

# Suicide Response Resources

*Reducing the risk  
of suicide contagion*



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# Reducing the risk of suicide contagion

*Suicide within a school community can have a devastating impact on students, families and staff, and can also lead to suicide contagion*

Suicide contagion refers to the process where one suicide or suicidal act within a school or community increases the chance that others will see this as an option to end their life.

Suicide contagion doesn't only happen when one other young person ends their life in response to a suicide. This can lead to a suicide cluster, where a number of connected suicides occur following an initial suicide.

This is something that's been more prevalent in some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, particularly in more rural and remote places around Australia.

## Why does suicide contagion occur?

There are many complexities in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kinship structures. Kinship isn't just about relationships—it's a cultural way of life that directly influences everyday interactions. When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people experience the loss of a friend, peer or someone from their community by suicide, it has significant cultural consequences for them.

Young people can relate to and identify with the actions of their peers. They may feel that if their

peers ended their life by suicide, then it's a viable option for them too. This thinking may be more likely in communities where suicide has been the way in which many have passed away.

## The way people talk about suicide can also influence the risk of contagion

For some young people, particularly those who have experienced significant disadvantage, the perceived attention given to the person who has passed away may make them feel that the tragic event is actually a positive outcome. This isn't necessarily an intentional response; however, it's common for people to remember the positive things about someone who has recently died and to focus less on the difficulties experienced prior to their death. Friends and family may wear memorial shirts featuring pictures of the loved one or statements such as "you'll always be remembered" or "rest in peace"—these may appear to be well meaning; however, this has the potential to prompt suicidal thoughts and behaviour in vulnerable young people. Avoiding discussion of suicide with young people doesn't help manage the risk of suicide contagion.

Many people believe that talking to young people about suicide will put the idea into their minds, but if a suicide has occurred among their friends or peers, young people will already be thinking and talking about this occurrence. The stigma associated with mental health issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people exacerbates the belief that these discussions will increase risk for young people. Generationally, Elders have believed that talking about suicide will leave people more vulnerable to subsequently use this as a means to end their own life. This belief hasn't fostered a culture that encourages open discussion about the suicide.

However, in recent years, it has been viewed as more acceptable to talk about the loss of someone by suicide. Many communities are leading the way in advocating to reduce the stigma and belief that talking about suicide increases the risk of someone suiciding. Providing a safe place for young people to yarn about their feelings can actually reduce distress about the event and may decrease their risk.

### Who's at risk of suicide contagion?

Young people can experience multiple factors in response to a suicide and, at times, they can all be interconnected. They can be grouped into three main categories: social connectedness, exposure and past experiences to suicide, and social and emotional wellbeing concerns.

*Note: a large proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been exposed to suicide deaths and this significantly increases their risk of suicide.*

SOCIAL CONNECTION	EXPOSURE AND PAST EXPERIENCES	SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING CONCERNS
Family or friends of the person who suicided	Witnessed the suicide scene or seeing deceased person	Stressful and emotional difficulties at home and in community
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people if it was a person from their cultural background	Have had previous experience of losing family or friends to suicide	Being away from their home and family, feeling isolated and alone
In smaller more isolated communities everyone can be impacted	Generational trauma and complex grief experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people	Relationship difficulties and disconnection from culture
Being able to relate to the same pressures and issues of the person who passed away	Has previously tried to end their life by suicide	Excessive alcohol and other drug use

## Reducing the risk of suicide contagion

There are a number of ways to reduce the risk of suicide contagion in a school or community, these include:

- Talking with the family or community leaders to identify the young people who are not coping well with the loss.
- School staff identifying and monitoring young people at increased risk of suicide.
- Providing access to support and treatment for people at risk of suicide. This could include initial one-on-one support for distressed students, as well as linking them to ongoing treatment by social and emotional wellbeing clinicians, appropriate local service providers or Elders in their community.
- Providing age and culturally appropriate information that guides a young person through their personal healing journey. This information needs to be clear, concise and delivered in a timely manner. This will reduce the circulation of rumours regarding the circumstances surrounding the death and help them to understand their grief experience.
- Ensuring close friends and family are told of the death prior to letting the larger school group know. Where practical, announcements should be made to small groups.

## When you're worried about a young person

If you believe a young person's at risk of suicide seek professional support from your local social and emotional wellbeing service or emergency department. Encourage the young person to stay with you while you arrange support, if they're unwilling, you should contact their family or Elders immediately. Remove any means of suicide available to them in the immediate area, such as medications or weapons. There are many steps that can be taken to reduce the risk of suicide contagion in your community. Talking to young people about what's happened, offering them support and care, and linking them in with the help they need are important first steps.

### Other resources

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

**Grief:** how young people respond to suicide

**Remembering a young person:** memorials and important events in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

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