

It's OK not to be OK



David McKeown

David McKeown is a vet, a founder volunteer with VetSupport and also volunteers with Vetlife and Samaritans. In this article he gives his take on the three organisations with which he is involved, encouraging anyone who is distressed for whatever reason to reach out and use the help and support that is freely available

Before COVID the World Health Organisation tells us that about 800,000 people per year take their own lives. In the UK and Ireland we lose around 6,000 people to suicide each year – that’s one person dying every 90 minutes.

In 2019 just over 200 people died by suicide in Northern Ireland. 70% of those who take their own lives are male. On average every death by suicide impacts around 130 people. It is truly shocking that 26,000 people in Northern Ireland were touched by suicide in 2019.

It is too early to see what long-term impact the pandemic has had but one piece of research just published demonstrates that since March 2020, there are significant increases in suicidal thoughts being recorded in the under 30’s especially when compared with older groups. That’s not really a surprise to any of us considering the extra challenges presented to this cohort over the past 20 months.

There are many myths surrounding suicide which need to be dispelled. Some of those myths are:

1.	Those who talk about suicide are not at risk of suicide
2.	All suicidal people are depressed or mentally ill
3.	Suicide occurs without warning
4.	Asking about suicide ‘plants’ the idea in someone’s head

5.	Suicidal people clearly want to die
6.	When someone becomes suicidal, they will always remain suicidal
7.	Suicide is inherited
8.	Suicidal behaviour is motivated by attention seeking
9.	Suicide is caused by a single factor
10.	Suicide cannot be prevented
11.	Only people of a particular social class die by suicide
12.	Improvement in emotional state means lessened suicide risk
13.	Thinking about suicide is rare
14.	People who attempt suicide by a less-lethal means are not serious about taking their own life.

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The public's perception of the veterinary profession has been hugely influenced by countless TV programmes, fly-on-the-wall documentaries, and dramas. Although it has been accepted within the profession, it is a real surprise to the general population that the suicide incidence in the veterinary profession is 4 times the national average and twice that of other professions. It has been like that for decades.

There are many reasons suggested as to why the veterinary profession has such a high incidence. Some of the factors may relate to isolation, loneliness, selfless giving to the job or to the client, inability to switch off, exhaustion, and criticism from clients. In some cases, this can lead to a feeling of hopelessness, a feeling of being a 'failure' and an inability

to see a way out of the downward spiral. There are many excellent papers on possible contributors to suicidality within the veterinary profession.

This article describes three excellent sources of help that is readily available to members of the veterinary profession within the UK and Ireland.

Perhaps society is becoming better at accepting that it is OK not to be OK. We all have mental health, and we must all take whatever actions necessary to optimise our mental health. Self-care is a vital component if we are to survive and thrive in this modern world of constant data challenges.

Vetlife delivers confidential support by way of a 24/7 telephone helpline operating 365 days a year. A team of trained volunteers made up of vets, nurses and people immersed in veterinary life deliver the service



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and they responded to almost 4,000 enquiries in 2020. The telephone number is 0303 040 2551 for calls from the UK and 01800 145 156 for calls from Ireland. In most instances callers will be connected immediately to someone who will help. Callers can also be referred to Vetlife's Health Support giving the caller prompt access to mental health professionals.

Contact can also be made by anonymous email with responses expected within 24 hours.

Details of the Vetlife service can be found at www.vetlife.org.uk including a large selection of self-help articles.

"Vetlife has been there to support me through this extremely difficult period of my life." Vetlife caller

VetSupport is a non-emergency support service which started a few years ago as a pilot scheme in N. Ireland and funded by Mind Matters. Vet Support has now extended its remit, offering support across the UK and Ireland. A small team of vets and nurses provides peer support, a listening service and coaching to anxious, distressed, or overwhelmed members of the veterinary profession or practice teams who make contact. The service is totally confidential, and the peer supporter will work alongside the caller to help them reduce their anxiety and support them as they rationally explore their options. Contact is made via www.vetsupport.me and a response to arrange a mutually convenient time to talk happens within



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24 hours. On the website callers can also see who the peer supporters are. Influenced by each supporter's short bio, a caller can choose to contact a specific peer supporter.

"I'm very thankful that VS was there when I needed them. Being able to talk to someone who understood the challenges and stress that working in practice brings was a relief. I received practical support and relevant advice from a friendly face on what has been a difficult journey. Please don't think twice about asking for support" VetSupport caller

Samaritans was formed almost 70 years ago and now has 20,000 volunteers operating through 200 branches throughout the UK and Ireland. Volunteers listen to callers distressed for whatever reason. 1 in 4 calls are about suicidal thoughts, 1 in 12 calls are about self-harm, 1 in 5 were about worries linked to coronavirus. In 2020 Samaritans responded to 10,000 calls per day. In Ireland Samaritans

responded to 1,500 calls per day – that's a call every minute!

Every life lost to suicide is a tragedy and Samaritans believe that suicide is preventable. Samaritans provides confidentiality, 24/7 availability, time to talk things through, a human connection and active listening. It is amazing what good can come from having been properly listened to.

Samaritans is there for everyone. A Freecall number 116123 is manned 24/7.

"With Samaritans, they make you feel like just at that moment, you're the most important thing they're dealing with." Samaritans caller

If you are reading this and feel troubled, anxious, reluctant to talk to someone close, do not hesitate to contact any of the 3 groups described above. You are not alone. Sharing your troubles with an empathetic trained listening ear works wonders for any of us – try it – what is there to lose?

