

Suicide Response Resources

Suicide in schools: information for families

Exposure to suicide can be a traumatic experience

It can have a profound emotional effect not only on family and friends, but on students, school staff, families and the whole community.

Here's some information that may help you as you support a young person during this difficult time.

How young people respond to suicide

How a young person responds to a suicide is influenced by their age, developmental stage, personality, relationship with the deceased person and what's happening in their life.

There isn't a standard response to suicide but there are a range of normal grief-related reactions that young people may experience.

These include:

- shock, disbelief, confusion or numbness
- guilt or blame
- sadness and feelings of betrayal or abandonment
- experiencing anxiety, fears or nightmares
- preoccupation with thoughts of the person who has died, and trying to make sense of the death and understand why it happened
- withdrawal from others
- irritability, anger or aggression
- difficulty concentrating
- changes to sleep patterns, appetite, energy and enjoyment of usual activities.

Young people need to find safe ways to express their feelings, whatever their age. Parental understanding, reassurance and attention are very important at this time. Be guided by the young person's need to talk and make it clear that you will be available whenever they need you.

Young people who have experienced other stressful situations in their lives may find it harder to cope.

It can be harder for children who have experienced other stressful situations or trauma in their lives like separation or parental divorce, the death of a relative or pet, or moving house or school to cope with suicide. The death may trigger difficult feelings about these events and make coping with the death itself more difficult.

If a young person is already using the services of a psychologist or psychiatrist, inform them of the suicide.

Some reactions can happen weeks, months or a year after the suicide.

If you're concerned about your young person's reaction and behaviour (such as changes in their socialising or school work) it is important to speak to the principal, a student counsellor or a general practitioner (GP). This may result in a referral to a counsellor for a mental health or risk assessment.

What young people need to know

The school will provide students with information about the incident, but young people may want to know exactly what happened.

Details about the way a suicide occurred will not be given to students as this information is potentially harmful to their wellbeing. As family members, it's important to steer discussion towards positive help-seeking actions that young people can take when they're struggling. This includes talking to a trusted adult, such as a parent, counsellor, teacher, relative or friend.

Asking for help

Encouraging young people to ask for help is important in any discussion about suicide.

Young people sometimes share their feelings about death with friends – in conversations, letters, emails, text messages and online. If they suspect a friend may be about to hurt themselves, they should tell an adult immediately.

Responding to community concern with respect

Suicide can have a profound emotional effect not only on family and friends, but on the whole community.

When you speak with other members of the community:

- respect the bereaved family
- take care not to give the impression that suicide was a positive outcome for the young person
- encourage help-seeking behaviours in young people.

What to do about media coverage

Research has shown that the way suicide is reported in the media is important. Some types of media coverage can increase the risk of suicide in vulnerable people.

You may decide to protect your family against some media coverage or you may choose to watch the news together. By watching the news together, you can discuss any concerns and ensure everyone feels supported.

Managing the media

The media may approach family members for comment after a youth suicide, even if you don't have any connection to the young person who died.

It's important to understand that you're under no obligation to speak to the media. If you feel like speaking it's important to keep your comments brief and reinforce these principles about the reporting of suicide:

- Highlight the complexity of suicide. Suicide isn't the result of a single factor or event. Most people who die by suicide have had a history of difficulties that they may not get reported in the aftermath of the suicide.
- Encourage reporters to raise public awareness about the risk factors and warning signs of suicide as well as the actions that can be taken to help a suicidal person.
- Encourage reporters to provide their readers or listeners with information about local support services, local mental health services and crisis support contacts.
- Tell the media not to publish pictures of the death scene or distressed mourners.
- Focus on how the suicide has impacted the school community.

It's best to avoid:

- PROVIDING details about the method of suicide.
- GLAMOURISING the victim or the suicide itself. Take care not to give the impression that suicide was a positive outcome for the young person.

Seek advice from the school before speaking to the media. If you've already spoken to the media, it's important to inform the school.

Understand that school staff will also be affected

While everyone will be working towards returning school routines to normal, some staff will be managing difficult emotions.

Adult counselling support is available to all school staff through education departments and other relevant bodies.

Be aware of social media activity

After a suicide, young people are likely to turn to social media for a variety of purposes.

They might send news about the death (accurate and rumoured), post messages (appropriate and inappropriate), call for impromptu gatherings and create virtual memorials.

It's important to talk with your young person about social media activity and how it might impact on them. Talk to them about how to manage this and negotiate boundaries around their use of social media if necessary.

If you're concerned about messages you see or hear about on social media, let someone know. This could be school staff, local authorities or emergency services.

For more information and help

The **Beyond Blue support service** provides support any time of the day or night. To talk with a trained mental health professional, please call 1300 22 4636.

headspace centres provide support, information and advice to young people aged 12–25: [headspace.org.au](https://www.headspace.org.au)

Kids Helpline is a 24-hour telephone and online counselling service for young people aged five to 25: 1800 55 1800 [kidshelpline.com.au](https://www.kidshelpline.com.au)

Lifeline is a 24-hour telephone counselling service: 13 11 14 [lifeline.org.au](https://www.lifeline.org.au)

Suicide Call Back Service is a 24-hour service that provides telephone, video and online counselling: 1300 659 467 [suicidecallbackservice.org.au](https://www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au)

Your general practitioner (GP)

A psychologist or counsellor
(your GP can refer you).

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