



SAMARITANS

Online Excellence Programme

A Hub of Best Practice
in Self-Harm and
Suicide Prevention

2025



Introduction

Every 90 minutes, someone dies by suicide in the UK. Whilst the internet can be an invaluable source of support for those experiencing self-harm and suicidal feelings, it also carries risks, including providing access to graphic content, glorifying content and information on methods of harm.

Samaritans' [Online Excellence Programme](#) is the first and only partnership bringing government and platforms together to work collaboratively on the issue of self-harm and suicide.

The programme takes a multifaceted approach to tackle this incredibly complex issue – not just looking at the role of tech companies but also bringing key sectors together from across industry, government, research, education, support services and lived experience.

Whilst huge steps have been made over the last five years, including the Online Safety Act and regulations from Ofcom, many risks remain. Urgent action is still needed to create a safer internet for all.

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Evaluating the Online Excellence Programme

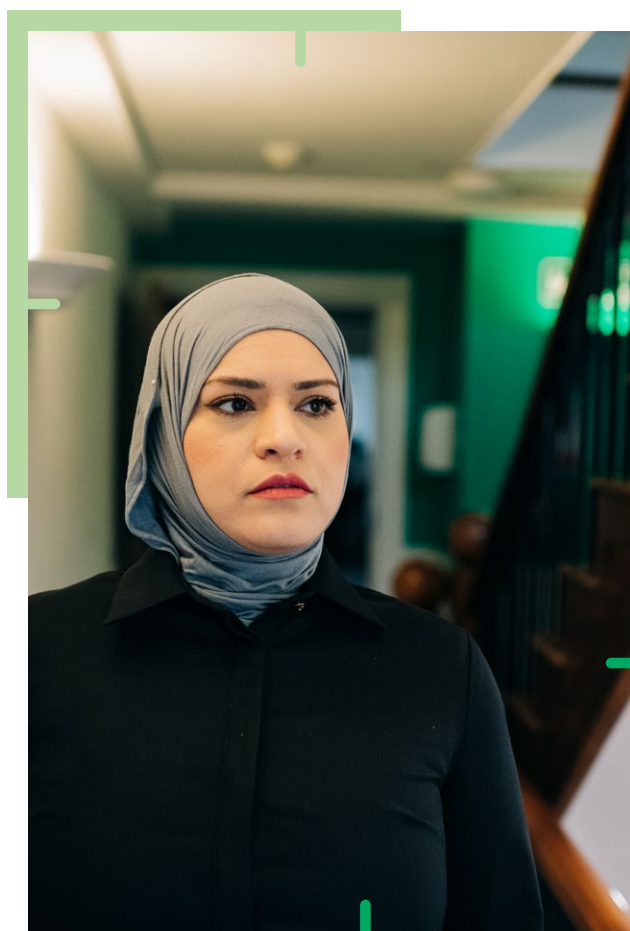


The Online Excellence Programme has several key objectives:

1. Act as a critical facilitator/ convenor, to effectively bring key sectors together to collaborate, share learnings and drive change.
2. Develop the evidence base around the impact of engaging with self-harm and suicide content online and translate it into actionable recommendations for key stakeholders.
3. Set best practice standards for industry for managing self harm and suicide content online in a safe and sensitive way
4. Provide ongoing support and advice mechanisms to industry to maintain an open, collaborative dialogue and best practice standards when addressing harmful online content
5. Upskill users (and those around them) to stay safe online when engaging with suicide and self-harm content.
6. Influence policy and regulation to ensure they have the strongest protections for self-harm and suicide related issues and are implemented effectively.

As well as our own ongoing monitoring and evaluation, we commissioned an external research agency (Cloud Chamber) to conduct an independent evaluation of the Programme covering our first phase of activity (2019-2022). The evaluation included interviews with industry partner representatives from Pinterest, Meta, TikTok and Twitter (now X), research professionals from our evidence strand of work, and Advisory service users.

This summary highlights what has been achieved, what we've learned and where next for the Online Excellence Programme.



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Online Excellence Programme achievements at a glance



Developed a groundbreaking evidence base

- Used novel approaches, exploring topics often for the first time, to understand how people use the internet over time and how online conversations about suicide are changing across the world's biggest and most at-risk platforms.
- Produced substantial new research and insight with University of Birmingham, Middlesex, Canterbury Christ Church, Bristol and Swansea and with our own in-house team.



