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Suicide and the workplace: A practical first steps guide



Contents

- 3 Introduction
- 4 BS 30480 explained
- 6 Information on suicide
- 7 Suicide and the workplace
- 10 Five first steps
- 12 General considerations for SMEs and freelancers
- 14 Ready to take the first step?
- 15 Further resources and references
- 16 Why BSI



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Caroline Roodhouse is a best-selling author, speaker and Strategic Communications and Well-being Specialist. After losing her husband to suicide in 2018, she has become a leading advocate for more compassionate conversations around suicide, grief and recovery.

Through her acclaimed book *Daddy Blackbird* and her work with organizations of all sizes, Caroline helps create emotionally intelligent, human-centred workplace cultures. She combines professional expertise with lived experience to show how thoughtful communication can protect well-being and save lives.

Introduction

One in four adults will think about suicide during their lifetime and one in 13 will make an attempt¹. This sensitive subject can carry extreme emotions, strong opinions and a lot of confusion, all of which will impact almost every workplace at some point.

Despite its prevailing impact, suicide is often treated as something that can't be spoken about at work. People worry about saying the wrong thing or assume it's too complex to address. Persistent myths lead to confusion and inaction.

The reality: silence does not protect people. However clear, well-informed communication and first steps do.

This guide complements **BS 30480 Suicide and the workplace – Intervention, prevention and support for people affected by suicide** and assists organizations to begin with clarity, confidence and care in a manageable and realistic way.

It has been developed to help organizations of all sizes gain:

- a clear understanding of why suicide is a workplace issue;
- practical actions to take and adopt straight away; and
- advice on adapting these steps for smaller organizations and freelancers.

Smaller organizations and sole traders will particularly benefit from the considerations in the **Five first steps section** of this guide.



BS 30480 explained

BS 30480 Suicide and the workplace Intervention, prevention and support for people affected by suicide - Guide is the UK's first workplace standard dedicated to suicide, helping organizations to take practical, informed action. It covers:

Awareness - enabling workplaces to create open, supportive cultures. This includes tackling stigma and myths, understanding risk factors, developing the right language and recognizing the warning signs that someone may be struggling.

Intervention - what to do if someone is at risk. It covers how to ask about suicide directly, how to respond appropriately, how to develop policies and safety plans and how to manage confidentiality and care in the moment.

Support after a suicide - guidance on caring for those bereaved or affected. This includes advice for line managers and HR, planning for return to work and how to communicate with care, confidence and consistency.

BS 30480 also includes essential annexes with action-based resources to support implementation:

- **Annex A:** Commissioning training - what to look for and questions to ask providers.
- **Annex B:** HR toolkit - checklists for responding to suicide, supporting return to work, and managing sensitive communication.
- **Annex C:** Workplace stressors - a reference list of risk factors across different sectors.
- **Annex D:** Line manager toolkit - safety plans, crisis flowcharts and practical guidance for those on the frontline.
- **Annex E:** Self-evaluation - benchmarking questions to help organizations measure progress.

BS 30480 is a voluntary guidance document, not a regulatory requirement. It doesn't add compliance burdens, but instead provides a shared, evidence-based framework that organizations of all sizes can adopt. Whether a large employer, a small business, or an individual freelancer, the guidance is designed to be flexible and realistic, so each can take meaningful, proportionate steps towards suicide awareness, intervention and support in their specific workplace environment.



The best starting point is pledging to adopt this standard, which sets out the management of suicide risk in the same way as any other recognized hazard

“Aureos has been driving its health and well-being programme since 2013. We acknowledge that construction work carries many hazards, including mental health crises and suicide. The infrastructure we work in and around, such as railways and highways, can also pose a high suicide risk for members of the public.

We believe BS 30480 will help us and the broader organization improve care and well-being by explicitly recognizing suicide as a hazard and sending a clear public signal.

We feel very comfortable adopting the principles and suggestions from this standard as they are well aligned to our strategy. We hope to set a benchmark that raises awareness, manages harm, and supports our partners and supply chain in sharing the same view.

We are confident we can embed these principles throughout our planning and risk management processes.”



