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Views of Suicide-Bereaved Adults Regarding the Significance of the Deceased's Death Date

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ABSTRACT

Empirical research suggests that the date of death by suicide may have had particular significance to the deceased, for example their birthday or an anniversary. However, no research has explored the views of the social network of the deceased as to any perceived significance of the date of the suicide. We conducted a secondary analysis of qualitative data from a large online UK survey of suicide-bereaved adults conducted in 2017–2018, including a question on whether suicide deaths of those in the respondent's social network were thought to be related to a significant date. We presented descriptive statistics for participants' socio-demographic characteristics and conducted a descriptive thematic analysis of free-text responses capturing views about any perceived links between suicides in the respondent's social network and any dates of significance, to establish a classification of types of significant dates relating to a close contact's suicide. Of the 7,158 eligible survey respondents, 203 (2.8%) individuals endorsed that the suicide of a friend/relative had occurred on a date of significance. We classified such dates as: 1) birthdays (39.5%), 2) death anniversaries (30.2%), 3) other significant dates (23.9%), 4) coinciding dates (3.9%), and 5) ambiguous date categories (2.4%). Participants often identified interpersonal issues between the deceased and others as a potential explanation for a specific date having significance. Despite the potential for recall bias in participants seeking meaning to a traumatic loss, our results identify the need for suicide risk assessments to consider specific significant dates as temporal risk factors for distress and suicide risk.

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Introduction

When applying the findings of epidemiological research to suicide prevention, policymakers have tended to focus on *who* is at risk of suicide rather than *when* they may be at greatest risk (Nock et al., 2019). This

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means that whilst we have a good understanding of socio-demographic and clinical risk factors for suicide, such as psychiatric disorder or unemployment (Fazel & Runeson, 2020), we have very little understanding of the time points at which individuals feel most suicidal. This is essential for planning preemptive support in advance of those points, as part of targeted suicide prevention interventions. There is some evidence that suicide risk is elevated on specific dates with particular meaning to the deceased, such as their own birthday (Williams et al., 2011) or the anniversary of the death of a friend or relative (Barker et al., 2014a, 2014b; Bunch & Barraclough, 1971; Grotta et al., 2023; Hiyoshi et al., 2022) although this finding is not consistent (Pitman et al., 2023). There is also evidence to support an elevated suicide risk around New Year (Beauchamp et al., 2014; Cavanagh et al., 2016; Hofstra et al., 2018) and Father's Day (Beauchamp et al., 2014), but a reduced risk around Christmas (Cavanagh et al., 2016). However, little is known about the different types of dates that may have particular significance in relation to suicidality nor the underlying mechanisms of risk.

This absolute concept of time as a risk factor for suicide differs from the subjective experience of time (and its meaning) for someone who is suicidal (Cáceda et al., 2020). Someone who feels depressed, defeated and entrapped may feel particularly vulnerable to suicide attempt around time periods that evoke cognitions around failure, regret, or loss (Williams et al., 2011). The marking and passage of time may seem more distorted for such an individual than for an epidemiologist, for example if the month before a decade birthday is more painful than the birthday itself. This distinction between the epidemiological (objective) and individual (subjective) measurement of time is important to keep in mind when trying to understand this phenomenon.

For example, bereavement anniversary reactions are conceptualized as psychological, somatic, and behavioral reactions, whether conscious or unconscious, to a specific date marking the anniversary of a significant bereavement (Chow, 2009; Leune et al., 2025). The date is assumed to act as a temporal trigger for the reemergence of distress relating to the past event, including grief symptoms relating to a bereavement. According to a recent systematic review of studies describing bereavement anniversary effects (Leune et al., 2025), there is some evidence to support the anniversary effect hypothesis, characterized by an increased suicide risk and impaired mental health during death anniversary periods. However, a recent study on Danish register-data did not find any evidence for an elevated suicide risk in people bereaved by suicide on bereavement anniversaries (Pitman et al., 2023). The idea that grief might be reignited at specific times of the day, week, month, year or lifetime is consistent with contemporary theories of grief. Several theoretical models of grief

emphasize the temporal and cyclical processes of grief, marked by repeated oscillations between loss and restoration (Bristowe et al., 2024). To understand triggers among bereaved people, Rando (1993) proposed the concept of Subsequent Temporary Upsurges of Grief (STUG), understood as intense and unexpected waves of grief that arise in a person who has experienced the death of a loved one and who is grieving that loss. Recently, Saltzman and Terzis (2025) proposed the notion of ‘markers in time’: temporal triggers that emerge in the process of coping with traumatic loss.