Built cross-sector engagement

- Online Harms Research Webinar series has been accessed by over 1000 professionals globally.
- An external evaluation of the OEP carried out by the University of Leicester found practitioners who engaged with the OEP represented a wide range of roles and settings, indicating the demand for these resources across multiple sectors. The evaluation also found that practitioners generally agreed with the importance of raising the issue of online use with those they support.
- Similarly, a 2022 external evaluation of the OEP conducted by Cloud Chamber found that industry partners greatly valued the independent role that Samaritans played, described by one partner as a "neutral convenor" for the industry on suicide and self-harm issues. The evaluation found a strong appreciation of the programme's role in facilitating information sharing on suicide and self-harm trends and emerging issues that enabled platforms to take faster, collective action. Not only did the OEP facilitate tactical responses that are likely to have reduced harmful material online more quickly and effectively than before, it also acted as a real-world example of the value of improved cooperation and communication within and among the major industry players.





Online Excellence Programme achievements at a glance

Influenced industry practice

- Published the first ever industry guidelines for sites and platforms hosting user generated content on managing self-harm and suicide content online. The guidelines have been accessed over 12,000 times.
- Launched and delivered an Advisory Service, helping sites and professionals by providing free bespoke advice, training and support on responding to self-harm and suicide content.

Educated users and the people around them to stay safe online

- Developed a hub of resources to help users to stay safe online, co-developed with people with lived experience, accessed over 27,000 times.
- Helped people share their personal stories of staying safe online by publishing multiple blogs.
- Produced a series of videos to be included in YouTube's 'health shelf'. These appeared when people search for self-harm and suicide related terms and feature people talking about what helped them in their own journeys and in supporting others with self-harm and suicidal thoughts. These have been viewed over 22,000 times.
- Launched two social media campaigns helping users to stay safe online, collectively reaching over 3.7 million users across Facebook, Instagram and Twitter (now X).
- Developed guidance for parents and families on talking to loved ones about their online use, accessed over 2,700 times.
- Developed guidance, handouts and a free e-learning module in collaboration with Tees Esk and Wear Valley Mental Health Trust, aimed at practitioners and highlighting the importance of talking to service users about their online use.
- Our e-learning module has been completed by over 1,200 practitioners since its launch in April 2023 and accessed over 11,700 times. A further 2000 practitioners have attended our training webinars.

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About the Online Excellence Programme



The internet can be an invaluable space for individuals experiencing self-harm and suicidal feelings; however, it can also provide access to content that can be distressing and triggering.

Suicide and self-harm are complex and rarely caused by one thing. However, there is evidence that, in many cases, the internet is involved: a 2017 inquiry into suicides of young people found suicide-related internet use in 26% of deaths in under-20s and 13% of deaths in 20–24-year-olds (Appleby et al., 2017).

We believed that something had to be done.

The Online Excellence Programme is a hub of research, insight, practice and advice developed by Samaritans in partnership with government and leading online platforms. The original funding agreement with industry partners ran from 2019 to 2022, with a second phase which began in early 2023.

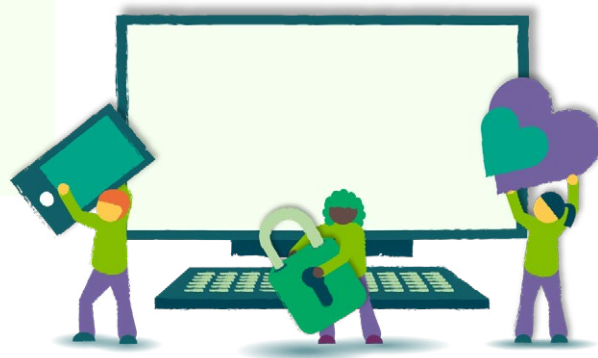
 **We launched the Programme with the overall aim to make the internet a safer space by minimising access to harmful content relating to self-harm and suicide content, while maximising support opportunities for vulnerable users.**

Together, we've broken new ground in understanding and tackling online harm, but there is still work to do.

Why it's important

Recent findings revealed that three-quarters of people who took part in Samaritans' [research with Swansea University](#) said they had harmed themselves more severely after viewing self-harm content online. Whilst the [Online Safety Act \(OSA\)](#) goes some way to protecting users from harmful content relating to self-harm and suicide, significant risks remain. The OSA's strongest protections are limited to under 18s. The Act only covers part of the internet - key areas of harm will still not be addressed including online marketplaces, static websites and artificial intelligence.

