

**Suicide  
Postvention  
Resources:**

*Section A:  
Immediate  
Response*

# Welcome to Be You

As an educator, you're all about helping children and young people to flourish. So are we.

# Action Checklist

The list below outlines the key actions that schools can undertake to respond to and recover from a death by suicide. Further detail about these actions is provided throughout the toolkit.

## Section A: Immediate Response

- Contact relevant mental health services for support.
- If the incident happened at school, ensure the immediate safety of staff and young people – for example, provide first aid and call an ambulance and the police. Ensure the scene is secure and any witnesses are moved to an area for support.
- If the incident happened away from school, find out as many of the facts as possible. Investigate rumours immediately. Confirm facts with the family or police.
- Ensure those affected – young people, family and staff – are not left alone. Contact the families of young people and staff.
- Inform the relevant representative at your state or territory education department or equivalent body.
- Contact your Be You Consultant for support and guidance as required.
- Contact the bereaved family. Ask how to refer to the death when informing the school community. If the family agree, use the term 'suicide'.
- Convene the Emergency Response Team (ERT). Refer to your postvention plan or department guidelines, and modify the plan as required for the circumstances.
- Identify any ERT staff who are impacted and need to change responsibilities or opt out of managing the response.
- Inform staff – in person if possible. Contact staff who aren't on site. Don't talk about or describe the method of suicide.
- Identify and plan support for young people at increased risk of suicide.
- Set up a support room for young people.
- Inform students in small groups via a script. Don't describe the method of suicide. Note any absent students or any students who are very distressed.
- Inform families. Include information relating to help services. Don't describe the method of suicide.

- Inform the wider community as appropriate – for example, other schools or sporting clubs.
- Nominate a media liaison ERT member. Contact the media liaison adviser in the central office of your relevant education authority. Plan a response to any media enquiries.
- Plan a response for social media.
- Ensure staff have support within the school, and access to external professional advice where required.

## Section B: Short Term

- Restore the school to its regular routine.
- Plan the school's involvement in the funeral.
- Continue to identify, monitor, support and assess young people at risk. Develop support plans for impacted and high-risk young people. If necessary, refer them for further mental health support.
- Monitor any memorial sites and communicate with young people about any required changes to processes or activities. For offsite memorials, liaise with the police if you have concerns.
- Organise regular staff meetings. Communicate updated information and provide a space for concerns or questions.
- Ensure staff have support within the school, and access to external professional advice where required.
- Keep families informed about supports offered at school, changes in routines or activities and supportive resources.
- Collect all the belongings of the deceased student for the police and family.
- Continue to monitor staff and young people's wellbeing, and review your list of at-risk students.
- Consider the impact of the suicide on the planning for school events like yearbook photographs, award nights, graduation and reports.
- Conduct a critical incident review.
- Consider facilitating an information session for families.
- Continue to document all the school's postvention activities and actions.

## Section C: Longer Term

- Continue to support and monitor young people.
- Continue to support and monitor staff.
- Keep families, staff and young people informed about the school's ongoing response and recovery.
- Plan for important events and anniversaries.
- Implement recommendations from the critical incident review.
- Include the postvention plan in staff inductions.
- Continue to document all the school's postvention activities and actions.

# Section A: *Immediate Response*

# Steps to follow

## Look after your own wellbeing

### **Managing a postvention plan can be stressful and tiring.**

It's important to look after your mental health during this emergency phase. Take time to breathe, consider the priorities for action and make decisions with other members of the ERT. No-one should carry the responsibility for decisions by themselves.

## If the suicide has happened at school

### **Ensure the immediate safety of all school staff and students.**

- Administer first aid when necessary.
- Call 000 for emergency services.
- Alert the Emergency Response Team (ERT).

## Isolate the site of the suicide

- Limit access to the site by students and unauthorised staff with screens, by blocking corridors and using evacuation procedures.
- Don't remove items or disturb the area, which police will need to examine.
- Do everything possible to protect others from viewing the site.

Follow your school's emergency and critical incident management protocols as appropriate.

## Support witnesses

### **If any students witnessed the death, a nominated ERT member should:**

- move them to a safe location
- arrange for them to be supervised and supported by a member of staff
- contact their family and inform them of the situation
- liaise with police regarding statements or other required actions
- give the young person the option of being collected by their family
- offer them support from a mental health professional.

### **If any staff members witnessed the death, the ERT member should:**

- move them to a safe location
- arrange for them to be supported by another member of staff and a mental health professional if required
- liaise with police regarding statements or other required actions
- offer them relief from their duties for the day and check what support is available to them outside the school.

## If the incident happened away from school

- Confirm the death and establish the facts.
- Don't ignore rumours, notes, emails or messages about suicide from young people, families or staff. Follow these up immediately.
- Verify reports of suicide that don't come from immediate family members through the police, hospital staff or, with sensitivity, the family.
- If information is determined to be incorrect then provide accurate information to contain and dispel rumours.

## Ensure that affected young people and staff aren't left alone

Anyone immediately affected by a suicide death should be supported in a safe and secure place until family members arrive to support them. Note that family members may need assistance to know how to support the affected person. Provide them with resources and contact details for support services.

## Inform the relevant education department or governing body

Seek support and consultation from your education department or governing body.

Contact the Be You team who can provide onsite, phone or email support and guidance for your school.

Contact details for each state and territory team can be found [here](#).

## Liaise with the bereaved family

**Contact with the family is the responsibility of one staff member only.**

This role requires sensitivity and compassion, given the grief the family will be experiencing.