Our understanding of the temporal significance of a date or time period in relation to an individual’s decision to attempt suicide remains scant. We therefore aimed in this study to investigate whether key informants (people bereaved by suicide) perceive any significance to the date of the suicide death and their reasons for thinking that date might have been significant to the deceased in the lead-up to their suicide.

Methods

Study design

We conducted a secondary analysis of online qualitative survey data collected in the UK in 2017–2018 by a team at the University of Manchester (McDonnell et al., 2022; Rivart et al., 2021). The online survey included 71 questions, representing a mixture of tick-box and free text questions, which was estimated to take 30 minutes to complete either online or on paper. Questions captured socio-demographic characteristics, experiences of suicide loss, key impacts and access to support.

Recruitment

The study was advertised between July 2017 and August 2018 via (in frequency order of recruited numbers) X/Twitter; interviews on BBC Breakfast, BBC Radio 4, and Voice of Islam Radio; announcements at a UK suicide bereavement conference; articles in The Guardian national newspaper; a request from a UK member of parliament (MP) for all MPs to raise awareness of the survey amongst their constituents; and a range of websites (University of Manchester, Support After Suicide Partnership (SASP), Suicide Bereavement UK (SBUK), and other voluntary sector organizations supporting suicide-bereaved people). The majority of respondents heard about the study via X/Twitter. A community of X/Twitter followers were updated through daily posts during the 12-month recruitment period to share recruitment numbers and messages of thanks. Followers assisted with snowball sampling by creating their own video clips to motivate people to participate. To boost male participation, the principal investigator (SMD) used the X/Twitter account of a celebrity

ex-footballer. Further details of the recruitment process are described elsewhere (Rivart et al., 2021).

Measures

We defined our sample by those who responded positively, via free text, to a question capturing the links between the reported suicide death(s) of individual(s) in the respondent's social network and perceived significance to the date(s) of death. The question was:

In your opinion, were any of the deaths directly associated with a significant date, e.g. a birthday or anniversary? (Q48).

We included in our analysis all participants who answered “yes” to this question and provided an explanation as to any perceived links between the suicide death(s) of an individual in their social network and the date(s) of death. We excluded all those who provided no answer or a negative answer to this question.

Data analysis

We analyzed socio-demographic data to present descriptive statistics for our sample of bereaved participants capturing their sociodemographic characteristics: age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, relation to the deceased, and time since loss. Time since loss was categorized into seven specific time ranges (e.g., <6 months, 6 months to 1 year ago, >1 years but <2 years ago, 2-5 years ago; >5 years but <10 years ago; 10-20 years ago; >20 years). We used the approach of inductive thematic analysis to identify patterns in the data provided capturing participants' views on potential links (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis was descriptive and was guided by the six steps described by Braun and Clarke (2006): 1) familiarization of data, 2) generation of codes, 3) combining codes into themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) determining significance of themes, and 6) reporting of findings.