Reflecting the importance of this area of work, and in consultation with the programme, the [Suicide Prevention Strategy for England \(2023-2028\)](#) has outlined tackling online harms and improving user education as a key workstream.





About the Online Excellence Programme

Lived experience at the heart of the programme

The programme has been informed by people with lived experience from its launch. A total of 24 lived experience advisors have worked with us over time to inform the strategy, our work and review all outputs. We've collaborated with Samaritans' 500-strong lived experience panel and spoken with bereaved families. In addition, we have recruited multiple lived experience panels and organised focus groups to work with us more closely on specific co-developed content.

“ I have loved working on the OEP and seeing things take shape from initial ideas to fully-formed pieces of work that will make a difference to huge numbers of people. Being able to use my lived experience and come together with others to make important changes has been life-changing for me, it's boosted my confidence, given me a sense of purpose and we're making a genuine and tangible difference. The Samaritans team are great at getting the best out of us and hosting really enjoyable meetings about some really tough topics. It's an honour to be part of this programme. ”

- Lived Experience Advisor

“ Contributing to the programme has made me feel that the lived experience voice is both valued and appreciated by Samaritans, and our involvement has always been done in a way that is central to the work of the OEP team, so we never feel like an after-thought. It gives me a lot of confidence that the work Samaritans are doing to change the mental health landscape is genuinely human-centric.

The OEP team have ensured that our experience is one full of kindness and safety and have created a really open and inclusive forum in which we have been able to openly share our thoughts, views and insights. It has been an honour to be part of it and has felt like we are being given the opportunity to genuinely shape the outputs of the charity and beyond. ”

- Lived Experience Advisor





Aim 1: Cross-sector collaboration



The Online Excellence Programme (OEP) is the first of its kind to bring together government and platforms to work together to tackle self-harm and suicide content online. The OEP promotes consistently high standards across the sector by providing a centralised space for those working in and around the industry to find support and guidance, providing opportunities to convene and share best practice.

What we've achieved

Several industry interviewees stated that relationships existed between them and other similar organisations in other markets around the world, but they regarded the relationship with the Samaritans' Online Excellence Programme as unique in the UK.

We have also worked in multiple cross-sector working groups with other charities working collaboratively to address harmful content circulating online. One example of this is the UK Council for Internet Safety Early Warning Group made up of charities, government, police and educational professionals.

What we've learned

Industry partners greatly valued the independent role that Samaritans played through the programme. One partner described the programme as a "neutral convenor" for the industry on suicide and self-harm

“That engagement piece with Samaritans has been really key to the development of our policies – how we enforce them, how we stay aware of different trends...that's where the programme has come in.”

There was a strong appreciation of the programme's role in facilitating information sharing on suicide and self-harm trends and emerging issues that enabled platforms to take faster, collective action.

“We've appreciated the more rapid response [from Samaritans], getting information on viral trends and key words.”





Aim 2: Developing the evidence base



We have led a programme of research, significantly developing the evidence base on how people use the internet, what is helpful/harmful, who is most at risk and what interventions work.

We've achieved this in collaboration with experts from the University of Birmingham, Middlesex, Canterbury Christ Church, Bristol and Swansea and with Samaritans' research team.

The research has been ambitious - we've used novel approaches – exploring topics often for the first time, to understand how people use the internet over time and how online conversations about suicide are changing across the world's biggest and most at-risk platforms.

What we've achieved

The Online Excellence Programme has published new and pioneering research.

Self-harm and suicidal content online, harmful or helpful? A rapid review of the evidence

Research by the University of Leeds reviewed the existing evidence base and reported in 2022. The [report](#) highlights the complexities of how individuals engage with content online and cautions against a blanket approach to the removal of all associated content from the internet.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Young People's Mental Health in the UK: Key Insights from Social Media Using Online Ethnography

A 2022 [study](#) from the University of Birmingham into young people's discussions on social media about the impact of COVID-19 on their mental health, including suicidality.

How social media users experience self-harm and suicide content

Research by Swansea University, first published as a Samaritans [report](#) in 2022 in advance of final academic publication found that 83% of social media users surveyed were recommended self-harm content on their personalised social media feeds without searching for it.

There are more publications commissioned and underway, as we continue to build the evidence base. [See Appendix I](#) for additional papers and articles from the Online Excellence Programme and partners.