Consider who's best placed to undertake this in light of their relationship with the family, the degree to which they're impacted by the death and how comfortable they are to take on this role. It is usually undertaken by the principal or a senior staff member who doesn't have a personal relationship with the bereaved family. Holding both a personal role and the school liaison role can prove difficult and, in some circumstances, can compromise the professional liaising that needs to occur. It can also negatively impact the staff member's grieving process.

There may be great variation in the accessibility of the family and their capacity and willingness to communicate. This may be influenced by the family's pre-existing relationship with the school, cultural or religious practices regarding death and suicide, and whether there are siblings attending the school. In some circumstances, the family may ask (or you could request, if they're too distressed to talk) an extended family member to liaise with the school on their behalf.

**This early liaison with the family is important to:**

- offer the condolences of the school
- offer support and liaison with the school, including providing information about the school's postvention plan
- provide contact details for external support services
- ascertain if the school community can be informed and if the death can be referred to as a suicide.

**It's also important to request permission to recontact the family over the coming days**

This contact may:

- alert them of potential or scheduled media contact
- determine details about the funeral or memorial service and their wishes regarding the school's representation at it
- discuss and arrange support for siblings attending the school.

# Other things to consider during the immediate response

## Using the word 'suicide'

If the family has confirmed that the young person has died, it's important for legal and ethical reasons to seek their permission to refer to the death as a suicide. Even if they're using the word suicide, you can't assume that they're providing permission for this information to be shared with the school community.

Some families will not wish for the death to be referred to as a suicide at all, or they might acknowledge the death was by suicide to the ERT but not wish for it to be communicated that way to the broader school community. They may request the use of language like 'sad and tragic death' or 'sudden death'.

If the family asks for advice, it's appropriate to talk about the benefits of being able to discuss suicide openly. You can share that research shows that vulnerable young people and school communities are best supported by using clear and accurate information about suicide, mental health conditions, coping strategies and help-seeking, and that being able to talk openly about suicide can help staff and families to support young people impacted by the death.

## Who determines a death is a suicide?

**Deaths by suicide, like all sudden or unexpected deaths, are reported to the coroner.**

The coroner determines that a death is suicide. Their investigations may take time and the bereaved family may choose to refer to the death as suicide prior to formal determination by the coroner.

With permission from the bereaved family, you can communicate to the school community using language such as 'circumstances of the death indicate suicide' or 'suspected suicide'.

## How to refer to the cause of death?

**The family's wishes regarding how to refer to the death must be respected.**

Referring to a death as a suicide without the family's consent can have an adverse effect on the grief of the bereaved. It also poses a possible litigation risk for the school.

However, the language you use is important. It can affect the grief and help-seeking behaviour of those impacted by the death. Wherever possible, it's recommended that you allow for appropriate conversations about suicide as a general topic, particularly if there's speculation among young people about suicide.

This is a very complex situation and there are some important points to note:

- Carefully consider confidentiality and who's informed that the death was a suicide. This may be the ERT only.
- While it can feel uncomfortable to talk about suicide at all without permission, discussing suicide as a general topic is OK and doesn't breach confidentiality. However, you need to avoid confirming whether the young person in question died by suicide.
- For group conversations, you could say, "We have heard young people wondering about whether [student's name] died by suicide. Their family have chosen to keep how they died private and we will be respecting their wishes. We ask you to respect their wishes, too. But given the subject has come up, there's some important information about suicide we'd like to discuss."
- For individual conversations where a student or family member asks directly if the death was by suicide, your response will depend upon your assessment of the situation. It might be enough to simply respond that the person died suddenly or unexpectedly. You might gently contain questioning by reiterating that the family has chosen to keep how the young person died private and the school is respecting their wishes.
- Sometimes a more-detailed response will be required, especially if the person asking is distressed. Keep talking generally about suicide and move the conversation away from specific details. Instead, focus on how the young person is feeling or coping. For example, say "I understand you want to make sense of how [student's name] died, and it's normal to want to know and understand, but the family have chosen to keep how they died private and we will be respecting their wishes. It's OK to be upset now, and I want to help you as best I can. It would be a good idea to talk to [school wellbeing staff] and to get some more support from them. What do you think?"

- Wellbeing staff can then support the young person's responses and feelings to suspecting or believing that the person died by suicide in a safe and confidential space. Please note: wellbeing staff can discuss the young person's belief that the person died by suicide without breaching confidentiality.
- Ensure staff understand that they can and should bring difficult experiences to the ERT or seek advice before proceeding with a course of action.
- You can update the school community as more information becomes available – for example, if the family decides to refer to the death as a suicide after initially choosing not to.
- You can seek further information and support from your Be You Consultant.

## The impact of suicide on boarding schools

There is an absence of evidence regarding suicide postvention in the boarding school setting. The below recommendations are practice informed.

The impact of a death by suicide can be greatly extended in the boarding school setting due to the multiple communities existing within or connected to the school (for instance, those communities where the students live outside of school terms).

### **To ensure a comprehensive response to a death by suicide in boarding schools, there are four key areas to address:**

- communication between teaching and boarding staff
- supporting boarding students' mental health
- managing the multiple communities making up the school community
- managing risk for all students.

The capacity and ability for boarding staff to provide support to students, particularly after school hours, and the impact of the suicide death on them personally, should also be considered when planning supports for this group.

## Death in school holidays

### **A death by suicide during the school holidays presents additional challenges.**

You might like to consider:

- whether you should respond during the holidays and if this should be done in conjunction with your education department or school's governing body
- whether external services may be more appropriate to respond during school holidays
- facilitating an ERT meeting if possible.