Mark Newns
Head of Health and Wellbeing, Aureos

AUREOS

Information on suicide

Around 7,555 suicide deaths were reported in the UK in 2023². When someone dies in this way, the effects are felt widely. On average, around 135 people are touched, from family and friends to colleagues and communities³. That suggests an estimated 865,000 to 950,000 people are exposed to suicide annually.

Thoughts of suicide rarely arise for one single reason. Instead, they usually happen as a result of multiple experiences, pressures and problems. These may include experiences of loss, financial difficulties, addiction, relationship breakdown, poor mental health, trauma, or discrimination.

Signs someone may be struggling

Everyone is different, but there are some changes that might give you cause for concern. These include withdrawing from others, changes in mood or sleep, talking about feeling hopeless or like a burden, or putting affairs in order. None of these signs means someone will take their life, but several together can suggest they need support.

What can help

Staying connected to trusted people, using calming techniques like deep breathing or taking a gentle walk, keeping to regular routines, and getting professional support can all help. For people at higher risk, writing a safety plan (Clause 7.9, Annex D, D.6) that includes who to call, what to do, and how to stay safe when things feel unbearable can be lifesaving.

The impact on others

Around one in five people will lose someone to suicide during their life⁴. This can affect their mental health for years, as they tackle feelings like guilt, shame, sadness, confusion and anger. People might not be ready to seek help straight away, so gentle, repeated offers of support are important.

The cost to society

Beyond the human heartbreak, suicide has a huge impact on workplaces and communities. Each life lost is estimated to cost over £1m in lost productivity and wider effects⁵.

Myths to move past

Many misconceptions around suicide are explored in BS 30480. Some examples of these can be found below.

Myth: Asking someone if they're thinking about suicide puts the idea in their head.

Fact: It doesn't. Asking directly opens a conversation that can be lifesaving.

Myth: People who talk about suicide aren't really at risk.

Fact: Many who die by suicide have spoken about hopelessness or wanting to escape the pain and so every disclosure needs to be taken seriously.

Myth: People bereaved by suicide don't want to talk about the person who has died.

Fact: Many do. Sharing memories and being listened to helps them process their grief.

Suicide and the workplace

Most adults spend much of their lives in workplaces, which means colleagues are often part of the network affected when someone is in crisis. Employers can't prevent every suicide, but they can play a vital role in reducing risks, supporting people, and responding compassionately if the worst happens.



Impact at work: Human and business

In smaller organizations in particular, a colleague experiencing thoughts of suicide or the loss of one person by suicide can deeply affect the whole team. In the case of a death, colleagues may feel grief, guilt, confusion, or believe they should have noticed something was wrong. Managers can feel overwhelmed, unsure how to support their teams while coping with their own emotions. This can create a sense of instability: morale may decline, absences may increase, and productivity can suffer as the team adjusts to the impact.

The impact is not only personal, but financial too. Any death can lead to long-term and costly disruption, including:

- higher turnover if employees leave because they feel unsupported;
- recruitment and training costs when experienced staff resign;
- reputational risk if the organization is seen as uncaring; and
- potential legal exposure or reputational damage if duty of care is questioned.

When work adds pressure

Certain aspects of working life can increase suicide risk. These include:

- excessive workload, long hours and job insecurity;
- bullying, harassment, or discrimination;
- performance issues;
- stress and burnout;
- sudden organizational change, such as restructures or redundancies; and
- exposure to trauma (including suicide), for example in emergency or frontline services.

Some industries have consistently higher suicide rates than average, like construction, agriculture, and health and social care⁶. These sectors often involve high pressure, isolation, long or irregular hours, or exposure to risk and trauma. Recognizing these pressures is one of the first steps towards reducing them.



When work protects

At the same time, work can be a powerful protective factor. Supportive workplaces provide:

- a sense of purpose and belonging;
- positive relationships and social connection;
- access to peer support and colleagues and line managers who can listen; and
- clear policies and practical support in times of crisis.

Employers who build supportive cultures can ensure the balance tips toward protection rather than risk. Even small changes like encouraging open conversations, showing flexibility during difficult times and knowing where to signpost for support can help.