Aim 2: Develop the evidence base

What we've learned

We have used the programme's research to lobby government, with the evidence gathered being critical to our policy work on the Online Safety Act. It has also helped us shape our industry guidelines to ensure they are informed by the latest evidence base.

Our research programme is developing a greater understanding of the complexity of suicide and self-harm content and the nuances of users' behaviours and intentions. This will, in future, help us to develop support that better supports users.

“It's such a complicated area. Typically suicide and self-harm is spoken about in simplistic terms, its good or bad; it sounds good to say all harmful content should be banned but it's not thought out. The same thing can have a good impact on one person, and bad impact on another. And that changes day to day. It's not a black and white space.”

Researcher



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Aim 3: Best practice industry guidelines



One of the earliest programme outputs was the development and launch of the first ever guidance for industry on how to manage self-harm and suicide-related content. The guidance was produced in collaboration with government, tech companies, academics and people with lived experience.

The content is based on the latest evidence and is always evolving to reflect new legislation, research, online trends and changes in technology.

This includes guidance on everything from developing your content policies to how you can support the wellbeing of moderators viewing and responding to this content. They are aimed at all sites and platforms hosting user-generated content, ranging from small online community forums to global social media and video-sharing platforms.

What we've achieved

Our industry guidelines are believed to be a world-first in the sector and they have quickly become a useful and tangible way to engage partners, external and internal stakeholders in our wider programme of work.

One service user – a large national healthcare charity – explicitly drew on the guidelines during the development and implementation of their new suicide prevention strategy.

What we've learned

Industry partners agreed that our early focus on creating the guidelines was a sensible one. They welcomed its production as a concrete output, which has helped to give the programme a broad framework within which to organise its work. They tended to be seen as a useful framing of the issues, and a structure for considering their own guidelines and policies.

“The guidelines have been a key tangible [from the programme]”

Industry partner

They will continue to evolve in response to emerging online harm issues, the latest evidence base and the evolving regulatory framework.



The guidelines have been accessed over

12,000
times





Aim 4: Online Safety Advisory Service



In April 2022, we launched (and continue to deliver) an Online Safety Advisory Service. The first of its kind, the service helps sites and professionals to respond to issues relating to self-harm and suicide content online, regularly supporting social media platforms, forums, search engines, safety tech companies, government, police, health practitioners, schools, bereaved families and concerned members of the public.

The service also supports platforms to embed our industry guidelines in a way that is right for them and their specific online community.

What we've achieved

In our external evaluation, service users were universally positive about the service experience in terms of responsiveness, quality, and suitability of advice and guidance provided. The Advisory Service helps service users in a variety of ways, but this tended to be in the form of advice and guidance relating to policies and guidance for the oversight and management of online communities.

Examples of support range from informing social media content policies, to working with a local authority on responding to a local suicide cluster where online content was a key concern. Additionally, we supported an app provider (with over 300 million users worldwide) improve their user messaging and a games platform (with over five million games played a day) responsibly address expressions of suicide in a post-game context.

Our evaluation reviewed evidence from the Advisory Service logs from April 2022 to July 2023 (16 months). In that period, the service logged 142 incoming cases. Nearly one-third (29%) of cases came from 'Industry', primarily the major social media platform providers. Other major sources included central and local government (11% and 21% respectively).

People came to the service looking for support and advice, to discuss trends, or to report and discuss specific incidents.

“We went into it expecting to maybe just have a conversation and came out of it with multiple documents having been reviewed [by the Service]. Our moderation policy is quite a lengthy document and it's given us the assurance that what we are doing is what we should be doing...It feels good to know we've prepared as much as we could prepare.”

Tech Company

We helped an App Provider with over

300 million users





Aim 4: Online Safety Advisory Service

What we've learned

Self-harm and suicide content online is extremely nuanced, and there remains clear uncertainty and anxiety in the industry about how to address it safely and effectively.

The industry and its stakeholders need more than guidelines.

Legislation and effective regulation is necessary to ensure that platforms are taking appropriate action and creating safe spaces, but this often tells platforms what to do, rather than how to do it safely and sensitively.

The Advisory Service fills this gap, providing an opportunity to push platforms to high standards and use their sites effectively for suicide prevention. It also works with people with lived experience to support platforms with more nuanced issues where the evidence base is lacking.

“ We really respect their opinion in matters relating to suicide and self-harm that we have to deal with. ”

Charity



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Aim 5: Educating users and the people around them



In 2022, we launched [a hub of resources](#) to help users stay safe online when engaging with content relating to suicide and self-harm, co-developed with people with lived experience.