During the first stage, one researcher (EL) read through all responses to Q48 and removed ambiguous responses, such that only responses with interpretable meaning were analyzed. After this familiarization phase, the same researcher then coded all the responses independently, identifying units of meaning within each response and assigning a code to each. In the third stage, all codes were merged and categorized into a unique list of categories for discussion with the wider team. In the fourth and fifth stages, group discussions within the research team were used to compare codes to the data, and to review the emergent thematic framework. The collaborative team-based analytic process aimed to

review the consistency and face validity of codes to enhance validity of findings by ensuring high levels of reflexivity and fostering conceptual thinking throughout the process. Our analytic team included clinical and non-clinical perspectives as well as those with lived experience of suicide loss. Finally, we reported our findings with exemplar quotes from online typewritten responses. We retained the wording used by respondents even where this did not accord with guidance on the language around suicide (IASP, 2022), corrected spelling only where characters were omitted, substituted or inverted. We redacted from the text any details of the method of suicide and also excluded qualifying sociodemographic information for each quote due to the risk of deidentification.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval for the primary study was obtained from the University of Manchester Research Ethics Committee (reference number: 2017-1818-2599). The current study was covered by the ethical approval for the primary study.

Results

Sample characteristics

Of the total of 7,158 respondents to the survey, 371 responded affirmatively to the relevant significant date question (Q48), of which 168 ambiguous responses (without a clear explanation of the perceived links) were excluded, leaving a total of 203 (2.8% of the total sample) individuals in our analytic sample who commented on the relevance of specific timepoints in relation to the suicide. Overall, they reported a total of 205 deaths by suicide in their social networks, as two participants reported two deaths by suicide.

The majority of the sample were female ($n=165$, 81.3%), White ($n=199$; 97.5%), of English nationality (75.9%) and self-identified as heterosexual ($n=189$; 93.1%). Their mean age was 37.4 years ($SD=14.2$). The majority of participants had been bereaved for over two years ($n=134$, 66.7%), with almost half of the sample ($n=89$, 44.3%) having been bereaved for over ten years. A total of 43 participants (21.4%) had been bereaved for less than one year. Overall, 166 (81.8%) participants reported that the death had constituted a major psychological impact on them.

As responses regarding perceptions of timing of death were free text we did not have data on exact date of death in relation to other key dates, so we relied on respondents' perspectives as to whether the death had occurred on or near another significant date.

Classification of types of significant dates

Our descriptive thematic analysis identified five main categories of dates thought to have been linked to the timing of the suicide: 1) birthdays, 2) death anniversaries, 3) other significant dates (Christmas, wedding celebrations, Father's or Mother's Day), 4) coinciding dates and 5) ambiguous date categories (uncertainty expressed about the relevance of specific dates in explaining the timing of the suicide of their friend/relative).

Suicides linked to birthdays

The largest category represented was deaths by suicide linked to birthdays ($n=81/205$; 39.5%), including deaths on or near the deceased's own birthday ($n=45/205$; 22.0%) and deaths on or near the birthdays of other known to the deceased ($n=36/205$; 17.6%).

Around the deceased's birthday. Most of the suicides linked to birthdays occurred on or near the birthday of the deceased ($n=45/81$; 55.5%). Examples included:

She [my daughter's best friend] died two days before her 13th birthday. [43-year-old woman bereaved by the suicide of her daughter's best friend 6 months previously]

My sister's suicide was on her 30th birthday. [47-year-old woman bereaved by the suicide of her sister 9 years previously]

My husband [died by suicide] on his 56th birthday. [57-year-old woman bereaved by the suicide of her husband 2 years previously]

Deaths by suicide on or near a person's own birthday included the milestone of reaching an age that, according to participant, had held a particular emotional significance for the deceased. For some this age marked a point at which life would no longer have any meaning.

My father's parents died in their 40s and 50s, therefore he assumed he would die before 60. He took his own life less than 2 months after his 60th birthday. He had massive secret debts that we only learnt of after his death. He assumed he would die of a heart attack before 60 (and lived a lifestyle that made this likely e.g. alcoholic, bad diet, stressed and angry all the time). I wouldn't be surprised if he had a life insurance policy that expired when he turned 60. [35-year-old woman bereaved by the suicide of her father 3 years previously]

My brother decided he was going to take his life within weeks of his 18th birthday, he didn't seem to want to reach adulthood. [23-year-old woman bereaved by the suicide of her brother 6 months previously]

My mother always told the family she would end her life on her 49th birthday. She had told us this all my life up until I was 18 when it happened. [64-year-old man bereaved by the suicide of his mother 46 years previously]

In a minority of cases, the decision of the deceased to end their life on or near their own birthday was thought to hold some symbolism in symmetry.

