

# The call you don't hear



MATT FIELD KINDER MRT  
RESCUE BENEVOLENT FUND AMBASSADOR



As I write this, on World Suicide Prevention Day (Wednesday 10 September), I find myself looking back almost twenty years to the struggles that twice brought me to the edge...

That truth often stops people. They expect accounts of rescues, crag fasts, or long nights wading through peat. They rarely expect a mountain rescuer to say, 'I survived suicide, twice.' Yet if we are committed to saving lives on the hill, we must also be committed to protecting the lives of those who go there to save others. Suicide is an unseen danger because it hides in familiar places: the banter in a Land Rover, the 'I'm fine' text on WhatsApp, the teammate who never misses a call-out, but slips quietly away from the group photo.

## MY JOURNEY, AND WHAT HELPED ME RECOVER

My struggles began long before I joined mountain rescue. Life pressures, unresolved issues and the belief that coping meant hiding everything drove me into darkness more than once. I wore competence like armour and mistook silence for strength. On the outside I looked steady. Inside, I felt trapped.

After my first attempt, I convinced myself I could cope, but I was not ready to accept help. A year later, I found myself back in the same healthcare setting, this time knowing that I had to change my outlook.

The initial turning point came when I finally accepted professional support. A mental health team listened without judgement and offered practical tools. They showed me I did not have to face everything alone. The silence I had carried for so long began to loosen. Recovery was never neat. It was uneven, often painfully slow, but it was possible. And it still continues today, one day at a time.

That was the treatment phase. A decade later came the deeper work. Stuff still was not right. A conversation with a teammate

introduced me to a psychotherapist. This specialist guided me through the events that had shaped me, exploring not only the impact on myself, but also on those around me. Over two years we faced the triggers head on. It was the hardest period of my life, but running was no longer an option.

For years I had spoken of this only in therapy. That changed on a late Saturday afternoon at Crowden during the PDMRO Foundation Course. It was one of those long sessions when many students were struggling to stay awake. Having been asked to give a short talk on the risks of ignoring mental wellbeing, I had not planned to reveal much about myself, but when I stood up the words came out:

'Hi, my name is Matt, and I am a two-times suicide survivor.'

In that moment something changed. For the first time I was no longer carrying the weight alone. Speaking openly in front of friends and peers was frightening, but it brought relief and gave others permission to speak as well. From then on recovery became less about endurance and more about connection: teammates who checked in, a culture that allowed me to pause when needed, and the reassurance that honesty strengthens our place in rescue rather than weakens it.

## WHY THIS MATTERS TO MOUNTAIN RESCUE

We are part of the wider blue light community, even though most of us are volunteers. We witness things few others ever see, shoulder burdens that often go unnoticed, and do so while managing jobs, families, and the constant pull of the SARCALL ping. The media celebrate bravery and independence, but that same image can make openness difficult. Add

fatigue, workplace stress, winter pressures and financial strain, and you have a combination that increases the risk of poor mental health, even if it never shows in team photographs.

Talking about suicide is not about putting ideas in people's minds. When handled carefully, it reduces risk. Research shows that responsible, open and non-graphic conversations encourage people to seek help. Silence does not protect us; it keeps us stuck.

If you are reading this and something inside you whispers, 'That is me', please know this: I have stood where you are standing, and I am still here. The mountains will be there tomorrow. You can be too.

## SUICIDE RISK IN THE BLUE-LIGHT COMMUNITY: WHAT WE KNOW

Suicide touches every part of society, but evidence shows that those working in emergency services face particular risks. Recent figures highlight concerning patterns across police, ambulance and fire services, underlining the importance of open conversations and tailored support.

- **Police:** The National Police Chiefs' Council recorded 27 suspected suicides among serving and former officers and staff in a single year (February 2024 to January 2025). Earlier figures noted around 80 suspected suicides between 2021 and 2024.
- **Ambulance staff:** UK studies reveal higher levels of suicidal thoughts and attempts, compared with the general population. A 2022 review for NHS ambulance trusts confirmed an increased risk.
- **Firefighters:** Office for National Statistics data from 2011-2018 recorded suicides among serving firefighters. International

research consistently shows elevated risk in fire services compared with baseline populations.

