Suicide contagion

for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people

Suicide within a school can have a devastating impact on students, families and staff. It can also lead to the social transmission of suicidal thoughts and behaviours.

This fact sheet is intended for school leaders, Emergency Response Teams and wellbeing teams. However, it is important to inform all staff members about suicide contagion to support them in identifying any students or colleagues who may be at risk after a death by suicide.

Suicide contagion

Suicide contagion refers to the process where one suicide or suicide-related behaviour within a school or community increases the chance that others will see this as an option to end their life. This phenomenon is also known as the social transmission of suicidal thoughts and behaviours.

This can lead to a suicide cluster, where a number of connected suicides, or suicide attempts, occur following an initial suicide.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are more likely to have been affected by suicide at a young age, with the suicide rate for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people more than three times as high when compared with non-Indigenous Australians. Exposure to suicide and ongoing intergenerational trauma can increase the risk of suicide for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Why does the social transmission of suicidal thoughts and behaviours occur?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kinship structures are complex. 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 a peer ends their life by suicide, then it's a viable option for them, too. This thinking may be more likely in communities where many people have taken their own lives.

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 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 before 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 response has the potential to prompt suicidal thoughts and behaviour in vulnerable young people.

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Avoiding discussion of suicide with young people may increase 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 it. In the past, the stigma associated with mental health issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may have exacerbated the belief that these discussions will increase risk for young people.

However, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are now leading the way in advocating to reduce the stigma and belief that talking about suicide increases the risk of someone taking their own life. Providing a safe place for young people to yarn about their feelings can reduce distress about the event and may decrease their risk.

Who's at risk of suicide contagion?

How young people respond to a suicide can be influenced by different factors. At times, these factors can be interconnected. They can be grouped into 3 main categories:

- social connectedness
- exposure to and past experiences with suicide
- social and emotional wellbeing concerns.

Social connection	Exposure and past experiences	Social and emotional wellbeing concerns
Being a family member or friend of the person who took their own life	Witnessed the suicide scene or saw the deceased person	Stressful or emotional difficulties at home or in the community
Sharing a cultural background with the person who died, particularly a community or kinship connection	Has previous experience of losing friends or family to suicide	Being away from family or home, feeling isolated or alone
Living in a smaller, isolated community	Intergenerational trauma and complex grief experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples	Relationship difficulties or disconnection from culture
Being able to relate to the same issues and pressures of the person who passed away	Has previously tried to end their own life by suicide	Excessive alcohol or other drug use

Reducing the risk of social transmission of suicidal thoughts and behaviours

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 help-seeking 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 young people to understand their grief experience.

Monitoring young people

It can be helpful to follow the **Notice, Inquire, Provide (NIP)** early intervention framework when monitoring young people after a suicide. This involves:

- **Noticing** changes in a young person's learning, emotions, social interactions and behaviours. You can find more about behaviours to look for in the 'Grief: How Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people might respond to suicide' fact sheet.
- Establishing a connection with a young person and **inquiring** about their circumstances. This may include encouraging them to speak with another staff member, family member or trusted adult, such as a community leader, if they feel more comfortable to do so.
- **Providing** support and help-seeking advice, as appropriate. Young people may respond to a suicide in different ways and may just need to speak with someone about how they are feeling. However, if you believe a young person is at risk of suicide, you must act immediately.

You can find out more about the NIP framework in the Early Support domain of the Be You Professional Learning.

Supporting an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander young person who may be at risk

If a young person has spoken with you about intending to harm themselves or take their own life, you must urgently escalate this conversation to the school's wellbeing or leadership team. The school should also contact the young person's family, a trusted community member or Elder.

The school should also seek professional support from your local social and emotional wellbeing service or emergency department. Request if any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander clinicians, support staff, or staff with cultural safety training are available to support the young person.

Stay with the young person until support is available. Encourage them to call a trusted family or community member if that will make them feel more comfortable while you wait with them. Remove any means of suicide available to the young person 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 with the help they need are important first steps.

Other Be You resources

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

- *Grief: How Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people might 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*
- You may also like to explore the Be You resources for culturally respectful engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

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