### **If you decide to respond during the school holidays:**

- ensure you work collaboratively with external services who can provide support to young people
- where possible, the same postvention tasks should occur during the school holidays
- contact families to inform them of the death, and outline help-seeking options available for young people and families via your usual communication process. In this communication, it's important to ask families to inform their young person.
- contact by phone the families of those most impacted or at risk directly
- decide on the process for responding to families contacting the school at this time. For example, will a nominated staff member be checking the school phone and responding to enquiries regularly or intermittently? Ensure families are informed of the school's availability and provide external support contact details. This information may be communicated via the school's website or social media accounts.

## Combined primary and secondary schools

### **Children, adolescents and adults all respond to death and express grief differently.**

Children and young people's responses to a death by suicide will depend on their age, developmental stage, personality, connection to the deceased, cognitive capacity, cultural traditions, previous experiences of death, the environment in which they live and the presence of any pre-existing emotional difficulties.

The age range of students and the subsequent different ways they process loss and express grief creates additional complexities and considerations for combined primary and secondary schools. Though details about suicide won't usually be given to primary school-aged students, sometimes children will have this information (for example, they may have heard about it from older siblings or heard about it after information is shared with families). Seek advice from your leadership team on how to manage this.

School staff have experience and expertise talking appropriately to different age groups and should be guided by this, tailoring the information to the child's age and developmental stage.

### **Consider the following:**

- Children at various ages and stages of development will have different understandings of what death means and this will need to be taken into account when providing information. Regardless of how much the information is filtered, it needs to be accurate and consistent. Avoid talking about the death in terms of fairy tales or myths.
- Ideally, the family informs the child about the death. Provide guidance and resources to support families.

- Be prepared for children to ask questions and talk about how they're feeling. It's important that children feel comfortable talking to trusted adults about their worries and uncertainties. Talk in general terms about feelings, focusing on experiences of loss when people or pets have died rather than the specifics of the recent death. This might be difficult as children can be very curious about what has occurred. Share what other people find helpful when they're feeling sad. This will help avoid more complex discussions about suicide. Encourage children to share concerns with their families.
- Children are less likely to articulate their grief in words. Observe and follow up any behavioural or mood changes, and encourage families to do the same.
- You can access and refer to information about grief in younger children and how to talk about death with children (for example, the [Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement](#) has fact sheets about grief and talking about death with children).
- In consultation with the bereaved family, support any bereaved siblings (and significant family members) to return to school.
- If classroom conversations occur, ensure they're safe for all children. Interrupt and redirect conversations when necessary. Conversations that become unsafe for younger children should be redirected to an individual setting, such as with the school counsellor.
- Seek consultation from external services as needed, such as the Be You team, your local child and adolescent mental health services or the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement.

## What is the Emergency Response Team (ERT)?

**The ERT is a group of staff within your school setting who have been identified to respond when a suicide which impacts the school community occurs.**

The ERT may already be established (in the case of postvention planning work being completed in your school setting) or might convene in response to a suicide event.

It is the responsibility of the ERT to implement an Emergency Response Plan (ER Plan). The ER Plan is a resource kit for the Team to use following a suicide event.

## Convene the Emergency Response Team (ERT)

**Collectively, the team ideally has:**

- experience with critical incident management
- a strong understanding of and experience in student wellbeing, including at least one member of the student wellbeing team
- a strong understanding of and experience in staff wellbeing
- Principal or assistant principal membership
- Knowledge of how the school and community functions

If your school has developed a postvention plan, you will already have identified the members of the ERT. It's important to consider whether nominated staff are appropriate in each circumstance. Staff should have the option to opt out if they're impacted by the death or feel unable to undertake the responsibilities assigned to them.

If you don't have this team in place already, identify the most suitable members as soon as possible. The ERT should meet within 24 hours of the suicide to implement the postvention plan (or establish the plan, if there's not an existing one).

**The ERT should also ensure that:**

- no single member of staff assumes the full burden of responsibility
- the wellbeing of the ERT members is considered
- all members are made aware they can opt out of the ERT at any time.

## Communicate with relevant mental health professionals

**Your school may have access to mental health professionals internally. If not, you can liaise with your Be You consultant to help identify appropriate resources within your local community. The ERT team, including the school wellbeing representative, will also be a good resource in this instance.**

This will also aid the referral process for any young people who are identified as high-risk and in need of additional assessment and mental health support.

**The capacity and scope of mental health professionals differs across regions, however they may be able to work alongside the school to:**

- attend to the needs of affected young people
- assist in the identification of other vulnerable young people
- assess young people who may be at risk
- manage referrals from families and staff
- provide information sessions to students
- communicate and coordinate support with other relevant services
- attend to the immediate counselling needs of affected staff – your school's Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) can also be utilised for this support.

## Planning tip: resource kit

The postvention plan should include a resource kit. Ideally this should be updated every year and include:

- ✓ an up-to-date schedule of classes
- ✓ an up-to-date list of students enrolled
- ✓ emergency telephone numbers of all ERT members
- ✓ emergency telephone numbers of all staff
- ✓ contact details of external mental health professionals or services
- ✓ contact details of key people in the local community such as family groups and religious leaders.

## Planning tip: develop relationships

Postvention collaboration between schools and mental health professionals is greatly enhanced by existing relationships. Consider contacting local services when you develop your postvention plan. This may include mental health professionals from the relevant education body, Be You team members, your local headspace centre and the local child and adolescent mental health service.



## Inform staff

**Ideally, an initial staff briefing should be held before school commences in the morning.**

Please note: in some cases, only the ERT will know that the death was by suicide and it shouldn't be communicated to all staff. However, there may not be enough time to hold this meeting before students have begun to hear the news through word of mouth, text messages or social media. If this happens, the ERT leader should first verify the accuracy of the reports then notify staff of the death through the school's predetermined crisis alert system (via email or calls to classroom phones). Remember that information about the cause of death should be withheld until the family has been consulted.

