

Small Talk Saves Lives Q&A

For internal background information & reactive media queries

Please contact a.shacklady@samaritans.org or charlie.oven@networkrail.com for sign off on external press queries and use

August 2021

What is Small Talk Saves Lives?

Samaritans has launched the Small Talks Saves Lives campaign in partnership with Network Rail, British Transport Police and the wider rail industry to empower the public to act to prevent suicide on the railways and other settings. A simple question or observation can be all it takes to interrupt someone's suicidal thoughts and start them on the journey to recovery. We're reminding people that they already know how to start a conversation, so giving them the confidence to act.

The campaign has been running since 2017 and is the rail industry's flagship suicide prevention campaign. Suicide is preventable and suicidal thoughts are often temporary and can be interrupted. We want to give as many people as possible the tools to notice if someone may be at risk and the confidence to approach them.

Previous phases of the campaign have shown encouraging results – 76 per cent of those who saw the campaign in the last phase said they would be either likely or very likely to approach and speak to someone who appeared upset or in distress on a platform at a train station. And 53 per cent of those who have seen the campaign were able to identify that someone who appeared upset or in distress on a platform at a train station might be considering taking their own life, compared with just 36 per cent of those who haven't seen the campaign. Encouragingly, 42 per cent said that the campaign had increased or reinforced their intent to act if they notice somebody who appears upset or in distress and may be at risk of suicide.

Small Talk Saves Lives phase 5

Small Talk Saves Lives phase 5 will be launching in the first week of August and will run for four weeks across a range of earned, paid and owned media channels. Research has shown that many people still don't know what to say when faced with the scenario of making an intervention. Therefore, the art of small talk is an underlying theme for the campaign this year. A little small talk and a simple question like 'Hello what's the time?' or 'Hi, where can I get a coffee?' or 'How great is this weather?' can be all it takes to interrupt someone's suicidal thoughts and help set them on the journey to recovery. The challenges that people face up and down the country have been felt even more deeply over the last year, as the pandemic has had a profound impact on the nation's mental health. It's more important now than ever that we look out for each other.

The creative for this campaign focuses on exactly this and will feature prominently across campaign

assets including:

- A 30 second animation for digital advertising
- A 30 second audio advert for podcasts and radio
- Printed and digital posters will be displayed in and out of the rail environment
- Research on how the nation feels about making small talk following the pandemic
- Research from Middlesex university on interventions
- Case studies of those who have saved lives using small talk

Phase 5 key messages

Primary messages:

- Samaritans launches Small Talks Saves Lives in partnership with Network Rail, British Transport Police and the wider rail industry to empower the public to act to prevent suicide on the railways and other settings.
- A simple question or observation can be all it takes to interrupt someone's suicidal thoughts and start them on the journey to recovery. We're reminding people that they already know how to start a conversation, so giving them the confidence to act.
- If you think somebody might need help / is in need of help, trust your instincts and start a conversation.
- A little small talk and a simple question like 'Hello what's the time?' or 'Hi, where can I get a coffee?' can be all it takes to interrupt someone's suicidal thoughts and help set them on the journey to recovery.
- Find out more [Samaritans.org/smalltalksaveslives](https://www.samaritans.org/smalltalksaveslives)

Secondary messages:

- Suicide is preventable and suicidal thoughts are often temporary and can be interrupted.
- Join thousands of people looking out for one another.
- By starting a conversation, you could help save someone's life and put them on a path to recovery.
- You don't need special training to help – you just need to start a conversation.
- When you've started a conversation, listen to what they have to say and repeat it back to them to make them feel listened to and understood.
- If you don't feel comfortable speaking to the person yourself, tell a member of staff, police officer or call 999 in an emergency.
- There are 23,000 railway employees and stakeholders who have been trained by Samaritans in suicide prevention, meaning that one in six employees are now able to support those who come to the railway in emotional crisis.

What gave you the idea for the campaign?

We work with leading academics in the field of suicide prevention research. A study carried out jointly for Samaritans and the rail industry by the Universities of Middlesex and Westminster indicated that a ‘bystander’ campaign could be valuable as the public has a role to play in suicide prevention especially on the railways. With this campaign, we’ve been able to build on our partnership with the rail industry and the latest research to help the public to understand that they can play their part in suicide prevention, in the rail environment and elsewhere. And we’re giving them the confidence and skills to do that; a little small talk can be all it takes.