My dad died by suicide on his 57th birthday, it appears that he wanted the same date of death as date of birth. [24-year-old woman bereaved by the suicide of her father 4 years previously]

Around the birthday of a friend/relative of the deceased. Beyond deaths occurring on or near a person's own birthday, suicide deaths were also perceived to have occurred on or near the birthdays of others known to the deceased (n=36/81; 44.4%). Examples included:

My brother took his life a couple of days before my birthday. [36-year-old woman bereaved by the suicide of her brother 5 years previously]

My wife took her life on our son's birthday. [56-year-old man bereaved by the suicide of his wife 6 months previously]

My father took his own life on the birthday of his own mother. [53-year-old woman bereaved by the suicide of her father 17 years previously]

My mother's suicide happened on my dad's birthday. [33-year-old man bereaved by the suicide of his mother 8 years previously]

It was before [what would have been] the 21st birthday of his brother who committed suicide. [21-year-old woman bereaved by the suicide of a close friend 6 months previously]

Several suicide deaths were reported as having occurred on or near the birthday of a relative who had also died by suicide:

It was my brother's birthday [who had died by suicide 4 years before] when his ex-wife died by suicide. [49-year-old man bereaved by the suicide of ex-sister-in-law 10 years previously]

My cousin's death happened three days before my brother's birthday [who had died by suicide the year before]. [20-year-old woman bereaved by the suicide of her cousin and her brother 1 and 2 years previously]

A common context described for a suicide occurring on or near the birthday of a close contact was interpersonal issues between the deceased and one or more relatives. These included accounts of unresolved break-ups and dependent or complicated relationships, as well as situations of apparent revenge and/or intention to hurt the bereaved.

My mum died on my brother's birthday as he rejected her again. [26-year-old woman bereaved by the suicide of her mother 6 months previously]

He committed suicide on her [ex-wife's] birthday which we interpret as deliberate so she would never forget. [53-year-old woman bereaved by the suicide of her brother-in-law (unknown time since loss)]

Suicides linked to death anniversaries

A total of 62 deaths by suicide out of 205 (30.2%) were reported to have occurred on or near death anniversaries. Such suicide deaths on bereavement anniversaries were most commonly reported on the first anniversary but also on anniversaries up to 17 years after the death. Examples included:

My first brother died by suicide on 15th March age 21 and my second brother died by suicide on 12th March aged 15 years on weekend of his older brother's anniversary. [48-year-old woman bereaved by the suicide of her brothers 18 and 17 years previously]

His son took his life on his first-year anniversary. [31-year-old man bereaved by the suicide of his cousin 12 years previously and his uncle 13 years previously]

My ex-partner's suicide happened on the 1-year anniversary of his younger brother's death who committed suicide the year previous aged 28. [40-year-old woman bereaved by the suicide of her ex-partner 3 years previously]

My daughter that died in 2008, it was 4 days before her sister's first anniversary of her death. [67-year-old woman bereaved by the suicides of her daughters 9 and 10 years previously]

My mother's suicide is related to the death anniversary of her husband who died two years previously on 30 May. She died on 2 July. [54-year-old woman bereaved by the suicide of her mother 6 months previously]

A lad from the army [killed] himself due to marital breakdown and 12 months later his 17-year-old son [died], who couldn't live without him. [42-year-old man bereaved by the suicide of his colleague (time since loss unknown)]

Similarly, as for suicide deaths on or near birthdays, a common context described for suicides around the death anniversary of a close contact was interpersonal issues between the deceased and one or more relatives.