## WHY THE RISK IS HIGHER

The higher risk in the emergency services does not come from one cause, but from a combination of pressures that build over time. The qualities that make people effective in these roles — resilience, responsibility, determination — can also make it harder to admit when things are not right. When you add trauma, fatigue and organisational strain, the weight can become overwhelming.

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## IF YOU NEED SUPPORT NOW OR AFTER A DIFFICULT CALL-OUT...

The first step is often to talk with someone you trust in your own team. Speaking to a teammate, a section leader or your wellbeing lead can feel daunting, but many of us find relief once the words are spoken. At the same time, you may not want to share something so personal so close to home, and that is completely valid. What matters most is feeling able to reach out. If talking within the team feels too difficult, there are confidential services available day and night, ready to listen and help.

- **Samaritans 24/7:** 116 123 (free) or visit [samaritans.org](https://www.samaritans.org)
- **Shout (text support, 24/7):** Text SHOUT to 85258
- **GP/NHS 111** (urgent mental health option)

## FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE:

- Exposure to trauma (violent deaths, serious injury, child fatalities)
- Shift work and fatigue, disrupting sleep and mood regulation
- High responsibility with limited control, leading to moral injury
- Stigma around seeking help, reinforced by cultures of stoicism
- Work and family conflict from long hours and irregular schedules
- Financial and organisational pressures, especially for volunteers who bear personal costs.



## WELLBEING INFORMATION

Being a mountain or cave rescue volunteer can be mentally and physically stressful. Sometimes we can struggle to cope. It's important to seek help if you feel that you or one of your colleagues need it.

## USEFUL CONTACTS AT A GLANCE:

**Togetherall:** To register, see opposite and go to: [togetherall.com](https://togetherall.com)

**The Samaritans:** Call **116 123** for 24/7 confidential emotional support

**Blue Light Together:**  
[BlueLightTogether.org](https://bluelighttogether.org)

**Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide:** For adults affected by suicide, go to [uksobs.org](https://uksobs.org) or call **0300 111 5065**

**CALM: National Helpline for Men:** Call **0800 58 58 58**

**MIND Mental Health Charity:** Call Infoline: **0300 123 3393** Monday – Friday 09:00–18:00 (except for bank holidays).

**Rescue Benevolent Fund:** Email [secretary@rescuebenevolent.fund](mailto:secretary@rescuebenevolent.fund) or go to [rescuebenevolent.fund](https://rescuebenevolent.fund)

**MREW Wellbeing** on MREW website: [mrew-wellbeing.org.uk](https://mrew-wellbeing.org.uk)

## FANCY BECOMING A RESCUE BENEVOLENT FUND AMBASSADOR?

**Judy Whiteside** explains how... When we started out, in 2013, it made sense to follow the already familiar and well-established 'regional' structure with 'reps' appointed by their regions. In practice, this didn't work — not so much a lack of interest, more a reluctance for already busy people to take on another yet another 'responsibility' within their region.

So, earlier this year, the Fund trustees changed the structure and now invite ANYONE (irrespective of region) who has an interest in wellbeing, to help us spread the word about how the fund can help team members in need, when they need it. And we are happy to have more than one ambassador per region — or even team!

There's no remuneration, it's entirely voluntary, and any meetings we call are conducted online. The idea is that you liaise with those within your own team and region — the people you are close to and work with as rescuers — and feed back into us, as trustees. All we ask is that ambassadors are willing to assist potential beneficiaries in making applications to the Fund, and help promote the Fund to the wider mountain

and cave rescue community, encouraging those team members and their families who need support to make appropriate applications. Essentially, help us promote the Fund to a wider audience.

We also ask that all our ambassadors ensure that any information shared with them is regarded as confidential

irrespective of outcome (unless the applicant has expressly given their permission).

If you do fancy becoming an ambassador, please email me via [secretary@rescuebenevolent.fund](mailto:secretary@rescuebenevolent.fund) to chat some more. Look forward to welcoming you to our merry band! ☺



We can all need help sometimes. Don't be embarrassed to ask for it.