Remembering a young person

Memorials and important events in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

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.

Sorry Business and funerals

There are hundreds of diverse traditional groups across Australia. The beliefs and customs associated with death and grief can differ, with traditional groups having their own practices, ceremonies and customs.

Sorry Business is the term used to refer to the important period of mourning, activities and cultural practices after the loss of a loved one for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Sorry Business involves responsibilities and obligations to attend and participate in funerals and other cultural ceremonies. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, participating in cultural practices and traditions is an important part of grieving. It can reduce distress for family, friends and communities affected by grief.

Funerals often involve the whole community, not just immediate family and friends.

Funerals in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities may be delayed for the arrival of family from afar to attend. The time between the death and the funeral can be very difficult for individuals, particularly when there is a delay between these two distressing events. Ensure additional support is offered and available to students and staff during this time. The funeral can mark a culmination of grief but is also a time for coming together and healing.

If the funeral is during school hours, ensure regular classes and school routine continue – where possible – for students who choose not to attend the funeral.

Funerals and services can be extremely upsetting for young people, so parents should be encouraged to attend with their children.

Remembering the person in a safe and respectful way

Memorials give friends, families and communities a chance to mourn together and share the significance of their grief and the loss of a loved one.

When a young person passes away unexpectedly, the urge to create a memorial can be powerful. Consider involving the community Elders and leaders in conversations about memorials to ensure plans are in accordance with cultural and traditional protocols around language, names, images and other possessions of the grieving family or community group. For example, in some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, Sorry Business can include not using the name or image of the person who has died.

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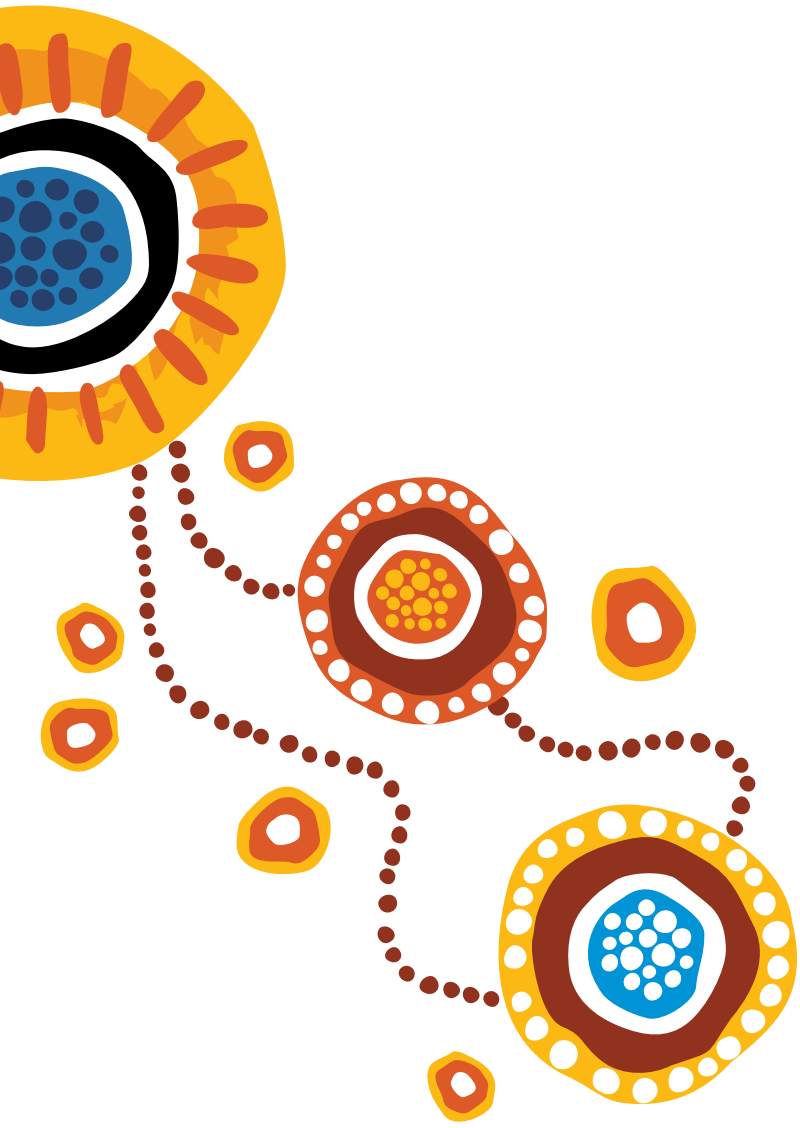
There are many ways to create a respectful and meaningful memorial