However, if the student body is speculating about suicide, it's appropriate to acknowledge this and talk about suicide as a general topic. If you're unsure how to do this, talk to the ERT leader or your Be You team.

## Arrange the first staff briefing

**The briefing should occur before students are formally informed but after the ERT have met to implement the postvention plan. The purpose of this briefing is to inform staff of relevant information regarding the suicide and those affected; giving enough detail to enable staff to contain rumours and support young people, but avoiding details of the method of suicide.**

**The first staff briefing should:**

- introduce the ERT
- identify an ERT contact person who staff should go to with any information or questions
- follow a script to inform staff of the suicide. A script ensures information is accurate and communication is consistent (you can find a sample script in the Complete Toolkit). Ensure the wording is adjusted to reflect how the family have requested the death be referred to.
- share the bereaved family's wishes about how it's communicated
- discuss the principals of postvention, including the school's role, the impact of suicide contagion and the importance of ensuring that suicide is neither glamourised nor a topic that can't be discussed
- advise staff to share any information they become aware of with the ERT
- advise staff not ask young people for information about the suicide
- advise staff to forward items of the young person's work to a nominated member of the ERT
- identify an ERT contact person for media enquiries
- explain plans for the coming days at school, including: the location and purpose of a support room; external supports available on site; changes in routine or responsibilities; changes to monitoring and supporting young people, including attendance – all unexplained absences should be followed up immediately, including staff absences; identifying, supporting and referring young people who are vulnerable or at risk; informing students of the death; informing families and the school community of the death; managing internal and external communication to the school community, and how phone enquiries will be managed.

- Identify risk:
  - Brief staff about suicide contagion
  - Brief staff about how to identify students who are distressed or who may be at increased risk of suicide (e.g. provide information on risk factors and warning signs of suicide). Include information about how to support or refer a student, as necessary (see 'Identify Young People at Risk', below).

**Be sure to notify any staff who are on leave or not present at the staff briefing.**

This includes regular casual staff, support staff, canteen staff, tutors, volunteers, sports coaches, out-of-school-hours-care staff, bus drivers and boarding house staff.

**Consider the impact of this news on staff**

Where possible, the most affected staff, or staff with vulnerability, should be informed individually or in small groups. This is particularly important if the young person had been engaged in school counselling. Consider extra supports for these staff members.

Compile a list of all staff members who had close contact with the young person or who may be at high risk of distress for other reasons.

Nominated ERT members should:

- check in with them to see if they need additional support
- organise onsite counselling in an appropriate location
- encourage them to seek appropriate support – this may be internal or external to the school, formal or informal
- arrange for several substitute teachers to be on hand to provide rotating support in case teachers need to take time out of their classrooms or wish to attend the funeral.

The ERT is responsible for monitoring the wellbeing of all staff, and staff absences and support needs. It might be helpful to identify a couple of ERT members to take particular responsibility for this.

**Prepare staff to inform students**

- Provide appropriate staff with a script to use when informing students of the death
- Arrange for an alternative person to read the script for any staff who are unable to manage
- Advise staff not to ask students for information regarding the suicide
- Discuss common or likely student reactions and questions.

**Regular staff briefings**

**Ideally, staff should meet at the beginning and end of the working day following the suicide.**

This allows for:

- communication about relevant information and decisions made by the ERT
- time for staff to provide feedback and ask questions
- time for staff to express their own grief and reactions
- time for the ERT to identify any staff who may need additional support.

This structure also contributes to a sense of collegiality and shared responsibility, which helps protect the wellbeing of staff.

### Staff should be provided with:

- information on grief and how to offer support
- information on how to manage a safe discussion about suicide and signs to watch out for
- sources of support they can access for themselves at school and outside of school
- an option to leave for the day rather than return to work. Ensure staff have appropriate supports if they choose to go home.
- a script if asked to inform students about the death (see a sample script in the Complete Toolkit)
- guidance for front office staff, as families may contact the school about the death before receiving official communication from the school. Front office staff should be guided on how to respond to key questions and distress.
- an option to opt out of tasks if they're feeling distressed or overwhelmed. Don't require staff to inform students of the death if they don't feel able to do this. Staff who had a relationship with the young person may not feel able to support other young people at this time, and alternative staff may need to undertake these responsibilities.

### The end-of-day staff briefing should:

- offer verbal appreciation of staff
- review the day's challenges and successes
- offer opportunities to debrief, share experiences, express concerns and ask questions
- facilitate checking in with staff to assess whether anyone needs additional support
- disseminate any further information regarding the suicide and funeral arrangements
- discuss plans for the next day
- remind staff of the importance of self-care.

## Be You Fact Sheets

- Staff grief after suicide
- Family liaison, funerals and memorials after a suicidee
- Staff wellbeing

## Identify young people at risk

After a suicide, one of your main responsibilities is to ensure the process of identifying, supporting, referring and monitoring at-risk young people is well understood and effective.

**However, remember that it is not the responsibility of education staff to complete risk assessments. These assessments should only be conducted by mental health professionals with clinical training and experience.**

### Some things you can do (in consultation with your Be You consultant) might include:

- developing a list of the most impacted young people, young people who may be at risk of suicide and young people who are vulnerable
- ensuring that all those identified are monitored, supported and their risk considered
- referring anyone considered at high risk of suicide to a mental health professional for further assessment
- ensuring staff are aware of the school's referral processes.

Request a mental health professional or school wellbeing staff member to meet with you to help and guide this work from the outset.

## Which young people may be most impacted and at increased risk?

*This information will help you identify and develop a list of young people who may be most impacted or at increased risk.*

### Who is at risk of suicide?

Research shows that a wide range of biological, psychological and social factors are associated with an increased risk of suicide. Risk factors can be things that can change (for example, substance abuse) or things that can't change (for example, a family history of suicide).