FURTHER INFO IF PUSHED: In this research people who had considered or attempted suicide on the railway suggested intervention by commuters and bystanders as a way of preventing rail suicides. Interviews with individuals who had attempted suicide and analysis of CCTV footage suggested the existence of observable ‘abnormal’ behaviours amongst individuals seeking to take their lives on the rails, such as moving between platforms, station hopping and waiting at the station for a significant amount of time whilst allowing trains to pass by. There is therefore potential for the public to play a role in spotting these signs and taking action.

Who have you worked with to develop the campaign?

We have worked in partnership with Network Rail, British Transport Police and the wider rail industry to develop the campaign. We have also consulted individuals who have experienced suicidal behaviour, those who have lost loved ones to suicide, people who regularly travel by train, and the general public. We wanted to make sure we took into account a range of experiences and insights to create as powerful a campaign as possible. All of the Small Talk Saves Lives campaigns have been tested with members of the public.

Where did the idea of ‘small talk saving lives’ come from?

Samaritans train thousands of rail staff in suicide prevention every year. Many of them go on to make an intervention and save a life. We encourage staff to look out for anyone who may be at risk and then start a conversation with them by asking a simple question. Research recognised the vital part that the general public could also play in suicide prevention and saving lives. A little small talk can be all that’s needed to interrupt suicidal thinking and start that person on a journey to recovery. Small talk really does save lives.

Why does the campaign just focus on the railway setting? Should it not try and prevent suicide more widely?

This latest campaign encourages people to act both in the rail environment and in other settings too. We want to give as many people as possible the skills to notice if someone is at risk.

Does this campaign contradict your Media Guidelines – you’re talking about a method of suicide?

This campaign is about empowering the public to notice someone who may be at risk, to help save lives. We have a long-standing partnership with the rail industry to prevent suicide in the rail environment, which we talk about publicly in ways that minimise risk to anyone who may be vulnerable. We have taken the same approach with this campaign and we’re asking journalists who report on the campaign to bear in mind Samaritans’ Media Guidelines throughout.

Why is responsibility being put on the general public to act, rather than railway staff or members of the British Transport Police?

The rail industry has thousands of staff members trained in suicide prevention and – after the prison service – there’s no other sector with as many people trained in this area. As a result, lives are being saved every day. In fact, for every life lost on the railway, six are saved by those around them. The campaign is calling on members of the public to help act as extra pairs of ears and eyes to help spot people in emotional distress. The hope is that by appealing to members of the public, the number of life-saving interventions being made across Britain will increase further.

Aren’t you potentially putting people at risk by encouraging them to act?

Our message to the public is to only approach somebody who appears in distress if they feel it is safe to do so. Alternatively, they can alert a member of railway staff, a police officer or call 999. Someone who feels suicidal is likely to be in significant emotional distress and focused on ending their own pain, rather than harming anyone else. In earlier phases of the campaign, we’ve had no reports that people felt concerned about their own safety when making interventions. The public and passengers are keen to support the campaign.

Aren’t you asking people to put themselves at risk of coronavirus by encouraging them to approach people they don’t know?

Our message to the public is to only approach somebody who appears in distress if they feel it is safe to do so and they are comfortable to. Alternatively, they can alert a member of railway staff, a police officer or call 999 in an emergency. The challenges that people face up and down the country have been felt even more deeply over the last year, as the pandemic has had a profound impact on the nation’s mental health. It’s more important now than ever that we look out for each other.

Are you trying to create ‘have a go heroes’? Could someone be put in danger trying to help?

Small Talk Saves lives is all about acting in a way that you feel comfortable and safe with. If your instincts tell you that someone could be at risk, but you don’t feel you want to talk to them, or aren’t able to talk to them, there are number of things you can do, eg, talk to other passengers about your concerns and get support that way, talk to a member of staff, or dial 999 in an emergency. We are making it clear that we don’t recommend any kind of physical contact, but the campaign is all about how just a simple question, not physical contact, can save a life.