My husband's brother took his life soon after the [first] anniversary of my husband's death. He was upset that I had not included him on my husband's headstone. Their relationship had not always been close, and he had suffered with mental health issues for many years so I did not feel responsible, but it was very difficult for the whole family. [62-year-old woman bereaved by the suicide of her husband and her brother-in-law 11 and 10 years previously]

I understand from others that our friend committed suicide a year after a friend of his also committed suicide. We speculate that there may have been a secret gay relationship between them, which would have been an issue for their Muslim families.

[47-year-old woman bereaved by the suicide of her friend (time since loss unknown)]

One participant reported the death of his best friend's mother, who had died by suicide on the first anniversary of her son's suicide. He explained that this woman had wanted to gain an insight into the experience of her son.

She died on the [first] anniversary of his death; she left a note to me explaining that she wanted to know how he had felt as he died. [31-year-old man bereaved by the suicide of his best friend's mother 8 years previously]

Suicides linked to other significant dates

A total of 49 out of 205 (23.9%) deaths by suicide were reported to have occurred on or near other types of significant dates, including Christmas ($n=18/49$; 36.7%), wedding celebrations ($n=9/49$; 18.4%), Father's or Mother's Day ($n=6/49$; 12.2%) and, more rarely, St. Valentine's Day ($n=3/49$; <5%). One account provided was of a husband and wife dying by suicide on the same day around the time of a key religious festival.

My friend took her life at Christmas, which was a time of year which had a lot of negative associations. [69-year-old man bereaved by the suicide of his friend 1 year previously]

My son's death took place on Valentine's Day. [53-year-old woman bereaved by the suicide of her son 2 years previously]

After my father's suicide, my brother always struggled on the anniversary of my father's death, and my mum and dad's wedding anniversary. He committed suicide on their 40th wedding anniversary [15 years after the father's suicide]. [41-year-old man bereaved by the suicide of his father (time since death unknown) and his brother 15 years later]

On Mothers' Day, my friend killed himself I think because he still loved his wife who had divorced him but was trying to take away his rights to see his children. [18-year-old woman bereaved by the suicide of her friend (time since loss unknown)]

Coinciding perceived significant dates

In a few cases ($n=8/205$; 3.9%), the participants identified a combination of significant dates that they felt may have been of relevance to the timing of suicide of their friend/relative. One individual reported the suicide of a relative as having occurred in the same week as two family birthdays, a wedding anniversary, and another cultural festival, describing this as "a real slap in the face." Most described two or three significant dates around the time of the death.

Her birthday would have been 5 days later. Christmas was coming and there may have been other things that brought on a crisis. She was being treated for her mental health.

[80-year-old woman bereaved by the suicide of her granddaughter 1 year previously]

Ambiguous date categories

A few participants ($n=5/205$; 2.4%) expressed uncertainty about the nature of relevance of any links between the death of their friend/relative and the date of their suicide. Some were unsure whether their friend/relative had intended to die on that specific date and were uncertain about whether they might be over-interpreting any significance of the date, acknowledging that they might be trying to create meaning to address uncertainty.

My cousin's death was possibly related to the anniversary of the death of an uncle that he looked up to, but we don't know as we don't have confirmed date of death. [36-year-old woman bereaved by the suicide of her cousin 6 months previously]

He died on New Year's Day although nobody knows whether this was significant for him. [38-year-old woman bereaved by the suicide of her friend 5 years previously]

I've since found out my brother who took his own life told my other brother he didn't think he'd make it past 50 (but wasn't specific) and he took his life one month before his 50th birthday (although we do not know if this is coincidence or not). [43-year-old woman bereaved by the suicide of her brother 6 months previously]

The uncertainty that some had about any significance to the date of the suicide was reported as a source of distress, involving rumination about potential explanations.

