

Self-care for school staff

working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in remote areas

Suicide can have a significant effect on a school community. It can be traumatic for students, families, school staff and the wider community.

People may respond to a suicide in different ways

Following a suicide, it's normal for people to react in varied ways and experience different emotions, including guilt, hurt, confusion, anger, shame and remorse. These emotions can cause changes in people's behaviours and their ability to cope.

Working in remote areas may include living and working in an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are diverse, complex and vary in protocols and practices across Australia.

Protocols have been passed down over thousands of years and continue as living traditions, including practices relating to a death in the community.

By observing and following local protocols, you are valuing, respecting and enacting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and knowledge.

If you are still learning about or unfamiliar with the protocols in the local community, you may find some practices challenging or confronting.

While it is important to respect local protocols, you should also be aware of your emotions and wellbeing during this time and seek support if required. This safeguards your welfare and will help you to support your students.

Common responses following a traumatic event or suicide:

- sleeping difficulties
- reduced or increased appetite
- difficulty maintaining concentration and attention
- confusion
- increased irritability and agitation
- intrusive thoughts and feelings about the suicide
- increased anxiety or restlessness
- low motivation and energy
- anger and blame.



How you can look after yourself following a suicide

Seek out your support team

Some people prefer to seek help from professional services, while others may feel that seeking out the support of friends, colleagues and family is what they need. This may include spending time in the community with the local Elders and the family. This would be appropriate if you have a personal connection with them. It's important that you do what feels best for you, remembering that everyone's grief experiences will differ.

Debrief with external professionals

It may be helpful to debrief with mental health professionals as they offer a different type of support to family and friends. Talking with professionals can help you to understand what you're experiencing and can reduce the chance of long-term distress or difficulties. Don't wait until the holidays to seek help from an external professional. You can access many services online or on the phone. You can find a list of these services and their contact details at the end of this fact sheet.

Monitor your own responses and take care of your personal needs

After being affected by suicide, some people notice changes in their behaviour for some time following the event. Some of these behavioural changes may include withdrawing from others, increased irritability and difficulty concentrating. Others may react quite differently and feel the need to take on all the responsibility themselves.

Sometimes, when working in remote locations, people can form a close bond with local families and make themselves available to support the family or individuals outside of their work at the school. Taking a break from your teaching responsibilities and personal relationships within the community may be difficult. Remember to take time to recharge, when possible.

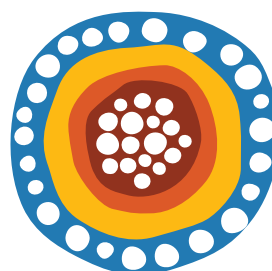
While educators play a supportive role in the community, it's important to remember that you are not expected to be a counsellor or health professional.

If you identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, you may feel added pressure if non-Indigenous colleagues look to you for cultural advice or information during this time. Be sure to prioritise your social and emotional wellbeing and seek support, particularly if you shared any cultural or personal connections with the person who died.

Similarly, if you have colleagues who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, be mindful of any additional cultural responsibilities they may have during this time. Ensure that support is available for them to look after their own social and emotional wellbeing.

Plan ahead where possible and have a contingency plan to manage difficult situations in the classroom

Sorry Business is the term used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to explain the activities associated with the death of a loved one, including funerals, traditional ceremonies and gravestone unveilings. There are many responsibilities and bereavement protocols related to Sorry Business and this may interrupt the usual flow in your classroom and school. Try to be flexible and prepared for this. Acknowledge the importance of these protocols in helping people move through their grief. Be aware that some staff and students may take longer to move through the grieving process than others.



○ Maintain structure and routine in the classroom

Following a suicide, it's important for the school, but also for you and your students, to try and return to routine as soon as is practical. Returning to a predictable routine can support staff and students process what has happened without feeling overwhelmed by navigating ongoing changes or disruptions. It might also be helpful to consult with your principal and other support staff if you're finding that your students are having difficulties managing the demands of their schoolwork.

○ Time management

Give yourself enough time to get to places and complete tasks. Try not to overload yourself with too much work or take on extra responsibility, including over-committing yourself and feeling rushed. This will likely increase your stress levels.

Use other community strengths and services that support students and remember that you play a part in supporting a whole community approach. Follow the community's lead. During times of grieving be mindful that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities will completely close all services as a sign of respect and to allow everyone to participate in Sorry Business.

