Suicide Prevention & Mental Health Support

A Guide for Veterinary Professionals

⚠ If you are in immediate crisis right now please call:

- Emergency services on **999** available 24/7, free, and confidential
- **Samaritans** 116 123 free, and confidential
- **National Suicide Prevention Helpline** on 0800 587 0800 or 0800 689 0880.
- **Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM)** on 0800 58 58 58 (from 5pm to midnight 365 days a year
- **NHS urgent mental health helpline** on 111, option 2
- **VetIfe** on 0303 040 2551 24/7
- **PAPYRUS HOPELINE** if you are under the age of 35, or supporting someone under 35 on 0800 068 41 41

Or Text (if you prefer not to talk) :

- "SHOUT" to 85258 – to connect with the **SHOUT** 24/7 text service
- **PAPYRUS HOPELINE** at **07860 039 967**

Or go to your nearest Accident and Emergency department if your life is in danger

Why This Matters: Understanding the Risk in Veterinary Medicine

Vets and Nurses have a higher likelihood of psychological distress and suicide compared with the general population. This is not a personal weakness — it is a systemic problem that demands honest conversation and active support.

The Statistics

Veterinary professionals are:

- 2–3× more likely to die by suicide than the general public
- More likely to experience suicidal thoughts, depression, anxiety, and burnout than the general public
- Exposed to death and euthanasia more frequently than almost any other profession

Contributing Factors

- Compassion fatigue and moral distress
- High student debt and wage gap
- Client aggression and conflict
- Access to means (medications, controlled substances)
- Culture of stoicism — 'just push through it'
- Staff shortages and overwork

Guidelines provided by

VETS in MIND

www.vets-in-mind.org

Recognising Warning Signs — In Yourself and Others

Knowing what to look for can save a life. These signs don't mean someone will definitely attempt suicide, but they are a call for connection and support.

Take the free Suicide Awareness Training from **Zero Suicide Alliance** via https://www.zerosuicidealliance.com/ which provides fundamental suicide awareness and prevention skills.

Warning Signs to Watch For

Talking about: feeling like a burden, having no reason to live, wanting to die, feeling trapped or in unbearable pain

Behavioural changes: withdrawal from friends and colleagues, giving away possessions, increased alcohol or substance use

Mood signs: extreme sadness, sudden calmness (after depression), expressing hopelessness, anxiety, or rage

At work: frequent absences, declining performance, increased errors, difficulty making decisions

Seeking "access to means": unusual interest in controlled substances, medications, or methods of harm

How to Help a Colleague You're Worried About

You don't need to be a mental health professional to help. You just need to show up. Research is clear: asking about suicide does not put the idea in someone's head — it can save a life.

✓ What TO Do

- Ask directly: "Are you thinking about suicide?"
- Listen without judgement — don't rush to fix
- Stay with them if they are in immediate risk
- Help them connect with a crisis line or professional
- Follow up — send a message, check in the next day
- Collaborate with the colleague in distress to tell a senior staff member or practice manager that they are struggling
- Take all mentions of suicide seriously

✗ What NOT to Do

- Don't promise to keep it a secret
- Don't minimise or dismiss: "Everyone feels like this" or "You have so much to be grateful for"
- Don’t ask, “You’re not thinking of suicide, are you?” This implies that you are uncomfortable with an affirmative response.
- Don't leave them alone if they are at immediate risk
- Don't debate whether their feelings are valid
- Don't use stigmatising language (e.g., "committed" suicide), instead use “death by” suicide.
- Don't try to manage the situation alone — involve others

What to Say — Starting the Conversation

"I've noticed you haven't seemed yourself lately — are you okay?"

"I'm worried about you. Can we talk?"

"Are you having thoughts of suicide or harming yourself?"

"You don't have to go through this alone. I'm here."

It doesn't need to be a perfect conversation. Your willingness to ask is what matters most.

For more information, please refer to https://bethe1to.com/bethe1to-steps-evidence/

Supporting Your Own Mental Health

Your wellbeing matters just as much as the patients you care for. Sustainable compassion starts with caring for yourself.