Following a suicide within the school community not only students, but staff and community members may also be at increased risk.

Students, staff and community members may be at increased risk and need additional support if they:

- were close friends of the deceased student
- had a negative interaction with the deceased student
- appear to be in a severe state of distress
- witnessed the death
- display some of the broader risk factors and/or warning signs of suicide.

## Suicide contagion

**Suicide contagion is when one suicidal act within a school, community or geographic area increases the likelihood that others will attempt or die by suicide.**

While it's a rare phenomenon, young people seem to be more vulnerable to suicide contagion than older people. This may be because young people identify more

strongly with their peers and adolescence is a period of increased vulnerability to mental health conditions, which is one of the strongest risk factors for suicide.

One of the factors thought to contribute to suicide contagion is the glamourising or romanticising of suicide that can occur in the process of communicating about a suicide death. This refers to actions or messages that may inadvertently make suicide seem desirable to other vulnerable young people.

It's common for people to remember the positive things about someone who has died recently and to focus less on the difficulties they may have been having prior to their death. While this may be well meaning, it has the potential to encourage suicidal thoughts and behaviour in vulnerable young people. Care needs to be taken not to give the impression that suicide was a positive outcome for the young person.

To reduce the risk of suicide contagion, schools have the important task of ensuring suicide isn't glamoured. However, not speaking about suicide is equally problematic. It can mean that young people miss the opportunity to receive important education about mental health and suicide, and inadvertently discourage people from seeking help.

What's more, suicide contagion is also more likely to occur when observers identify with the deceased, so oversimplified messages about why someone suicided should be avoided. Such messages may contribute to other vulnerable young people's increased identification with the deceased person.

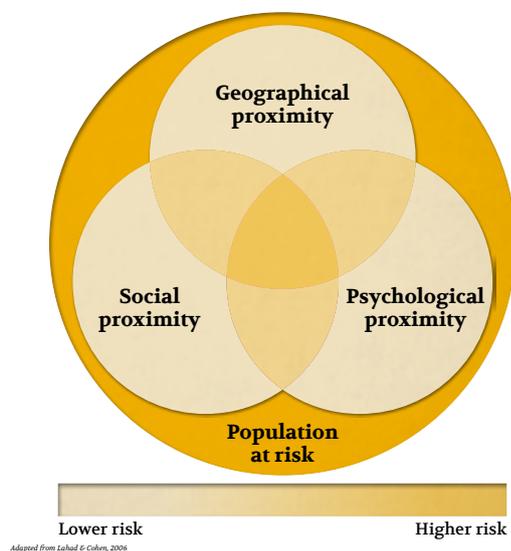
The way the school communicates about suicide is therefore of critical importance.

## Be You Fact Sheets

-  Supporting young people after suicide
-  Grief: how young people respond to suicide

## Who's at risk of suicide contagion?

The Circles of Vulnerability Model can help you to determine the impact of the death on members of your school community.



**A population at risk** refers to those already at risk of suicide (discussed above).

**Geographical proximity** refers to those who witnessed the death, were exposed to it or had contact with the person shortly before they died. Suicide contagion can also occur via the internet, mobile phones and the mass media. Social media can substantially broaden the exposure and impact of the suicide. You might like to consider the [#chatsafe guidelines](#) when thinking about how to manage these platforms.

**Psychological proximity** refers to those who relate to the deceased through cultural connections, shared experiences, or perceive themselves to be similar to the deceased in some way.

**Social proximity** refers to the relationship someone had with the deceased, including family, friends, social circles and romantic partners. It's about how close someone feels to the deceased. Even if they don't appear to have had a relationship with the person who died, a young person's perception of closeness (for example, feeling close to the person because they travelled on the same bus together for years, even if they never spoke) has been found to significantly influence their level of risk.

## List young people who are impacted or already considered at risk

This may include:

- siblings of the deceased
- young people who witnessed the death
- young people with a history of a suicide attempt/s
- young people who are (or have been) accessing mental health services
- young people known to be struggling with grief or trauma related to other events (such as deaths, accidents, catastrophes, family breakdown or emotional, physical or sexual abuse)
- young people in a severe state of distress.

## List young people who may be vulnerable or significantly impacted

**This can be done with the help of staff, students and families, and may include:**

- close friends of the deceased
- the romantic partner of the deceased or persons with a romantic interest in the deceased
- friends or a romantic partner who attend other schools (this may be best followed up by counsellor-to-counsellor communication if the young person is likely to need specialised support)
- friends or acquaintances who communicated with the deceased in any fashion in the hours before their death
- young people expressing guilt about 'messages' they were given by the deceased but didn't act on or share with an adult
- young people who may have had negative interactions with the deceased
- young people who may have been involved in activities with the deceased (such as peer groups, chess club or SRC)
- young people with a perceived closeness to the deceased, even if they don't appear to have had a relationship with them.

## List young people who belong to higher risk groups

Suicide is a difficult topic for many people; however, for young people who belong to an identified high-risk group, additional considerations are required.

When developing your list of young people at risk, consider that those identifying as belonging to the groups discussed below, may or may not be at higher risk.

### It's important that schools:

- create a supportive environment for any young person identified as at higher risk
- encourage and facilitate help-seeking
- don't highlight publicly that those who identify within these groups are at increased risk of suicide; rather, discussions should highlight that minority groups are likely to experience additional stressors.

## Culturally diverse attitudes and beliefs

It's important to consider culturally diverse attitudes and beliefs about suicide – both in the deceased young person's family and among those impacted by the death – and the implications of these, especially in relation to risk. You can seek consultation and advice from the bereaved family, appropriate service providers or community elders about cultural, religious and family practices relevant to the death and grieving process.