Are people going to feel obliged/compelled to act in case they get made to feel bad about it, or even get into trouble for not helping?

Not at all. This is about empowering people, not about obligations. It’s about one person noticing that something is not quite right with another person and trusting their instincts. Any of us could be in that situation, so it’s important that as many people as possible are prepared.

Isn’t the general public or even rail staff intervening with someone who is suicidal likely to have a big impact on their own mental health?

Our message to the public is to only approach somebody who appears in distress if they feel comfortable to do so. We recognise it could be a very emotional experience for those helping too

and it's important to talk about how you're feeling – whether that's with a co-worker, friends or family or a confidential helpline like Samaritans volunteers who are always there to listen, 24/7, on 116 123 or email jo@samaritans.org

Samaritans listening volunteers have received extensive training to help people, how can we ask the general public to do this without any training?

This campaign is about looking out for one another in the moment, and if you think someone might need help, to trust your instinct and start a conversation. You don't need any training to do that and the aim is to potentially interrupt someone's suicidal thoughts, which could help start them on a journey to recovery. This might include seeking further help, such as talking to a family member or contacting Samaritans.

FURTHER INFO IF PUSHED: In terms of how can we ask people to intervene who haven't had any training: The British Transport Police are aware of many interventions carried out by members of the public on the rail network already. So, ordinary people with no training are already saving lives on the railway, and no doubt in other settings too. (BTP can help if more detailed figures are requested.)

Surely the campaign is pointless because if a person is serious about killing themselves then there is nothing that can be done?

Suicide is preventable and suicidal thoughts are often temporary and can be interrupted, even if someone has been feeling low, anxious or struggling to cope for a long period of time. This is why interventions and getting the right kind of support at the right time is so important.

What should people look out for in case someone is at risk?

There is no single or typical sign that someone may be suicidal, so the key message is that if you think that somebody is in need of help, trust your instincts and act. But things to look out for include:

- A person looking distant, withdrawn or upset
- Someone standing alone or in an isolated spot
- Somebody staying on the platform for long periods of time
- Someone repeatedly not getting on any of the trains that stop at the station

What kind of small talk or questions can you use to interrupt someone's suicidal thoughts?

It really is just a question of making small talk. Questions that bystanders can use that we are highlighting in this campaign are as simple as:

- How great is this weather?
- Do you know where I can get a coffee?
- What's the time please?

When would it not be considered safe to approach someone in the rail environment?

- If they're on the track or in a restricted area
- If they're under the influence of drugs or alcohol

How many interventions are there on the railways each year?

From April 2020 to March 2021 there were 1,810 interventions made on the overground rail network. Most of these were made by rail employees, the police and the public. This year (since April 1st), almost 1,000 interventions have taken place on Britain's rail network by rail staff, BTP officers and members of the public.

Is there a danger that someone could make the situation worse?

There is no evidence that noticing that someone could be at risk and talking to them will 'make things worse'. We do know that when a person is suicidal having someone talk to them and listen to them, and showing that they are not alone, can encourage them to seek support. This campaign aims to give people the confidence to know what to say and how to help in difficult situations. Please refer to our website for more information.

How will you know if the campaign is a success?

We will know the campaign has been a success by asking the public if after seeing the campaign they are more aware of how to recognise if someone needs help (and is possibly at risk of suicide) and feel more comfortable approaching them, knowing what to say and do. Suicide is preventable so the campaign will also be a success if more people understand that and talk about it. That in turn will help to challenge the stigma around experiencing suicidal feelings; encouraging more people to reach out for help, and not suffer in silence.

FURTHER INFO IF PUSHED: The British Transport Police and the Rail Safety and Standards Board (RSSB) collect data on interventions made on the rail network throughout the year. They also categorise the people recognised for the intervention, eg, rail staff, police officer, member of the public etc so we can compare this data to previous years to look for an increase in interventions by members of the public during the period the campaign is running, and beyond. We can also collect anecdotal evidence from our suicide prevention leads across the train operating companies and Network Rail. And we can also pursue case studies via digital channels.

How can I support the campaign?

Please visit www.samaritans.org/smalltalksaveslives to find out more and share the campaign on social media channels.