Daily Wellbeing Practices

- Acknowledge when you're struggling — name it without shame
- Take breaks and use your annual leave
- Debrief difficult cases with a trusted colleague
- Maintain relationships outside of work
- Limit alcohol — it worsens anxiety and depression
- Sleep, movement, and time outdoors genuinely help

When to Seek Professional Help

Don't wait for a crisis. Seek support if you experience:

- Persistent low mood or hopelessness
- Anxiety that interferes with daily life
- Thoughts of suicide or self-harm
- Feeling numb, disconnected, or emotionally exhausted
- Using substances to cope

Asking for help is a sign of courage — not weakness.

Crisis & Support Resources

Save these numbers. Share them. Use them. There is no wrong reason to reach out.

Call NHS urgent mental health helpline on 111, option 2

Resource	Contact	Notes
The emergency services	**Call 999**	UK — Free, 24/7, confidential
The Samaritans	**116 123**	Free, and confidential
National Suicide Prevention Helpline	0800 587 0800 or 0800 689 0880	UK — Free text-based support
Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM)	on 0800 58 58 58	from 5pm to midnight 365 days a year
PAPYRUS HOPELINE	Call **0800 068 41 41** or, Text **07860 039 967**	if you are under the age of 35, or supporting someone under 35
VetLife Helpline (UK)	**0303 040 2551**	For vet professionals in the UK
Employee Assistance Program	**[Add your EAP number here]**	Confidential — check your employer
Your GP / Family Doctor	**[Book an appointment]**	First step for ongoing mental health care

Online Resources

Vet Mental Health Alliance: www.vetmentalhealth.com

Vets in Mind Alliance for free to use and anonymous triage tools on **suicidal thoughts,** and other mental health **www.vets-in-mind.org**

Lifeboat by Not One More Vet: https://lifeboat.nomv.org/#/ — peer support community, resources etc

Vetlife: 24/7, 365 days a year.

BeThe1To: https://bethe1to.com/bethe1to-steps-evidence/

Practice Responsibilities — A Safe Workplace

Mental health support is not just an individual responsibility — it is a practice-level obligation. Practices committed to the wellbeing of their team should:

- if your practice has an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) service, team members should be reminded of it and know how to use it.
- Conduct regular, genuine wellbeing check-ins — not just performance reviews
- Train all senior staff in Mental Health First Aid or safe messaging around suicide. See https://www.rcvs.org.uk/about-us/news-and-views/news/rcvs-launches-mental-health-and-suicide-awareness-academy-courses for more information. The mental health courses are available via https://academy.rcvs.org.uk/course/index.php?categoryid=25
- Implement safe storage and dispensing protocols for controlled substances to reduce means access
- Create a culture where taking sick leave for mental health is treated the same as physical illness
- Establish a clear, confidential pathway for staff to raise mental health concerns without fear of consequence
- Hold regular debriefs after difficult cases — euthanasia, unexpected outcomes, client aggression
- Review workload and staffing regularly — chronic overwork is a risk factor, not a badge of honour

A Note on "Means Safety"

Veterinary professionals have access to substances that can be used in a suicide attempt. This significantly increases risk. To guard against this, practices should:

Audit and restrict access to controlled drugs to only those who require it

Store all controlled substances securely in accordance with regulations

Consider using a method of controlling access to lethal medications

Never ask a colleague who may be struggling to handle euthanasia drugs alone

Support staff who request a temporary change of duties related to drug access without stigma

After a Loss — Supporting Your Team Through Grief

If a colleague has died by suicide, the impact on a team can be profound and long-lasting. Those who were close to them, or who feel they "should have known," may struggle deeply.

- Acknowledge the loss openly and with compassion — silence makes grief harder
- Avoid sharing details about the method — this is in line with safe messaging guidelines
- Activate your EAP immediately and communicate this clearly to all staff
- Give team members permission to take time off if they need it
- Be vigilant for signs of grief, guilt, or increased distress in other team members in the weeks that follow
- Consider a formal debrief with a mental health professional to support the team
- Grief has no timeline — check in with staff regularly, not just in the immediate aftermath

You chose this profession because you care.

That same care — the kind you give every patient — deserves to be turned inward too.

Your team needs you. And you deserve support.

If you're struggling, please reach out now —

Call the emergency services on 999

The Samaritans on 116 123

Vetlife on 0303 040 2551

This document should be reviewed annually and updated with local resources where applicable.

Practice Name: _____ Date: _____

Contact: _____

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