It's also helpful to consider and try to mitigate any cultural barriers to help-seeking.

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Between 2013 and 2017, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people made up more than a quarter of all suicide deaths in this age group. It is thus vital to consider the unique needs of this group.

However, there is no current practice-informed guidance to understand how best to support children, young people and community members from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds following a death by suicide. The below provides some general information to consider with respect to these community groups.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities hold well-established cultural beliefs, protocols, customs and practices in relation to death, the deceased and the grieving period after someone passes away. Among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, 'Sorry Business' is the term used to refer to the period of mourning, activities and cultural practices that occur after the loss of a loved one. Adhering to cultural practices and traditions is an important part of grieving and can reduce distress for family, friends and communities affected by grief.

Cultural practices and beliefs in relation to Sorry Business can vary between groups, and may vary depending on the location of the community and where families traditionally come from. Australia is a large nation represented by hundreds of diverse traditional groups, and each group has its own practices, ceremonies and customs. It's important to consider these culturally diverse beliefs when responding to suicide – both in the deceased young person's family and among those impacted by the death – and any implications of these, especially in relation to risk.

### It may be helpful to:

- seek consultation from the bereaved family about their cultural, religious and family practices relevant to the death and their grieving processes
- consider consulting with a cultural elder from the local community for further guidance and understanding
- consider consulting with an external local service provider who can provide some advice and support regarding the cultural practices relevant to the local community

- specifically consider the importance of cultural funeral rituals for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and prepare the school community if relevant.

It's also helpful to consider and try to mitigate any cultural barriers to help-seeking.

## Support young people at risk

Different staff members will have different responsibilities when supporting and responding to students who may be at risk following a suicide. Staff should support and respond to students at risk by:

- listening in a non-judgmental and empathic way
- remaining with them until an appropriate plan has been made with the wellbeing team or appropriate adult
- encouraging them to talk to a trusted adult
- referring them to the school wellbeing team or the nominated ERT member.

All young people identified as potentially high-risk following the suicide should:

- receive initial support from a member of the school wellbeing team
- undergo an individual risk assessment — this can only be completed by a mental health professional
- be monitored to ensure they are receiving appropriate support.

The ERT can liaise with the Be You Consultant to seek support on how to follow-up and refer students to appropriate support if they are considered at risk.

## Asking about risk

If you're worried that a young person might be at risk of suicide, it's important to create an opportunity to talk to them directly about your concerns in a calm and non-judgmental manner. It can feel uncomfortable asking someone directly about suicidal thoughts or plans, but it's necessary to check whether a person is at risk and how imminent that risk is. Asking directly is often a relief for young people, as it allows them to communicate openly and seek assistance.

### Anyone can ask about suicidal thoughts.

However, only those trained in suicide risk assessments should conduct them (mental health professionals). If a young person indicates they're thinking about suicide, empathise, acknowledge their distress and refer them to appropriate help.

For example, you could say:

"I'm so sorry to hear that you are feeling so bad. Things must be really hard for you now. But I believe that you can feel better with the right help. I'd like to take you to [the school counsellor] to have a chat. Is that OK with you?"

The school counsellor or wellbeing staff can then make a decision about referring for additional assessment and support as required.

## Immediate risk

If you believe a young person is at immediate or high risk of attempting suicide, you or an appropriate staff member should:

- stay with them (or arrange for supervision) until they can be seen and assessed
- contact their family as soon as possible
- remove access to methods of suicide or harm (such as sharp objects, medications, alcohol or drugs)
- contact an appropriate local mental health service, call 000 or take them to the emergency department.

## Be You Fact Sheets

- Supporting young people after suicide
- Risk assessment

## Set up a support room for young people

It is important to have a clear understanding of the processes already in place within your own school setting. The below are recommendations in relation to support room use, process and supervision which have been informed by practice examples and are to be used as appropriate to your setting.

**A support and reflection room is a quiet space set up by the ERT following a suicide.**

It is:

- on site at the school
- open during school hours only
- set up on the first day after the death, if possible
- a place for young people to go to receive support and have some quiet time to reflect
- a safe, supervised location where young people's grief and needs can be expressed, responded to and monitored.

### Room resources

**Where possible, a support room should:**

- be set up in a small to medium-sized room
- be private and easy to access
- provide protection from noise, bright light and high student traffic

- contain items such as water, tissues, cushions, bean bags, pens, paper, drawing materials, games and playing cards
- contain a sign-in sheet for students accessing the room, enabling the school to check against the attendance role and identify young people who may require additional support
- contain information about appropriate support services.

Although no guidelines make reference to the use of a memorial book, in practice, many schools have found this a useful resource.

### Room supervision

- At all times, the room should be supervised by staff members (preferably with a wellbeing background).
- Discuss and define the roles of each staff member when setting up the room. For example, one staff member allocated to the sign-in sheet, one 'floating' in the room to offer support as required, and one acting as a 'bridge' between the room and the rest of the school.
- Supervising staff members should be confident in managing a large group of distressed students, have an engaging style and have student wellbeing skills.
- The room's coordinator should be familiar with school processes related to student wellbeing.
- Ensure staff have a way to communicate with the ERT (for example, a mobile phone).
- Have wellbeing staff (such as counsellors, the wellbeing coordinator or student support service officers) available to see individual young people in a separate and private space. These staff members shouldn't be responsible for the coordination of the room, so they can freely provide individual support if needed.

## Room processes

### Before opening the room, develop clear and consistent processes.

Consider:

- the maximum number of young people the room can accommodate and options for managing a larger number
- how to prioritise access if demand is higher than anticipated
- how young people will access the room (for example, using your ordinary leave class process).