It may feel daunting for smaller businesses to think about suicide prevention. However, the principles of care and support apply at every scale. While larger employers may have HR teams and well-being programmes, smaller organizations often have the advantage of closer personal relationships, where changes in behaviour can be noticed more quickly.

No workplace is too small to take action. For example:

- **A local café** with five staff can create an environment where people look out for each other.
- **A freelance consultant** can plan how they would respond if a client discloses thoughts of suicide.
- **A local charity** can develop ways to normalize mental health conversations among its volunteers.
- **A small manufacturing company** can include suicide awareness in their line manager training.

These steps are simple, and they can make a real difference in creating safer, more supportive working environments.

Moving forward

Every organization can take the first steps toward strengthening trust, resilience and reputation. They can help people feel safer and more connected through everyday practices, such as:

- **promoting connection** - encourage peer support and informal check-ins;
- **creating safe spaces for conversation** - make it clear that well-being, including subjects like suicide, is something that can be spoken about without judgement; and
- **modelling compassionate leadership** - owners, managers and team leads set the tone by listening, showing empathy and responding calmly to concerns.

Warning signs in the workplace

While every individual is different, some changes may suggest someone is struggling:

- noticeable drops in performance or productivity;
- withdrawing from colleagues or avoiding social contact;
- frequent absence or arriving late more often;
- talking about feeling hopeless or like a burden; and
- marked changes in mood, behaviour, or appearance.

Noticing these signs doesn't mean diagnosing or making assumptions. It's about opening the door to support, checking in with care and signposting to help where needed.



Five first steps

For smaller organizations in particular, the day-to-day reality often involves juggling many roles and responsibilities. Resources are tight, and adding new tasks can be hard. That's why the steps outlined here are deliberately small and achievable. They are designed to fit into busy working lives and offer a foundation to build on.

01 Recognize the issue and commit to action

Openly acknowledging that every workplace can be touched by suicide is the first step towards meaningful action. BS 30480 highlights the importance of organizational culture and leadership commitment (Clause 4.1, 5.1), making this the foundation for creating a safe and supportive environment.

Whether through a well-being policy (Clause 5.2), a short statement of intent, or consistent leadership messages, a clear commitment shows staff and stakeholders that suicide prevention, intervention and support are taken seriously. Appoint a suicide prevention lead and work with them to shape your message.

02 Build awareness and understanding

Awareness is the gateway to action. Equipping managers and staff - especially HR, safety and well-being leads - with knowledge about suicide risk factors, warning signs, recommended language and safe ways to respond helps reduce stigma and creates confidence in starting conversations.

BS 30480 outlines key prevention principles to follow, including recognizing distress and providing training opportunities (Clause 6, Annex A). This might be as simple as sharing accessible resources, or as structured as arranging dedicated awareness training across teams.

03 Share clear support pathways

People need to know where they can turn for help, inside and outside of work. BS 30480 advises providing frameworks for signposting and support (Clause 6.2, 8.3), ensuring no one is left uncertain. Clearly displaying this information at multiple locations, using different communication channels including staff handbooks, noticeboards, intranets and payslips makes it easier for people to find the right help when they need it.

04 Be prepared to help

In a crisis, clarity can save lives. BS 30480 provides step-by-step guidance on recognizing distress, asking about suicide, and responding to immediate risk (Clause 7.3–7.8, Annex D). Prepare by adopting a simple protocol: ask directly, listen with empathy, signpost to professional help and escalate to emergency services if necessary. Having trained staff ready to respond can make all the difference.

05 Plan for support and recovery after a suicide

If a suicide does occur, a thoughtful and compassionate response is essential. BS 30480 provides guidance (Clause 8, Annex B), including checklists and advice on communication, bereavement care, and organizational responsibilities.

Preparing in advance for how you will respond helps protect morale, reassure staff and provide stability at a time of shock and loss. A clear plan also supports business continuity, making sure essential functions continue while giving space for people to grieve and adjust.

