

A Strategy to Prevent Suicide in New Zealand: Draft for public consultation

NETSAFE'S SUBMISSION TO THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH

About this submission

Kei te rangatira, tēnā koe,

This submission is made on behalf of Netsafe, an independent non-profit organisation with an unrelenting focus on online safety and security. Its purpose is to enable all New Zealand internet users to confidently access digital opportunities and prevent online harm. This purpose is complemented by Netsafe's statutory role providing 'Approved Agency' functions under the Harmful Digital Communications Act 2015.

This submission focuses on two areas:-

1. Improving support for helpline services, such as Netsafe's; and
2. Ensuring that the role of digital technology in increasing or decreasing the incidence of suicidal behaviour is explicitly included in the strategy.

Netsafe has been an active participant in the development of suicide prevention in Aotearoa-New Zealand since 2011.

We look forward to working with the Ministry of Health to provide subject matter expertise as it moves forwards with the development of this strategy.

Nāku noa, nā

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Netsafe's submission

Pathways

1. *What do you think about these pathways? Do you have any comments or suggestions about these pathways?*

Netsafe believes that considering the role of digital technology in making suicidal behaviour more or less likely should be a requirement of the strategy, and this should be reflected at all levels of the Pathways intervention model – see question 5 for more specific feedback.

Prioritising actions

2. *Do you think these are the right areas for action to prevent suicide (e.g., are any areas missing; are the areas identified the most important areas)?*

Netsafe provides a helpline service to help with online bullying, abuse and harassment under the Harmful Digital Communications Act 2015. In the course of this work Netsafe receives calls from, or about, people at risk of self-harm or suicide. Netsafe's experience is that the paths for getting immediate support for these people are not clearly signposted, especially for those at elevated risk of suicidal behaviour. For example, criteria for requesting intervention from a Mental Health Crisis Team, Police or other agencies are not always clear. This specific issue highlights a broader issue for services such as Netsafe's – access to best practice advice and resources. Netsafe believes this could encourage consistent professional practice across support services, strengthening overall provision.

Netsafe notes the strong role of the education sector throughout the strategy's action areas. Netsafe's experience from working with schools indicates increasing demands upon them to support the complex personal and social needs of rangatahi-young people. Therefore, Netsafe agrees that schools have a vital role to play in relation to fostering well-being through the creation of inclusive learning environments. This includes support for curriculum development that encourages resilience building and emotional intelligence development, and for the role of schools in the coordinated 'wrap around' support for young people.

3. *Which areas for action do you think are the most important ones to focus on first?*

Netsafe believes that the action areas should be interdependent e.g., Building social awareness of and well-informed social attitudes to suicidal behaviour (action area 2) should encourage responsible conversations about suicidal behaviour and preventing suicidal behaviour (action area 3), all of which should contribute to supporting positive wellbeing throughout people's lives (action area 1).

4. *Which activities within these action areas do you think are the most important ones to focus on first?*

As noted in the response to question 1, Netsafe believes that the role of digital technology in increasing or decreasing the incidence of suicidal behaviour should be explicitly included in the strategy – see question 5.

Other views, comments or information

5. *Do you have any other views, comments or information related to the draft strategy or preventing suicidal behaviour more generally?*

'DIGITAL' SHOULD BE A STRATEGIC THEME

Netsafe believes that the role of digital technology in increasing or decreasing the incidence of suicidal behaviour should be explicitly included in the strategy.

Digital technology has enabled new modes of communication that differ in significant ways from offline modes. These have contributed to a rapid reshaping of our communication culture with both positive and negative effects.

In relation to suicide prevention, for example, international research indicates children involved in cyberbullying are much more likely to view web content containing self-harm and suicide [1, 2]. In the Aotearoa-NZ context, there is concern about the emergence of bullying, and cyber-bullying in particular, as a 'background factor' in New Zealand's high youth suicide rate [3]. Further, phenomenon like 'digital self-harm' (including self-bullying) are indicative of the complex relationship between people and technology [4, 5].

In Netsafe's experience, unless 'digital' is explicitly included and appropriately positioned in strategic planning, its potential negative and positive impacts are typically overlooked. This would be a tragic oversight, with real world implications for the overall effectiveness of this suicide prevention strategy.

EXAMPLES OF INTERVENTION ACTIVITIES

Examples of intervention activities that could be included in the strategy:-

Prevention & research

- Evidence review of the positive and negative influences of digital technology in suicide prevention [e.g., 6-10]
- Using online social media platforms as communication tools postvention to mitigate the risk of suicide contagion [e.g., 11-13]
- Education programmes adopting a holistic, 'digital citizenship' approach [14]

Prediction and modelling

- Working with online service providers to develop appropriate technical mediations for online behaviours indicative of suicidal ideation and behaviour [e.g., 15]
- Identify patterns in mental health awareness and suicide prevention using 'big data' modelling approaches [e.g., 16-19]

Support & Intervention

- Using digital tools (e.g., apps, messaging) to supplement support and reporting approaches [e.g., 20-22] and to promote social cohesion [e.g., 23]

A BALANCED APPROACH IS ESSENTIAL

However, it is important to note that, in general, prevention approaches that rely on technical protections, such as content filtering or activity logging, simply do not work. They also involve consideration of complex issues such as confidentiality, informed consent, false-positives and adverse effects. This is highlighted by the implementation and subsequent withdrawal of the Samaritans 'Radar' app [24].

An effective prevention strategy is comprised of a blend of activities that are:

- Promotional: Guiding people's learning in the digital world, and
- Protective: Mitigating or buffering risk by protection, support or intervention.

Further, effective approaches are active and ongoing, and are underpinned by the idea that promoting safe and responsible use of digital technology is a shared responsibility.

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