Once the room is open:

- welcome each young person into the room and provide information. Let them know their family will be made aware of their use of the room (if this is consistent with your school process)
- provide support as needed
- identify which young people need additional individual support and link them with available wellbeing staff or external supports
- talk to distressed young people before they leave the room (discuss an appropriate place for them to go – for example, returning to class (if their distress has subsided), being collected by a family member or returning to the company of supportive friends during recess or lunch)
- be mindful that some young people may be impacted for reasons that are not obvious. All distress should be taken seriously
- continue to review the list of attendees and any follow-up actions that school staff need to complete.

This room can be maintained for several days.

Ensure that the school community is prepared for the room's closure and that additional supports are put in place as required.

## Be You Fact Sheets

- Grief: how young people respond to a suicide
- Supporting young people after a suicide
- Family liaison, funerals and memorials after a suicide

## Inform young people

In some cases, young people may already know about the suicide, but staff should still inform students formally.

### When informing young people, staff should:

- note students who are absent so they can be informed separately
- note young people who appear to be very distressed
- follow the script prepared by the ERT that's tailored to the age of the students, their emotional development and the types of relationships they shared with the deceased. You may need to have different scripts for different cohorts of students – see a sample script in the Complete Toolkit
- refrain from sharing the method of suicide – this can be traumatising for others and can also provide suggestion to those at risk of suicide.

Scripts are an important way to support staff with this difficult task. They also ensure that accurate and consistent information is provided, which helps to counter any rumours and misinformation that inevitably spread in a crisis.

If the bereaved family don't want the death referred to as a suicide, ensure the phrase 'died by suicide' is exchanged for 'died' or another term the school and the bereaved family agree to, and that any other appropriate modifications are made.

#### **The script should contain:**

- clear and accurate information
- acknowledgement that the situation will be distressing to family, friends and the school community
- a statement that there's professional help available for mental health conditions and suicidal thoughts
- information about supports available within the school (for example, school wellbeing staff and the support room) and in the community (for example, mental health services)
- a statement that young people should always tell a member of staff or another responsible adult if they have concerns about a peer
- information about normal grief reactions
- a reminder about the importance of self-care, stress management strategies and supporting each other
- a statement that rumours can be hurtful and unfair to the deceased, their family and their friends
- information about responsible use of social media
- instructions not to talk to the media and to refer any media enquiries to a nominated staff member
- a reminder about the process for leaving school grounds.

Once you've informed students about the death, give them time to process the information. Answer only basic questions and redirect more complex questions to other staff members such as the wellbeing team.

#### **You may also like to:**

- assess whether all students should be informed, or whether it's more appropriate to limit the announcement to particular groups who've been exposed to the suicide or who are likely to be exposed to the suicide (for example, young people in the deceased's year level)
- inform groups you've decided to inform as soon as possible
- prevent young people affected by the news from leaving the school unaccompanied. Families should be called to collect any young person who's too distressed to stay at school, even if the young person has a driver's licence.

### **How to inform different groups of young people**

#### **Inform young people in small groups such as home, pastoral or class groups.**

Whole-school assemblies aren't recommended. Reactions are more difficult to manage in this environment and it's harder to observe and support individuals.

#### **Inform close friends and vulnerable young people:**

- individually or in small, appropriate friendship groups
- before other students
- with support from a counsellor or staff member who has a relationship with the young people and feels able to do this.

### **You may also like to:**

- ensure young people are provided with immediate support and given information about where they can receive more assistance at school
- inform families so they can provide support to their young person
- arrange for young people to be collected from school by their families if necessary
- ask young people about any other young people who weren't obvious friends of the deceased who may benefit from being informed separately.

### **Inform young people in the same year level as the deceased**

Wherever possible, the homeroom or year level teachers (or equivalent) should inform young people in logical groups, such as homeroom or first period classes, using a script with the appropriate level of detail. This is done in recognition of their close association with the deceased and their different needs for support.

### **Inform young people in the same class as a sibling of the deceased**

Provide additional assistance on how to support the classmate once they return to school. It may be appropriate to have wellbeing staff or a mental health professional speak to this group and the class teacher.

### **Inform young people in other year levels in class groups**

This should be done by their usual teachers, with a script.

## **Supporting young people in class upon hearing the news**

### **The news of a suicide can elicit a range of emotional and behavioural responses.**

These will be unique for each individual and will depend on factors such as past experiences, level of support, personality type and how close the young person was to the deceased person.

### **Talking to young people about suicide can feel daunting.**

Many people fear it will cause increased distress or even lead to the development of suicidal thoughts or suicide contagion. However, talking about suicide in a calm and straightforward way, as well as providing information and support, is actually very important in helping young people to manage their feelings and make sense of what happened.

### **To limit the harmful impact of the death and to promote positive coping strategies and good mental health, it's helpful to:**

- acknowledge a wide range of emotions and thoughts
- acknowledge that the death may be confusing
- acknowledge that it's common to want more information to help understand what happened
- provide accurate information about the death (only include information you have permission to share and do not mention the method of suicide)
- avoid blame
- avoid sharing your personal opinion about suicide
- encourage help-seeking
- provide information about support plans at school.

Sometimes young people will seek more information or ask you to confirm information that isn't appropriate to share. You may not be able to do this, or it may be considered harmful to provide some information (such as the method of suicide). Focus on acknowledging the complexity of the situation, the young person's emotions and providing support.

You could say:

"It seems this information has really upset you. Unfortunately, it's sometimes difficult to understand why someone has died and suicide is very complex. It's not usually one reason. What can I do to support you right now?"

or

"I can see that this news has really upset you and you have some questions. Unfortunately, I am unable to share any more information with you as we are respecting the family's wishes for privacy. What can I do to support you?"

