

Advice for chambers following a death by suicide



Wellbeing
at the Bar

Advice for chambers supporting colleagues following a death by suicide

It is important to react, swiftly, compassionately and wisely to a suicide for all concerned. These resources have been developed by experts in this area. Valuable contributions have been made by chambers and other organisations that have had to manage the aftermath of the suicide of a barrister member, clerk or member of staff. They have kindly shared their experiences to assist others.

Immediate Steps

What makes suicide different from other deaths is that individuals including family members, friends and colleagues may feel responsible. These individuals need to be reached out to with accurate information, and given a platform to come together to grieve.

- If any information has already been made public, be sure to verify its accuracy first, and then pass it on to colleagues (members of chambers and staff) thereafter. This will give them a chance to express and normalise their guilt and separate it from their grief. It is important to steer clear of casting judgment or sharing personal opinions of the person who passed away, or the circumstances surrounding the suicide.
- Consider designating an individual who was close to the deceased and who knew his/her family to be the main point of contact rather than the family going through a CEO or similar (but recognise they will need additional support themselves). It is advisable to have a message carefully drafted by a senior figure in Chambers (ideally the Head of Chambers) communicating clearly and in appropriate terms the news to colleagues. The message should take care to limit traumatic details, and should refer to resources available for support. If details are limited they should highlight the point of contact, or that further information will follow in due course to prevent multiple replies over sharing additional information.
- Contact next of kin or family representative immediately and offer condolences on behalf of Chambers. Try to ascertain the facts surrounding the death; people will want information to make sense of the loss, but you should be careful about sharing information and seek family consent on what to share with colleagues. Consider an offer of practical support with regards to their loved one's practice, papers and fee collection (at the appropriate time) and nominate a single point of contact for such clerking arrangements.
 - Inform the individual's family of the steps that have taken within chambers. Be prepared to find yourself mediating between different members of the family and be careful not to take sides. Do not be surprised if members of the family express their anger to you.
- Use clear, direct language; say "died" in place of other colloquial expressions.

- Don't be afraid to express your emotions, and refer to the [bereavement guidelines](#) for typical responses.
- Contact clients – with an agreed form of words - and others that the member worked with. Inform them and advise of reassignment of work and other related issues.
- You might want to place a notice on your website advising people of the death but be slow to remove the person's profile from your site.

The funeral

Seek information about funeral arrangements and follow the family's wishes about whether colleagues may attend. If yes, invite the Head of Chambers, Senior Clerk and any colleagues who have expressed their wishes to attend. Take the initiative to send collective condolences on behalf of Chambers as appropriate e.g. send flowers or donate to a charity as requested by the family. Accommodate the wishes of those who wish to attend the funeral. Where possible, offer to make alternate arrangements so that they can do so.

Giving people opportunities to speak

Provide opportunities for people to speak – in groups or individually. Some people may be worried as to whether they themselves are at risk (*"If xx could take his own life, am I spinning out of control too?"*). Let people talk and provide as many "open doors" for people to knock on to share their pain. Cruse Bereavement Care (<https://www.cruse.org.uk/>) are very good at dealing with group and individual sessions.

Monitor and provide ongoing support to those closest, including the family. Consider offering services such as EAP, LawCare and appropriate clinicians.

Dealing with the Press

Agree a strategy for dealing with the press. There should be one point of contact and an agreed statement should be prepared. Offer the family the opportunity to refer all press enquiries to chambers and do not tell the press anything more than you absolutely have to.

The Police/Inquest issue and probate issues

Someone will need to be designated to deal with the Police who may want to investigate documents and possibly computers in Chambers to assess the state of mind of the individual prior to the suicide.

There will inevitably be an inquest, and the family will be contacted by the Coroner's staff very soon after the death. Consider offering support to the family through that process, potentially through a solicitor/directly instructed barrister experienced in inquest law. This can help them navigate a stressful process.

Memorials, Funds etc.

Memorial services can be really important. Agree who to invite and provide family, friends and colleagues with an opportunity to share stories and celebrate the individual's life. Think about the best time to hold the service. It is usually a good idea to hold such a service some months after the death, so that people have had time to grieve.

Allow for these opportunities for collective closure to take place, and consult with colleagues before moving desks and reassigning work.

In some cases, the family may not wish to hold a memorial, this should not prevent colleagues who are grieving their loss from arranging an event or acknowledgement of their colleague as doing so can aid their grieving process. Check with family members if an event is anticipated to allow them to participate, or have input.

Remember that family members may want to keep workplace related mementos as well as personal ones.

Consider some other forms of remembering the person - a lecture, fund, scholarship, or annual event.

Death in Service benefits, Insurance, Probate and Administrative Costs

If the person was a member of a Death in Service Benefits programme, you will need to seek legal advice on how to present this death to the benefits provider – some policies do not cover suicide or only do so after a prescribed period of time.

Whatever the outcome of the inquest, there can be difficulties in recovering under a life insurance policy when the death has been self-inflicted. Consider offering advice and support to the family.

You may well be required to participate in the probate process or liaising with those who are. Appoint a key person to deal with this.

Remember to deal with the practical issues such as contacting the regulator to inform them of the death, and cancelling ongoing subscriptions.

Resources

Please see guidance on bereavement [here](#).

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, On Death and Dying 1969

Harold Kushner, When Bad things Happen to Good People. Schoke Books, 1981

Maria Sirois, A Short Course in Happiness After Loss: (and Other dark, Difficult Times) 2016

Maria Sirois at TEDxBerkshires You Tube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ohGMg-LJCjs>

William Worden, 4 Tasks of Mourning <https://whatsyourgrief.com/wordens-four-tasks-of-mourning>

Websites:

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide <http://www.sobs.admin.care4free.net/>

Silence on Suicide <https://www.sossilenceofsuicide.org/>

These resources have been developed with the assistance of Robyn Bradey. Robyn is an Australian Mental Health Accredited Social worker who provides clinical supervision to mental health professionals. She is currently the Mental Health consultant and trainer for the Law Society of NSW, Legal Aid. The ODPP, the CDPP, state and Commonwealth government departments, the tribunals and Ombudsmen, RACS and some law firms.