

Communicating sensitively with users in distress

This information sheet provides guidance for sites and platforms hosting user-generated content on communicating safely with users experiencing self-harm and suicidal thoughts and behaviours. Sites should ensure they are using safe and empathetic approaches, remembering that the user could be experiencing high levels of distress and is in need of support.

There are various times when sites and platforms might communicate with individuals experiencing high levels of distress. For example, when a user is posting content that is worrying or if other users have reported their content because they are concerned.

Sites with high volumes of users may make use of automated or template responses. Sites with a smaller volume of users may be able to provide a more tailored approach by sending personalised messages.

All communications, personalised or automated, should:

- **Be understanding** and avoid making any assumptions about the user.

- **Be concise and use clear and accessible language**, as it can be hard to process lots of information when experiencing distress.
- **Encourage users to reach out for support** from people they trust, such as friends, family, health professionals or support services.
- **Be clear about support available**, both on the site and more widely. If the site is not monitored 24 hours a day, then signpost to services that provide support out of hours.

Our information sheet: [Supporting the wellbeing of users online](#) provides more detail on signposting users to appropriate support.

Automated and template messages

Using automated or template messages to respond to users in distress ensures consistency in language and tone. It can also allow moderators to respond to users more quickly. As best practice, messages should be **co-developed with subject matter experts*** to make sure they are accessible and sensitive to user needs.

Example template message

Hi (username), it sounds like you're going through a difficult time. Asking for help may not always be easy but if you want to know more about the support options that are available, these resources might help:

XXX (link to related resource)

Samaritans volunteers are there to listen round the clock if you need to talk about what you're going through. You can get in touch for free on 116 123 or email jo@samaritans.org.

Take care of yourself.

XXXX (name of platform/moderator)

* Our information sheet 'Promoting online excellence in suicide prevention through collaboration and transparency' gives further guidance working meaningfully with subject matter experts.

Personalised messages

Sending personalised messages can provide users with more tailored support, allowing companies to understand and respond to user needs more effectively.

Tips for communicating directly with users:

- **Listen.** Just listening can sometimes make a huge difference to the way someone feels. Using the same language as a person in distress and reflecting back what they have said can make them feel listened to.
- **Empathise.** Try to be kind, empathetic and non-judgemental. The user might be really struggling and in need of help and support.
- **Be consistent.** Employees or moderators might all approach messages slightly differently but it's important to be as consistent as possible to ensure a positive user experience.
- **Have clear boundaries.** Be clear on what you can and can't help with. It can be natural to want to give advice if a user is struggling but providing therapeutic support should be avoided unless professionally trained.

Example personalised message

The below illustrates how a site or platform might respond to a user experiencing thoughts about self-harm:

Hi (username), we just wanted to check in as it sounds like things are really difficult right now. In your post you mentioned that you're experiencing thoughts about self-harm and feel like your friends and family won't understand if you tell them (reflecting what they have said using their language).

We are not able to provide one-to-one support on here but if you think it might help to talk to someone in confidence, Samaritans volunteers are there to listen round the clock. You can get in touch for free on 116 123 or email jo@samaritans.org.

Samaritans also has some information on their website about the different support options that are available if you're thinking of harming yourself: <https://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help>

We hope this is helpful and we encourage you to continue to reach out for support.

Take care of yourself.

XXXX (name of platform/moderator)

Helpful Resources

NSPA. 2019. Responding to suicidal content online: Best-practice guidelines. Available from: <https://www.nspa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/NSPA-Guidelines-Responding-to-Suicidal-Content-Online.pdf>



How Samaritans can help you

For further support and advice on responding to self-harm and suicide content online, please see our [website](#) or contact the Samaritans' Online Harms Advisory Service at onlineharms@samaritans.org
Email monitored Monday–Friday, 9am–5pm.