

Understanding self-harm and suicide content online

The internet can be an invaluable space for individuals experiencing self-harm and suicidal feelings. It provides opportunities to access information, find options for support, and provides a platform to speak openly about difficult feelings that can be challenging to discuss face to face. However, it can also carry potential risks by presenting opportunities to access graphic content, details around methods of harm, and content that glorifies or promotes self-harm and suicide. Access to such content can be distressing, triggering and may act to encourage, maintain or exacerbate self-harm and suicidal behaviours.

Samaritans definition of self-harm and suicide*

Self-harm: any deliberate act of self-poisoning or self-injury without suicidal intent. This excludes accidents, substance misuse and eating disorders, as well as episodes of self-harm where the person was trying to take their own life.

Suicide: the act of intentionally ending one's life. This is caused by many factors, including depression and mental illness, stress, financial problems, relationship breakdown, bereavement and abuse.

What do we mean by self-harm and suicide content?

User-generated self-harm and suicide content can take many different forms online such as:

- Quotes about self-harm and suicide
- Lived experience accounts of self-harm and suicide
- Depictions of self-harm and suicide such as artwork, memes and TV stills
- Images, videos and livestreaming relating to self-harm and suicide
- Online hoaxes, challenges, and suicide pacts encouraging users to harm themselves
- Feeds sharing information or discussing recent events eg, after a high-profile suicide or broadcasting of a TV programme or film with related themes

- Memorial pages for individuals who have died by suicide

Why might users post or search for self-harm and suicide content?

Some of the reasons that users may post, search for, or engage with self-harm and suicide content include:

- Wanting to find out more about what they're feeling and experiencing
- Finding a place to speak openly without fear of judgement
- Reading stories or connecting with others with similar experiences
- Seeking a supportive online community where they can get peer support
- Finding support for themselves or someone they know
- Finding help materials or support options
- Raising awareness of self-harm or suicide prevention
- Accessing immediate support– this is particularly important for users in crisis or waiting to access support from health professionals

Users may also **stumble upon content by accident** or engage with it for more **harmful reasons**, such as to find information about methods of harm.

* Self-harm can be defined differently, and some definitions may include eating disorders and drug misuse. For example, in some clinical and academic settings (particularly in the UK), the term 'self-harm' refers to when a person harms themselves, irrespective of whether they do so with the intention of taking their own lives. The important thing is that sites and platforms have clear definitions that can be understood by users.

Risks associated with self-harm and suicide content online

Whilst lots of self-harm and suicide related content can be extremely helpful for users and a part of their recovery, there are some risks associated with particular types of content:

Promotion, encouragement or glorification of self-harm and suicide – content that promotes or portrays self-harm and suicide in positive ways, whether intentionally or unintentionally, can be harmful for users by making the behaviours appear more appealing. Examples include portraying self-harm or suicide as effective ways to end distress and encouraging other users to try these behaviours.

Sharing methods of harm can put users at increased risk. This includes sharing details or instructions around methods, suggested equipment or places to harm yourself, and comparisons of the effectiveness of different methods. Research suggests that when researching methods of suicide online, users are likely to find resources that instruct or encourage suicide, which can distract attention away from signposts to available support.ⁱ

Social contagion – some evidence suggests that content presenting self-harm and suicide behaviours

may be 'contagious' to other users viewing it, young people being more susceptible to this than other groupsⁱⁱ. The contagion effect may be precipitated by over-identification with the user who is posting. This not only relates to self-harm and suicide behaviours but also to feelings of distress.

Imitative or copycat suicidesⁱⁱⁱ – if methods of suicide or places where a suicide took place are widely discussed and described online, it poses risks that other users may try to replicate it.

Who is most vulnerable?

While research is limited, some evidence suggests that **young people** may be at increased risk from viewing self-harm and suicide content online. Research conducted by Samaritans and University of Bristol found that 26% of young people who had presented to hospital for self-harm or a suicide attempt had used the internet in relation to this. This was compared to 8.4% of adults^{iv}. **Further research is needed** to explore this and identify other groups who may also be at increased risk.

Deciding what's harmful and what's helpful – what we know so far

Understanding the impact of self-harm and suicide content online is complex and the evidence base has mixed findings regarding what content is considered harmful and for whom^v. What can be helpful for one user can be extremely distressing to others. User's perceptions on how harmful content is may also depend on factors such as the context of the content, their current level of distress and the volume of self-harm and suicide content they view.

Illegal content

In England and Wales, under the 1961 Suicide Act, it is an offence to encourage or assist the suicide or attempted suicide of another person^{vi}, therefore, any content that intentionally encourages a person to end their life would be considered illegal content.

Legal but harmful*

While any content has the potential to be distressing, research shows that content most likely to be harmful includes:

- **Content that portrays self-harm and suicide as positive or desirable**
- **Information and depictions of methods of harm**, especially with instructions or advice on how to hurt yourself, comparisons of the effectiveness of methods, or links and information that enable people to buy products intended for use as a means of suicide.
- **Graphic descriptions or depictions** of self-harm and suicide. This might include images of open wounds or blood.

* This refers to content that is legal but harmful in the UK context. The law on suicide varies between jurisdictions.

Content in the grey area

There is also a grey area where less is known about the potential positive and negative impacts of content on users. This includes:

- **Quotes about self-harm and suicide** – whilst many promote recovery or signpost to support, some can act to promote and glamourise suicide and self-harm.
- **Lived experience accounts of self-harm and suicide** – whilst sharing personal experiences is helpful for many users, in some instances they can sometimes be unintentionally upsetting and triggering for other users.
- **Depictions of self-harm and suicide such as artwork and memes** – the meaning of this content may be unclear, making it more difficult to moderate. Memes may present themes of suicide and self-harm humorously which can be upsetting.
- **Images of self-harm scars** – whilst these may be distressing and triggering for some they can also be shared in relation to discussion of recovery and removing content of this kind could be upsetting to the person posting.

- **Sharing methods of concealment** – this includes advice on hiding historic injuries and scars which may be part of a user's recovery. It also includes advice on hiding equipment or damage caused to the body relating to self-harm or suicide attempts. Helping users to hide harm from the people around them could delay them getting support.
- **Memorial pages for people who have died by suicide** – whilst this can be a meaningful way of remembering and paying tribute, there are risks that the content could glamourise suicide or portray it as an effective way of ending distress.

Positive content

While there is growing focus and awareness of the potential harm of self-harm and suicide content online, it is important to recognise the benefits that users can experience from online spaces. Research tells us that helpful content includes:

- Messages promoting help seeking
- Stories of hope, support and recovery
- Tips about self-care and looking after your wellbeing
- Information about sources of support



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.

- Marchant, A., Hawton, K., Stewart, A., Montgomery, P., Singaravelu, V., Lloyd, K., Purdy, N., Daine, K. and John, A., 2017. A systematic review of the relationship between internet use, self-harm and suicidal behaviour in young people: The good, the bad and the unknown. *PLoS one*, 12(8), p.e0181722.
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- The Suicide Act 1961, section 3(3)