We developed guidance for parents, carers and families on how to talk to their loved ones about their online use, educating them on how to signpost them to safe spaces online for support, whether they are posting about suicide or self-harm themselves, searching for support or supporting others online.

We also produced guidance for practitioners to increase their confidence at talking to the people they support about their online use and be able to direct them to safe spaces online for support. We worked with Tees Esk and Wear Valley Mental Health Trust to develop online guidance and an [e-learning module](#).

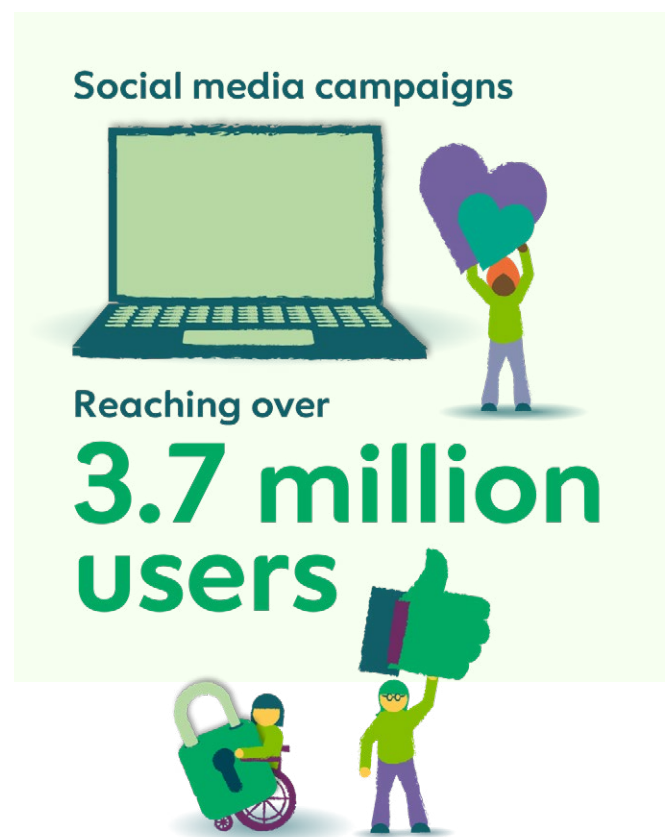
Developed by the programme in partnership with Health Education England, the open access e-module is designed to support a range of practitioners (education, mental health, emergency care, social workers, etc.) to have discussions with their service users about their internet use around suicide and self-harm. This content was further adapted to a successful training webinar for practitioners which reaches 250 practitioners on average each month.

What we've achieved

The hub of resources for users has been accessed over 26,000 times since its launch.

We've also helped people share their personal stories of staying safe online by publishing multiple blogs.

Our guidance for parents and families have been accessed over 2,700 times.





Aim 5: Educate users and the people around them

➤ Social media campaigns

We developed two social media campaigns helping users to stay safe online, collectively reaching over 3.7 million users across Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

➤ Supporting practitioners

Our practitioner guidance has been accessed over 29,000 times and over 1,200 practitioners have completed the e-learning module since its launch in April 2023. We have had a further 1,800 practitioners attending our training webinars.

Feedback shows that 94% of those attending the training webinar feel more confident knowing what advice they can give to help people stay safe and have positive experiences online.

“The training was helpful, this isn't a subject which I know much about but feel it will be highly relevant to my role. I feel more prepared to address issues around suicidality/self-harm and the internet if it were to come up.”

“It should be mandatory training requirement; although I work in community, we don't really approach this topic.”

What we've learned?

Practitioners felt ill-equipped to talk to people they support, demonstrating a need and a clear demand for training. Training needs to be embedded in core training for practitioners and education professionals.

The programme's resources for professionals are effective at increasing confidence and likelihood of talking to people about their online use but there remains a need to evaluate long term behavioural change.

An external evaluation of the OEP conducted by the University of Leicester found the OEP's resources for practitioners are effective at increasing confidence and likelihood of talking to the people they support about their online use.



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Aim 6: Influencing policy and regulation



Influencing change is key to the success of the programme. We have integrated the programme's outputs and learnings into our work on the Online Safety Act, using the evidence and insights gathered to inform our response.

What we've achieved

We played a leading role in shaping the law, ensuring that self-harm and suicide content was identified as priority content within the Online Safety Act.