General considerations for SMEs and freelancers

Smaller organizations, including sole traders, face particular challenges when it comes to suicide. Unlike larger employers, they may not have HR teams, occupational health services, or formal well-being programmes and policies. Owners and managers often juggle multiple roles, with limited time, capacity and resources to dedicate to new initiatives. This can make it harder to put structured support in place.

However, this doesn't mean they are unable to act. In fact, their size can be an advantage. Close working relationships mean that changes in mood or behaviour are often noticed more quickly. Communication can be more personal, and supportive actions can be adapted without the bureaucracy that larger organizations may face.

BS 30480 highlights specific considerations for small businesses:

- **Use informal communication** - supportive conversations and regular check-ins can carry as much weight in a small team as formal policies do in larger ones.
- **Look outside for support** - industry associations, trade unions, professional networks, charities and local services can help to fill the gaps.
- **Be aware of the impact** - in a smaller workplace, the absence of even one person can affect everyone so planning how to support colleagues is important.
- **Focus on self-care** - those responsible for the safety and well-being of others should always take their own mental health seriously and ensure they are fulfilling their own needs with appropriate coping strategies.
- **Learn in small steps** - shorter guides, basic toolkits, or free resources may be more realistic than extensive training programmes, but they still build knowledge and confidence.

No workplace is too small to act. Even simple, low-cost steps can create safer, more understanding environments.



This standard will help organizations build safer, more supportive environments

“We are proud to support this vital step forward in recognizing and addressing the impact suicide can have on our colleagues. Suicide is a difficult and often triggering topic to talk about, but it is important to break this stigma and spread the positive message that suicide can be prevented.

This standard will help organizations build safer, more supportive environments where mental health is prioritized and no one feels alone, and we are committed to aligning with its guidance to protect and empower our colleagues.”



Jo Butler
Chief People Officer, Heathrow

Heathrow





Ready to take the first step?

Here's a quick recap of where to start.

01 Recognize the issue and commit to action

Make a clear statement that suicide prevention and support matter in your workplace and show leadership commitment.

02 Build awareness and understanding

Equip managers and staff with basic knowledge, safe language, and confidence to start conversations.

03 Share clear support pathways

Ensure everyone knows where to find help, inside and outside work, and make that information easy to access.

04 Be prepared to help

Have a simple protocol in place so staff know how to respond calmly and safely if someone is in crisis.

05 Plan for support and recovery after a suicide

Create a plan to guide communication, care and continuity should a suicide occur.



BS 30480

Scan the QR code to download BS 30480, which you can refer to as you further develop your plans and strategies over time.



Further resources

Samaritans

24/7 confidential listening support. Call 116 123.

Mind

Information and support on mental health.
mind.org.uk

Papyrus HOPELINEUK

Support for young people under 35. Call 0800 068 41 41.

Hub of Hope

Searchable directory of local mental health services.
hubofhope.co.uk

National Suicide Prevention Alliance

Resources for workplaces and communities.
nspa.org.uk

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SoBS)

Peer support for those affected by suicide.
uksobs.com

Winston's Wish

Support for children and young people (aged 25 or under) across the UK who are bereaved.
winstonswish.org

Mental Health is Health

Tool for finding a helpline, text support or online chat globally.
mentalhealthishealth.findahelpline.com



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2. Samaritans, suicide facts and figures, latest suicide data.
3. Cerel, J. et al. (2018), "How many people are exposed to suicide? Not six." Journal of Affective Disorders.
4. Pitman, A. et al. (2014), "The stigma perceived by people bereaved by suicide." The Lancet Psychiatry.
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Why BSI

BSI is the UK's National Standards Body. We're appointed by the government to develop British Standards and represent the UK's interests in standards development at a European and global level.

We have over a century of experience and work with organizations of every size, across all industry sectors. Our role is to help organizations improve their processes, products, services and systems through voluntary, consensus-driven standards.

BS 30480 Suicide and the workplace – Intervention, prevention and support for people affected by suicide – Guide has been developed by a committee of more than 70 representatives from organizations and individual experts, including people with lived experience, workplace practitioners, clinicians and suicide prevention and bereavement support charities.





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Discover how we can support your organization in developing aligned and credible best practice. Connect with one of our experts today.

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