Invite the deceased person's friends and family to take part in planning any memorials. This shows respect for their grief and may avoid causing further distress. It's important that friends, fellow students and school staff are given the opportunity to attend the memorials.

With respect, care and collaboration with the family, friends, community and Elders, a memorial can play an important role in the grieving process.

Please note that in some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, it's not appropriate to have memorials as they may disturb the spirit of the person who has passed away. In some cultures, as well as not saying the person's name, community members will enact cultural practices to help the spirit move on.



Spontaneous memorials

It's not unusual for young people to create spontaneous memorials.

They may leave messages, flowers, photos or other items at the site where the person died or another significant place. While there may be little harm in creating spontaneous memorials, it's important that such sites don't inadvertently glamorise the death or cause distress to others who may see it.

If a spontaneous memorial is on school grounds, a nominated staff member should:

- monitor the site for and remove any objects that are inappropriate, hostile or inflammatory
- monitor the site for messages that indicate any students who may be at risk
- ensure any messages or objects from the memorial offered to the family are appropriate and respectful.

Setting limits around the location and length of time a memorial remains in place can reduce potential distress. However, this must be done with respect and sensitivity for people who are grieving. This includes letting young people know when a memorial will be removed and what will be done with messages or objects left at the site, for example, making them into a book for the family.

Be aware that online memorials may also occur on social networking sites, blogs or a dedicated website.

You can find more information about social media and online safety following a suicide in the Be You Fact Sheet 'Media and social media'.

How to avoid sensationalising suicide

Excessive or exaggerated outpouring of admiration and love for someone who has died by suicide may influence vulnerable young people to consider suicide as an option if they're going through a tough time.

Recommended	Not recommended
Treat the death as you would any other – this is a way of ensuring suicide isn't glamorised in any way.	Don't stop memorials. This may stigmatise the family and friends of the person who has died and result in further anger and distress for those affected by grief.
Acknowledge that death is tragic, painful and worthy of recognition.	Don't normalise or dismiss suicide.
At a memorial, discuss the connection between suicide and social and emotional wellbeing problems.	Don't mention the method and location of the death. Provide facts without unnecessary detail.
At a memorial, discuss strategies aimed at preventing suicide. Encourage help-seeking messages and activities that can help the grieving process.	Don't make assumptions. Be cautious when using names or displaying photos of loved ones who have passed away. Seek family permission.

Anniversaries and other events

The anniversary of a person's death and events such as their birthday or school graduation are often difficult times for friends and family. These dates serve as reminders the person they were close to is no longer with them. Such occasions can bring up feelings of grief, sadness and loss. They can also be a time of increased risk for vulnerable young people and may be a contributing stressor to suicidal thoughts or behaviours.

You can support young people through these times by normalising the grieving process and any thoughts or feelings of sadness, anger and stress. Remind young people that everyone will recognise the anniversary differently and encourage them to use their support network during this time.

Organised memorials to mark an anniversary can help provide a focus and acknowledge the event's significance.

Ideally, these should be arranged with small groups of close friends and family, and always with parents' permission. Having trusted community members, Elders or teachers available to provide support following the memorial is a good way to manage any distress experienced by those attending.

Remembering a young person who has died within an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community can occur in many different ways. What underpins the customs and rituals for death in these communities is the belief that death is sacred.

Other resources

Be You has a range of resources to help you manage issues related to suicide. Please see:

- *Funerals and memorials*
- *Grief: How Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people might respond to suicide*
- *Media and social media*
- *Suicide in schools: Information for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families*
- *Suicide contagion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people*

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We recognise their deep and ongoing connection to Country and pay our respects to Elders past and present.

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