My son died on Father's Day. The fact that my father also suicided [6 years before] made things worse. There was no evidence that there was a link of the date. But I can't help but think there might be. Mental torture. [58-year-old man bereaved by the suicide of his son and his father 8 years previously]

Discussion

In this sample of 7,158 respondents to a survey about experiences of suicide bereavement, a small minority ($n=203$; 2.8%) perceived some possible connection of the suicide to a specific date, but the majority (94.8%) did not. Our thematic analysis of free-text responses from these 203 participants, reporting 205 deaths by suicide, identified five main themes capturing the perceived significance of the date of the suicide. As a result, we were able to create a categorization of types of dates thought to have been significant. These socioculturally meaningful events included birthdays (of the deceased or of others in their social network), death anniversaries, other religious or cultural dates (such as Christmas, New Year, Father's or Mother's Day) and combinations of significant dates. Some

responses were ambiguous and we were not able to include them in any of the above categories. The occurrence of suicide deaths on anniversaries applied to those falling even many years after the loss, highlighting the long periods of time over which anniversary effects might operate. Responses from some participants conveyed a sense of possible mechanisms underlying the occurrence of suicides on significant dates, including interpersonal conflict, revenge and identification with the friend/relative who died by suicide.

First, we must acknowledge that our results are based on the perspectives of individuals bereaved by suicide in relation to their subjective experience of time and what this meant to the deceased. There should therefore be interpreted in that context. Epidemiologists tend to focus on time as an absolute, mathematical construct, expressing time as a risk factor in relation to specific measurable points. Bereaved individuals can experience time as distorted, depending on the meaning-making ascribed to certain time periods, and this might influence their perception of time points (or time periods) of great salience to the deceased (Owens et al., 2008). Our results may actually reflect how individuals cope with loss and contextualize their experience rather than the drivers for the individual who died by suicide. While some time points suggested as influencing a suicidal act may seem less plausible than others, we should respect the bereaved as the best judges of relevance, as they are closest to the deceased and have an in-depth understanding of the situation. Furthermore, making meaning after experiencing a loss due to suicide is a complex process of reconstruction, with the bereaved striving to piece together the shattered biographies of both their loved one and themselves (Owens et al., 2008). This involves considering many possible explanations for why the suicide occurred, including reflecting on the timing of the death, which may feel a more comfortable and less modifiable explanation.

The findings of our qualitative study are consistent with those from epidemiological studies finding suicide risk to be elevated around significant dates. These include two studies set in Japan (Matsubayashi & Ueda, 2016; Stickley et al., 2016) and one set in England and Wales (Williams et al., 2011) that reported a higher suicide mortality on birthdays. Such work also shows that risk applies to the days before the birthday and the days afterwards, with risk highest on the actual birthday (Stickley et al., 2016). This provides support for the "birthday blues" hypothesis that predicts excess deaths on birthdays (Williams et al., 2011). In England and Wales, an increased risk of suicide is observed on the exact birthday for males in the general population and the clinical population, especially for those aged 35 years and older (Williams et al., 2011). However, studies in settings such as Germany show no excess suicide risk around birthdays (Reulbach et al., 2007).

Regarding suicide risk around death anniversaries, four studies have investigated suicide mortality risk during anniversary periods after bereavement (Barker et al., 2014a, 2014b; Bunch & Barraclough, 1971; Grotta et al., 2023), of which three reported an increased risk for suicide mortality on death anniversaries (Barker et al., 2014a, 2014b; Bunch & Barraclough, 1971; Grotta et al., 2023). In contrast, in a population-based Danish study of suicide-bereaved individuals of all ages, which amalgamated all death and birth anniversary periods within the first five years after the death, no increased suicide mortality was identified during anniversary periods compared to intervening periods (Pitman et al., 2023). However, findings from a Danish population-based study of offspring bereaved by a parent's suicide found that suicide risk was elevated on reaching the age that a parent died by suicide (Logeswaran et al., 2025). Regarding calendar dates of cultural significance, increased suicide mortality has been reported at Christmas and New Year in Australia (Barker et al., 2014a, 2014b) and Denmark (Jessen & Jensen, 1999), while lower rates around Christmas were reported in Austria (Plöderl et al., 2015) and Sweden (Hadlaczky & Hökby, 2018).

