

Grief

How Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people might respond to suicide

Grief is a normal response to the loss of someone you have cared about or loved.

Everyone will grieve differently and experience different emotions

Grief following a suicide can be particularly hard. It can last for months, sometimes years. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, grief is usually referred to as part of **Sorry Business**. Intergenerational grief can be passed down through the family due to extensive, multi-layered grief and unresolved Sorry Business in some communities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are more likely to have been affected by suicide at a young age due to the high rates of suicide in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations.

The importance of historical context

Suicide is strongly related to the intergenerational and ongoing traumatic effects of colonisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities have a long history of grief and tragedy, including deaths by suicide.

Malignant grief is a process of irresolvable, collective and cumulative grief that affects Aboriginal individuals and communities. It is the result of persistent, multiple stresses particularly faced by communities in remote areas and can cause individuals and communities to lose function and become progressively worse.

This and other types of grief, such as loss of Country, can affect how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people respond to a death.

A young person may react strongly to the death of someone who may seem to be a distant relative or family friend. This is due to the interconnection between family groups and the breadth of kinship relationships within communities.

Young people can respond to suicide and grief differently than adults

The way they behave while they are grieving will depend on their age, their family situation, their connection to their culture and community, cultural protocols and the relationship they had with the person who died.

In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, death has a significant impact on the whole community, not just individuals. This can include people who usually support a young person, such as their family, Elders, friends, traditional healers, teachers and others who live and work in their community.

Hearing of a suicide, especially of a loved one, can leave young people with lots of questions

They might question how the person could have left them. This may leave them feeling rejected, isolated or resentful. They can also experience a range of emotions, including guilt, sadness, shame and anger. When someone passes suddenly in some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, they may look to cultural reasons and blame someone or something, and this can lead to payback. Cultural blame and payback are part of cultural practices that are not often spoken about.

How young people might grieve

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people may respond to a suicide in different ways

This may include behaviour that indicates:

- shock and disbelief
- feeling numb about the person who has died
- a sense of shame on the family and community
- fear of death or dying
- denial about the death
- longing for the person. This may include spiritual visions or hearing the person's voice – this is a known cultural practice
- longing to go home to Country
- anger towards those they feel are to blame
- sadness the person has gone and having a weakened spirit
- depression or having thoughts of suicide or self-harm
- guilt that they couldn't help the person
- anxiety about the future and how life will be without them
- worry about payback
- difficulty concentrating at school or not wanting to be at school
- changes to sleeping and eating habits.

Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people may show unhelpful ways of coping with death

These may include:

- blaming themselves or someone else
- withdrawing from friends, family or community
- drinking alcohol, taking drugs or smoking excessively
- acting out of character or picking fights with friends and family
- not looking after themselves or their family
- acting impulsively or aggressively
- dysregulation at school or skipping school or classes.





There is a range of things you can do to provide additional help and support

- Acknowledge the young person's loss and their need to take time to engage in Sorry Business.
- Be approachable so a young person can get help when they are ready.
- Take a yarning approach – avoid asking a lot of questions or speaking in a patronising manner. Allow for periods of silence and time for the young person to think about what they want to share. This approach may also reduce feelings of shame about talking about mental health, which can be a barrier to seeking help.
- Focus conversations on their relationships and connections with family, Country or community and how these can support help-seeking, healing and recovery. If students ask about the method or why the person may have done this, explain that suicide is complex and there is usually no single reason. Avoid discussion about method or other graphic or distressing facts.
- Provide a safe, supervised space for young people if they need some time out.
- Provide information about grief reactions and give examples that help them understand that their experience is normal.
- Provide a place for young people to talk to and connect with each other, with Elders or recognised community leaders from their cultural background, or with a health professional.
- Support their continued participation in enjoyable activities, such as sport or hobbies. Discuss ways of expressing their grief through dance, storytelling or art.
- Support the gathering of stories and memories of the loved one in ways that appeal to the young person. While this may include writing, talking, blogs, memorials and journals, it may not always be the most appropriate practice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. Cultural practice needs to be considered, for example, whether using the deceased person's name is appropriate.
- Help the young person anticipate times that might be particularly difficult (such as birthdays, the gravestone unveiling or death anniversaries) and develop a plan for managing that period.
- Encourage healthy goals – regular sleep, healthy eating and exercise.