If a young person wants to continue the conversation or is experiencing increased distress, redirect them to individual support such as the wellbeing coordinator.

## Be You Fact Sheet



Supporting young people after a suicide

## Inform families

### Inform families about the suicide and the school's response.

Giving families immediate and accurate information helps to support the school community, limits misinformation and gives families confidence in the school's response.

- If the bereaved family don't want the death referred to as a suicide, ensure that the phrase 'died by suicide' is exchanged for 'died' or another term that the school and the bereaved family agree to.
- Information should be conveyed via usual communication processes (excluding social media, which should not be used).

- Be sensitive to the response of families upon receiving this information.
- Make phone calls to the families of the most impacted or at-risk young people to inform them of the death and the possible impact on their young person. Provide support options for the young person and families.

### When you talk with families, include:

- the same clear and accurate information about the suicide that was shared with young people
- the name and contact details of the ERT member to whom they should direct any questions or concerns
- details of supports available for young people at school and in the community
- a list of resources available to families
- a statement that the school's routine will remain as normal as possible, including information about any upcoming events that have been altered or cancelled
- what to do if they're worried about someone else
- advice on how to talk to their young person about attendance at the funeral or memorial service
- the date and time of a family meeting, if one is to be held
- information about common reactions to suicide and grief reactions in young people
- how to answer difficult questions about suicide and how to talk to young people about suicide
- resources and information on youth suicide prevention.

**Communication with families should encourage them to:**

- monitor the reactions of their young person
- take supportive and protective action with their young person
- focus on the needs of their young person and not on specific information about the deceased
- talk with their young person openly about suicide or encourage them to talk to another trusted adult
- adopt actions and attitudes that complement the school's postvention plan
- communicate with the school about wellbeing concerns and support.

See a sample script in the Complete Toolkit.

## Be You Fact Sheets

-  Suicide in schools: information for families
-  Suicide in schools: information for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families

## Inform the wider community

You need to seek consent from the bereaved family in order to share information about the nature of the death outside of the school community. However, information of this nature spreads quickly via social media and word of mouth, and can have a profound effect on young people not connected to the school.

**In some circumstances, it will be important to liaise with some or all the following:**

- Local community and sports groups that the deceased young person was involved with or who will be servicing impacted young people.
- Other agencies that involve young people.
- Principals of local schools, schools the deceased previously attended, or schools attended by the deceased's siblings or known close friends, so they too can activate their postvention plan.
- The police.
- Relevant external mental health services available to young people or staff, especially those who could expect additional demand.
- Any service responsible for providing suicide postvention support (such as Be You or Standby).
- Any community response team that has been established in response to previous suicides.

## Dealing with the media

**The media is sometimes interested in reporting about youth suicide.**

If the suicide is to be reported in the media the reporting needs to be done with care, as media coverage can increase the risk of suicide contagion.

**To manage this – nominate one ERT member as the media liaison person if required.**

They should:

- liaise with the relevant spokesperson at the education department or equivalent body before speaking to the media
- prepare a statement that contains accurate information and is agreed to by the ERT and the bereaved family

- refer to (and refer reporters to) [Mindframe](#) which provides guidance and recommendations about safe reporting on suicide for the media. The website includes an overview of reporting about suicide with the least risk of suicide contagion, as well as tips and tools for how to work with the media.

**The media should be encouraged to reinforce some principles about the reporting of suicide, such as:**

- don't glamourise the victim or the suicide
- don't oversimplify the cause of suicide
- highlight the relationship between suicide and mental health conditions
- don't give details about the method of suicide
- don't include pictures of the death scene or distressed mourners
- always include information and phone numbers for crisis support services and local mental health services.

## Internet and social media

Messages posted on social media platforms can have a large impact because they can quickly reach a significant number of people.

**Managing social media is therefore an important part of your postvention plan.**

While it can feel overwhelming, you can collaborate with local support services to use social media to promote suicide prevention, mental health and wellbeing and distribute other important information to young people and the broader school community.

**Some suggestions for managing social media include:**

- involving and collaborating with students — don't ask them to monitor social media, but ask them to inform a nominated ERT member or their family if they see anything concerning
- monitoring any concerns raised about the deceased's social media posts
- following up any concerning social media use (such as sharing unhelpful rumours, inaccurate information, derogatory messages, glamourising suicide, or comments indicating young people who may be at risk) directly with young people and their families. In some circumstances, notifying the police may be warranted.
- providing information on appropriate and safe social media use to young people, families and school staff. This includes information about how to report any inappropriate use, and websites to access further information and resources.
- promoting activities and programs the school is undertaking to strengthen the mental health and wellbeing of young people
- raising awareness about mental health
- providing information about help-seeking options available and credible websites to support young people and their families.

**Information about the death is often posted on social media before the school informs students about the death.**

This can complicate your response and the messages you are trying to convey. If this has occurred:

- continue with your plan to inform students and staff, regardless of how much information is on social media. This will help to dispel rumours and ensure that everyone has consistent information.
- don't confirm or deny the information on social media. Continue to convey the information that you've agreed on with the family or your governing body.
- if you're unsure how to proceed, seek advice from your Be You Consultant.

Recent guidelines have been developed to assist young people to communicate safely online about suicide. For more information see [#chatsafe guidelines](#).

## Be You Fact Sheets: Immediate response

- Grief: how young people respond to a suicide
- Staff grief after suicide
- Family liaison, funerals and memorials after a suicide
- Responding to a death that can't be referred to as suicide
- Supporting young people after a suicide
- Boarding schools: what to do after a suicide

## Be You Fact Sheet

- Suicide, media and social media