The participants in our study sometimes speculated that suicide deaths around significant dates were potentially related to interpersonal issues, particularly interpersonal conflicts or a desire for revenge following the end of a romantic relationship. This can be understood within the framework of the Interpersonal Theory of Suicide, which encompasses the construct of thwarted belongingness (Joiner et al., 2009; Van Orden et al., 2010). The feelings of rejection that follow the dissolution of a romantic relationship or the death of a partner, especially by suicide, may engender a sense of thwarted belongingness, especially when the level of commitment to the relationship was high (Love et al., 2018). This may contribute to suicidal behavior, with specific dates providing a focus for rumination. This can also be understood in the context of the Integrated Motivational-Volitional (IMV) Model of Suicidal Behavior, in which factors such as a sense of thwarted belongingness drive the emergence of suicidal thoughts, and factors such as impulsivity, imagery, and fearlessness about death drive the transition to suicidal behavior (O'Connor & Kirtley, 2018). An anniversary or a key event in the cultural calendar may serve as an aversive reminder of a past interpersonal crisis, and rumination about this abandonment may drive this transition to suicide attempt.

To the best of our knowledge, this study represents the first qualitative investigation to assess the views of the social networks of people who have died by suicide regarding the potential significance of the date of suicide death. We analyzed data from a large national survey of people bereaved by suicide to elicit their perspectives about potential significance of death dates. This was an open survey in which we were unable to

determine the bereaved denominator among those invited to participate. However, the proactive recruitment approach increased the reach of the survey to men, who tend to be under-represented in surveys of this kind, and to those not seeking support. Our dataset involved a national sample recruited using channels that went beyond academic audiences, including social media, delegates at a suicide bereavement conference attended by those with lived experience, and further snowball sampling through suicide and mental health related organizations. Moreover, the sampling and recruitment was led by an individual with lived experience of suicide loss, utilizing their networks. We note that those responding included bereaved relatives and friends but also those bereaved by client death in the course of their clinical work, demonstrating the wide impact of suicide loss. As the survey was intended to elicit data on bereaved individuals' experiences in general, with the aims of this current study obscured, response bias based on views about significant dates was minimized. Our analytic team represented a broad range of clinical, research and lived experience, and discussions were used to challenge each other's interpretations of the data, improving the validity of our classification. Our data-driven analysis helped develop codes and themes that captured aspects of respondents' meaning-making around the suicide of a close contact, including, in some cases their beliefs about the factors explaining why they had died on a particular day.

Regarding limitations, we acknowledge the potential for recall bias in this cross-sectional survey, in that participants had spent time (over 10 years for 44.3% of the sample) trying to make sense of the loss. Interestingly, all of the participants who responded to this question were close to the deceased (e.g. family members, in-laws and friends). However, the survey also collected information from some professionals who probably did not know the deceased (e.g. the police). This may have resulted in a low response rate to this question and an underreporting of some relevant cases. It is also possible that the specific question posed may have induced meaning-making regarding significant dates only in the course of answering this survey. This does not, however, invalidate participants' views. We acknowledge that our sample may have over-represented those who were more psychologically impacted by the loss, and more likely to seek meaning in dates, and therefore we may have over-ascertained cases where the date was perceived to be significant. Finally, our analysis represents our interpretation of survey respondents' interpretation of a social contact's intentions and actions in the lead up to their death, introducing layers of subjectivity. Moreover, it must be acknowledged that only one author (EL) completed the process of retrieving eligible data and formally coding them in the first stages of the qualitative analysis. The whole team was, however, involved in the initial stage of familiarization with the data, and in later

stages of discussion the coding and agreeing an initial coding framework, as well as subsequent iterations of this framework. Despite these limitations, this dataset and our analysis represents the best means available currently of understanding the views of key informants.

