: **0191 250 4877**

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: rnrmwidows.org/

Email: chairmanrnrmwa@aol.com

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 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

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



Suicide & Co offers up to 12 sessions of free counselling, delivered online, by telephone or video call, for anyone over 18 years bereaved by suicide in England and Wales.

Website: www.suicideandco.org

Email: support@suicideandco.org

Helpline: **0800 054 8400**

Monday to Friday 9am - 9pm



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
every day 10am - close varies

Cruse chat: replies from expert grief counsellors
Monday to Friday 9am - 9pm



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

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 phone service. StrongMen also has a podcast available.

Website: www.strongmen.org.uk

Email: hello@strongmen.org.uk

Freephone: **0800 915 0400**

LGBTQ+ support



Fighting With Pride offers health and wellbeing support to LGBTQ+ serving and veterans and their families.

Website: www.fightingwithpride.org.uk/get-support

Email: info@fightingwithpride.org.uk



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 LGBT+ 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

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 ex-service loved one.

Support group membership form: www.ssafa.org.uk/get-help/support-groups-membership-form

Website: www.ssafa.org.uk

Advice line: **0800 731 4880**
Monday to Friday 9am – 5pm



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**
Monday and Tuesday 9am – 5pm
(call charges apply)

In person and online support groups can be located by calling the national office.

Tel: **0115 944 1117**
Online community forum free support accessible 24 hours a day. Users must register through the SOBS website.



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

Registration: www.facingthefuturegroups.org/RegistrationPage

Tel: **0207 758 0667**

(callers are asked to leave their contact details and they will receive a return call)



Togetherall is a free online community where serving personnel and 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

Information about drugs and alcohol



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

24-hour helplines



24-hour helpline for veterans who need mental health advice and support.

Helpline: **0800 1380 1619**

24 hours a day 365 days a year

Text: **07537 173683**
(charges may apply)

Email: helpline@combatstress.org.uk



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



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 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

Legal and financial advice



Royal British Legion (RBL) offers serving and veteran members of the Armed Forces and their families help 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**



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**



Citizens Advice offers free and confidential advice to serving personnel and veterans of the Armed Forces 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



Turn2Us offers financial support, bereavement benefit advice, grants and other information, support and advice to serving personnel and 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

Telephone helpline: **0808 802 2000**
Monday to Friday 9am – 5pm

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.coronerscourtssupportservice.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

Practical guidance on how to respond to someone experiencing suicidal thoughts



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

Website: zerosuicidealliance.com/suicide-awareness-training-veteran-edition

Support for children and young people



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: **07741 162 132** (charges may apply)



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

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

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: **07860 039 967**
(charges may apply)

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



Helping bereaved people
find support & wellbeing

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 also be accessed through the app.

Website: hubofhope.co.uk



Tell Us Once is a service in England, Wales and Scotland that lets you report a death to most government organisations in one go.

Website: www.gov.uk/after-a-death/organisations-you-need-to-contact-and-tell-us-once

The Tell Us Once service is not available in Northern Ireland. However, the following link provides information on who to tell in Northern Ireland.

Website: www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/who-tell-about-death

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



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 where to find additional support.

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



Beyond the Rough Rock 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. This book is a guide for adults supporting children.

Website: www.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-Guide.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

Apps and online resources



HeadFIT is free and designed for serving personnel, veterans and other members of the defence community and developed in partnership with The Royal Foundation, the Ministry of Defence, and King's College London.

Users can access free self-help tools to enhance mood, drive and confidence, and help manage the stress of everyday life.

Website: headfit.org



headspace offers a personal guide to mindfulness, sleep, focus, movement and more (a monthly fee is payable).

Website: www.headspace.com



Samaritans Veterans App is free to download and provides UK military service leavers and veterans with emotional health and wellbeing information, guidance and resources.

Website: www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/military/samaritans-veterans-app

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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, ex-service 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 Veterans

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

