

Appendix 1: Definitions and Language Guidance

Adapted from Papyrus Suicide Toolkit

Important definitions

The following definitions are relevant to our understanding of suicide prevention and mitigation:

- Suicide – a deliberate act of taking of one's life.
- Suicide attempt – a deliberate action undertaken with at least some wish to die as a result of the act. Although, the degree of suicidal 'intent' varies and may not be related to the lethality of the attempt.
- Suicidal feelings – these can range from being preoccupied by abstract thoughts about ending one's own life, or feeling that people would be better off without you, to thinking about methods of suicide, or making clear plans to take your own life.
- Suicidal behaviour – a range of behaviours related to suicide and self-harm in vulnerable individuals, including suicidal thinking, deliberate recklessness and risk-taking, self-harming not aimed at causing death and suicide attempts. Around 20% of young people have self-harmed (non-suicidal) by the age of 20, far fewer (around 2-3%) make suicide attempts.
- Non-suicidal self-harm – an action that is deliberate but does not include an intention to die and often does not result in hospital care. It can be used for one or more reasons that relate to reducing distress and tension, inflicting self-punishment and/or signalling personal distress to important others. Non-suicidal self-harm is a signal of underlying mental health difficulties; people who self-harm may also make suicide attempts and be at risk of suicide.

Language guidance

The language around suicide can help as well as harm. Using sensitive and appropriate language can help build awareness and understanding to increase empathy and support.

Helpful language which could be used after a suicide:

You could say: "Ended their life", "Killed themselves", "Died by suicide", "Took their own life"

Unhelpful language to use after a suicide:

- "Successful suicide": Talking about suicide in terms of success is not helpful. If a person dies by suicide, it cannot be a success. Other deaths are not spoken about in terms of success: for example we would never talk about a 'successful heart attack'.
- "Committed Suicide": Suicide hasn't been a crime since 1961. Using the word 'commit' suggests that it is still a crime (we 'commit' crimes), which perpetuates stigma or the sense that it is a 'sin'. Stigma shuts people up – young people will be less likely to talk about their suicidal feelings if they feel judged.

Helpful language which could be used when talking about an attempted suicide

- "Attempted to take their life", "attempted suicide", "engaged in suicide behaviours"

Unhelpful language which could be used when talking about an attempted suicide

- "Unsuccessful or failed suicide": People who have attempted suicide often feel, "I couldn't even do that right... I was unsuccessful, I failed". In part, this comes from unhelpful language

around their suicide behaviour. Any attempt at suicide is serious. People should not be further burdened by whether their attempt was a failure, which in turn suggests they are a failure.

- “It’s not that serious”: Every suicide attempt is serious: someone wanted to take their own life. All suicide attempts must be taken seriously as there is a risk to life. An attempt tells us that the person was in so much pain they no longer wanted to live. This is serious.
- “Attention seeking”: This phrase assumes that the person’s behaviour is not serious, and that they are being dramatic to gain attention from others. Suicide behaviour is serious and those who attempt suicide need attention, support, understanding and help.
- “It was just a cry for help”: This dismissive phrase belittles the person’s need for help. They need help: they are in pain and their life is in danger. They may feel they are not being taken seriously, which can be dangerous.

Unhelpful language to use when asking about suicide

- “You’re not thinking of doing something stupid /silly are you?”: This language is judgemental and suggests that the person’s thoughts of suicide are stupid or silly, and that they are stupid or silly. When asked this question, most will deny their thoughts of suicide, for fear of being viewed negatively. This is dangerous. You become someone it is not safe to talk to about suicide.