Further work is needed to triangulate the views captured in a survey of this kind with collateral from other members of the social network, including using more in-depth qualitative interviews to probe perceptions about the significance of dates of suicide. Although only a small proportion of suicide deaths were considered by bereaved individuals to be related to significant dates, our findings suggest that clinicians, bereavement practitioners and other members of the support network should be more aware of significant dates as potential temporal risk factors for suicide among individuals who feel suicidal. This particularly applies to the largest group represented in this dataset, those who died on or near their birthday. Inquiry about what someone is planning to do to mark their birthday can be very revealing, particularly for those who feel they have fallen short of an aspired life trajectory, and may identify suicidal planning. For those who have experienced bereavement, another substantial category represented in this dataset, inquiry about identification with the deceased and/or fantasies of reunion might help identify increased risk (Jones et al., 2025). Factors in the history will suggest key risk periods for specific groups, such as those who find cultural festivals such as Christmas or Mother's Day particularly challenging, the lead up to Remembrance Day for the Armed Forces community, or reaching the age of a deceased parent for those who have experienced traumatic parental loss. For all these groups, consideration must be given as to how to support them appropriately to mitigate risk factors for suicide, whether clinical, social or psychological. It is therefore important to use careful history-taking, as part of the process of therapeutic risk assessment (Hawton et al., 2022), to identify significant dates in a vulnerable individual's calendar (e.g. anniversaries or birthdays) or life course (e.g. a target suicide date). Support offered in the lead up to such dates might include considering appropriate ways to mark the day in a positive way and what practical and emotional support might be most appropriate in the anticipation of a difficult period (and its aftermath). Provision of support should acknowledge that for those who find anniversaries difficult, it is not only the initial anniversary that is distressing but also those up to many years after the loss. Individuals likely to need bereavement support around anniversaries should be sign-posted to available support, with advice on this provided by organizations such as The Compassionate Friends (2021). For example, Suicide Bereavement UK have developed the 'At Your Side' guides for the Armed Force community bereaved by suicide (Suicide Bereavement UK, 2024). This acknowledges the difficulty of navigating the lead-up to significant

dates and provides veteran-sensitive guidance on how to cope with the negative emotions in anticipation of such occasions. More generally, our findings highlight the importance of clinicians being aware of temporal influences on suicide risk, which are seen strikingly at the population level in relation to seasonality (Christodoulou et al., 2012) and at the individual level in relation to specific salient dates. Whilst specific salient dates are likely to be of less importance than well-established risk factors for suicide such as untreated psychiatric illness, pain or substance use, these might have multiplicative effects around specific dates. Having some understanding of the personal meaning of calendar milestones for patients with sociodemographic and clinical risk factors for suicide appears to be important as part of suicide prevention.

Conclusion

The findings of this qualitative study of 203 UK-based individuals bereaved by suicide provide a unique perspective on how they perceive the potential significance of the date of a suicide of someone known to them. The types of dates identified as significant included birthdays (of the deceased or of members of their social network), death anniversaries, other culturally significant dates (such as Christmas, New Year's Eve, Valentine's Day or Mother's or Father's Day), as well as periods in which significant dates coincided. Where death anniversaries were thought to be significant, these included not only on the first anniversary of a loss but sometimes those years afterwards. Participants commonly expressed uncertainty regarding the relevance of dates, and this attempt at meaning-making appeared to be distressing for some. Our findings suggest that it is crucial for formal and informal support networks, including friends, family, colleagues in support networks, to be more aware of significant dates among individuals who feel suicidal, particularly those approaching a difficult birthday or coping with a death anniversary, and consider how to support them appropriately to prevent suicide attempt.

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Author contribution statement

EL: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing—original draft. IH: Methodology; Data curation, Formal analysis; Writing - review & editing. SF: Investigation; Validation;

Writing—review & editing. AP: Conceptualization; Methodology; Supervision; Validation; Writing—original draft. SM: Funding acquisition; Project administration; Investigation; Resources, Supervision; Validation; Writing—review & editing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Informed consent statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Institutional review board statement

Ethical approval for the primary study was obtained from the University of Manchester Research Ethics Committee (reference number: 2017-1818-2599). The current study was covered by the ethical approval for the primary study.

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Data availability statement

The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the first author, EL, on reasonable request.

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