Remember, as an educator, you aren't expected to be a counsellor or health professional. Your role is to support young people impacted by the suicide to seek help and recover in ways that are helpful and culturally appropriate for them.

For communities that have experienced a lot of suicide deaths, suicide may seem a 'normal' way of dealing with problems. Help the young person to find other ways of dealing with problems by supporting them to reflect on their connections to life. Encourage more helpful coping strategies and engage with young people in their own way, for example, going fishing if that is an activity they enjoy.

Supporting a young person to get help

It's important that young people seek help from someone that they trust and feel comfortable with. They may be reluctant to see a health professional they don't know. If they've had a positive experience with getting help before, you might encourage them to contact that person again.

A trusted community Elder or adult may be a helpful support person, or they might prefer to contact their local health worker or social and emotional wellbeing team.

You could support them to contact their local headspace centre. Additionally, online and phone support is available through [13YARN](#), [headspace](#) and [Kids Helpline](#).

Other Be You resources

- *Suicide in schools: Information for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.*
- You may also like to explore the Be You resources for [culturally respectful engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities](#).

Bibliography

Aboriginal Mental Health First Aid Training and Research Program. (2008). *Cultural considerations & Communication Techniques: Guidelines for providing Mental Health First Aid to an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Person*. Melbourne: Orygen Youth Health Research Centre, University of Melbourne and Beyond Blue. https://www.mhfa.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/AMHFA_Cultural-Considerations.pdf

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2022). *Causes of Death, Australia*. ABS. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/causes-death/causes-death-australia/latest-release>

Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet. (2001). *Grief, Loss and Trauma*. <https://healthinonet.ecu.edu.au/learn/health-topics/social-and-emotional-wellbeing/grief-loss-trauma/>

headspace. (2015). *Responding to suicide in secondary schools: a Delphi study*. <https://headspace.org.au/assets/School-Support/hSS-Delphi-Study-web.pdf>

Oakley, J., Edwards, L., Westhead S., Duarte, B., Chang, E., Collova, J., Dudgeon, D., Hirvonen, T., Brown, T. (2023). *Yarn Up Listen up: Community Report of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Young People's Perspectives on suicide Prevention. Culture is Life and the Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10158019>

Parker, R., Milroy, H. (2014). *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health: an overview*. In Dudgeon, P. Milroy, H. Walker, R. (Ed.), *Working together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health and wellbeing principles and practice* (2nd ed. pp. 25-38). Canberra: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. <https://www.thekids.org.au/globalassets/media/documents/aboriginal-health/working-together-second-edition/wt-part-1-chapt-2-final.pdf>

Queensland Health, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health. (2022). *Sad News, Sorry Business – Guidelines for caring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through death and dying*. https://www.health.qld.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0023/151736/sorry_business.pdf

Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Care. (2010). *Working and Walking Together: Supporting Family Relationship Services to Work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families and Organisations*. <https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Working-and-Walking-Together.pdf>

Be You also acknowledges Thirrili, the national provider for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander postvention support and assistance, for providing insights and expertise for this fact sheet.

Artwork by Mumbulla Creative

Be You acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we work and learn. We recognise their deep and ongoing connection to Country and pay our respects to Elders past and present.

Fact sheets are for general information only. They are not intended to be and should not be relied on as a substitute for specific medical or health advice. While every effort is taken to ensure the information is accurate, Be You makes no representations and gives no warranties that this information is correct, current, complete, reliable or suitable for any purpose. We disclaim all responsibility and liability for any direct or indirect loss, damage, cost or expense whatsoever in the use of or reliance upon this information. © Australian Government 2024