This was a monumental achievement, given the scale of listed harms in the bill. Having suicide and self-harm explicitly listed means that there will be stronger protections. Not only will platforms have to remove this priority content, but they will have additional responsibilities to detect it on their platform.

We also achieved an amendment to the act to ensure that small but high-risk platforms were captured by the legislation.

“It [OEP] gives us such strong credibility...we're in a really strong position to influence.”

Samaritans team member

What we've learned

Our evaluation showed that partners seemed unclear about how the new Online Safety Act would change how they operate, and what this new context would mean for them.

The programme can help them understand how they can embed the new legislative framework relating to suicide and self-harm content in a safe and sensitive way.



Our role will be to continue to encourage and push the industry to:

- ensure that users of all ages are protected from harmful content
- encourage platforms to act now and not wait until new regulatory framework in place
- influence the government to make sure people of all ages are protected from harmful suicide and self-harm content, not just under 18s.
- ensure legislation covers all areas of online harms relating to suicide and self-harm

We continue to work closely with Ofcom to ensure the upcoming legislation protects everyone from harmful online suicide and self-harm content.





What further change do we want to see?



The internet will continue to be a key part of everyday life, with young people spending an average of 4-5 hours a day online.

We cannot stand still.



We need to see:

- Legislation that goes further.
- Sectors, particularly government, healthcare and services, education, academia and the non-profit sector, coming together to tackle this issue. It is not solely a tech industry responsibility.
- Platforms protecting their users by going further than the current minimal requirements set by legislation.
- Platforms actively using their sites for suicide prevention.
- More accessible training and guidance for users, parents, educators, practitioners on staying safe online and finding safe support.
- More research and evidence on at-risk groups, e.g. young people, neuro-divergent and LGBTQ+ individuals.
- More capacity to address current/emerging threats e.g. caused by new technologies such as AI.

To find out more about Samaritans' Online Excellence Programme, please visit the website at [samaritans.org/about-samaritans/research-policy/internet-suicide/samaritans-online-excellence-programme](https://www.samaritans.org/about-samaritans/research-policy/internet-suicide/samaritans-online-excellence-programme)





Appendix I



Further papers commissioned or authored by the Online Excellence Programme.

Morrissey, J., Kennedy, L., & Grace, L. (2022). The opportunities and challenges of regulating the internet for self-harm and suicide prevention. *Crisis: The Journal of Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention*, 43(2), 77.

Haime, Z., Kennedy, L., Grace, L., & Biddle, L. (2024). Experiences of moderation, moderators, and moderating by online users who engage with self-harm and suicide content. *medRxiv*, 2024-02.

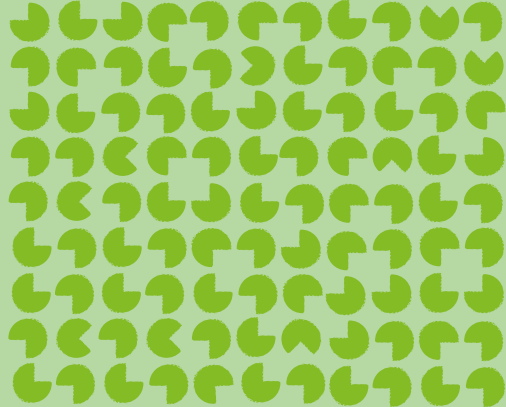
Biddle, L., Kennedy, L., Grace, L., Derges, J., & Haime, Z. (2024). Adults' experiences of using journalling to reflect on suicide and self-harm related online use: indications of a potential area for intervention development to reduce online harm.

Haime, Z., Kennedy, L., Grace, L., Cohen, R., Derges, J., & Biddle, L. (2024). The journey of engaging with web-based self-harm and suicide content: longitudinal qualitative study. *JMIR infodemiology*, 4(1), e47699.

Winstone, L., Mars, B., Ferrar, J., Moran, P., Penton-Voak, I., Grace, L., & Biddle, L. (2023). Investigating how people who self-harm evaluate web-based lived experience stories: focus group study. *JMIR mental health*, 10, e43840.

Ferrar, J., Winstone, L., Penton-Voak, I., Biddle, L., Moran, P., Grace, L., & Mars, B. (2024). Investigating the impact of lived experience stories on self-harm, mood, and help-seeking intentions: an experimental study. *medRxiv*, 2024-04.





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