○ Use positive coping strategies to manage distress

There are many ways to manage distress; it's about finding what works best for you. Some strategies may include:

- challenging unhelpful thinking
- relaxation exercises
- breathing techniques
- meditation
- physical exercise
- spending time outdoors
- engaging in pastimes such as music, art or reading
- healthy habits such as getting enough sleep and eating well
- the use of existing personal or spiritual belief systems.

○ Avoid unhealthy coping strategies

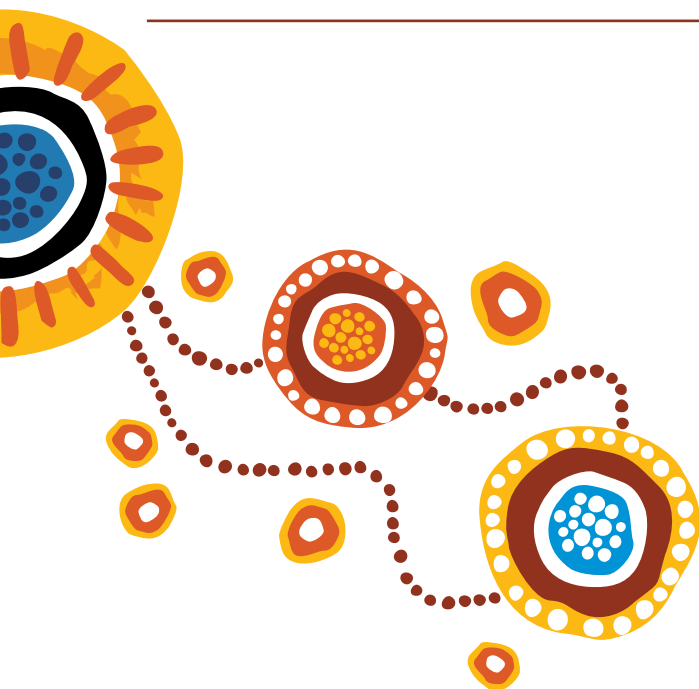
Using unhealthy strategies as a means of coping, such as drugs and alcohol, are only likely to complicate things. These strategies can increase emotional difficulties and take longer to process what's happened.

○ Maintain a healthy work and life balance

Set realistic and achievable goals for each day and week. Try to maintain a healthy diet, as this can help to strengthen your immune system and prevent you from becoming physically unwell. Try to maintain an exercise routine, which can be a healthy outlet for stress.

Maintaining a consistent sleep routine is also important in feeling equipped to manage throughout the day. Try to plan pleasurable activities to assist in managing your mood. Seek additional support or help if problems are persistent or overwhelming.

A suicide within the school community can have a wide-reaching impact. Ensuring there is support for students, staff and the broader community may give people the chance to grieve and heal in time.



Mental health services and support helplines

The **Beyond Blue Support Service** provides support any time of the day or night. To talk with a mental health professional, please call 1300 22 4636 or visit beyondblue.org.au

Lifeline can provide support 24 hours a day at 13 11 14 or lifeline.org.au

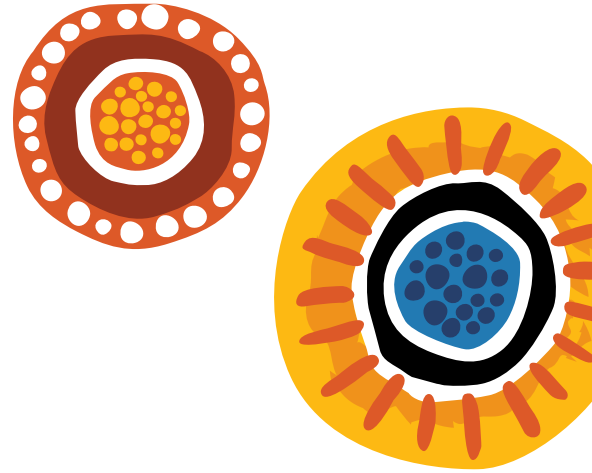
Suicide Callback Service can provide support to people who are experiencing suicidal thoughts, have lost someone to suicide or are supporting someone who is at risk of suicide: 1300 659 467

13YARN is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-run crisis support service. For support, call 13 92 76 or visit 13yarn.org.au

Thirrili works with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities affected by suicide. Anyone needing support can call 1800 805 801 or visit thirrili.com.au

Other Be You resources

- *Grief: How Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people might respond to suicide*
- *Culturally respectful engagement for learning communities*
- *Staff wellbeing*



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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.

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