

# Suicide Response Resources

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



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# 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 after someone passes away*

**Australia is a large nation, represented by many diverse traditional groups**

The beliefs and customs associated with death and grief can be quite diverse, with the hundreds of different traditional groups having their own practices, ceremonies and customs.

Sorry Business is the term used to refer to the period of mourning, activities and cultural practices after the loss of a loved one for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Cultural practices and beliefs in relation to Sorry Business can vary between traditional groups and may vary depending on the location of the community and where families traditionally come from.

Adhering to cultural practices and traditions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders peoples is an important part of grieving and can reduce distress for family, friends and communities affected by grief.

**Safe and respectful Sorry Business  
—memorials**

Memorials give friends, families and communities the chance to mourn together and to share the significance of their grief and loss of a loved one. When it's a young person who has passed away unexpectedly, the urge to create a memorial can be particularly strong. Memorials should adhere to the strict cultural protocols around language, names, images and other possessions of the grieving family or community group.

**There are many ways to create a respectful  
and meaningful memorial**

Including friends and family in the planning of a memorial is a good way of making sure that those closest to the person who has passed away are not caused any further distress. It's important that friends, fellow students and school staff are given the opportunity to attend the memorials.

Services can be extremely upsetting for young people, so parents should be encouraged to attend with their children and support people should be available before and after the service.

## 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 passed away or another significant place. While there may be little harm in the creation of spontaneous memorials, it's important that such sites don't inadvertently 'normalise' the death or cause distress to others who may see it. Online memorials—on social networking sites, blogs or a dedicated website—may occur.

Setting some limits around the location and the length of time it remains in place can reduce potential distress; however, this must be done with respect and sensitivity for those who are grieving. In some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, Sorry Business protocols can include not using the name or image of a person who has passed away. Consider involving the community Elders and family in this conversation around memorials ensuring that plans are in accordance with the cultural and traditional practices.

## How to avoid sensationalising suicide

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

### RECOMMENDED

Treat the death as you would any other—this is a better way of ensuring suicide is not glamorised in any way

Acknowledge that any death is tragic, painful and worthy of acknowledgement

At a memorial discuss the connection between suicide and social and emotional wellbeing problems

At a memorial discuss strategies aimed at preventing suicide and encourage help-seeking messages and activities that can help the grieving process

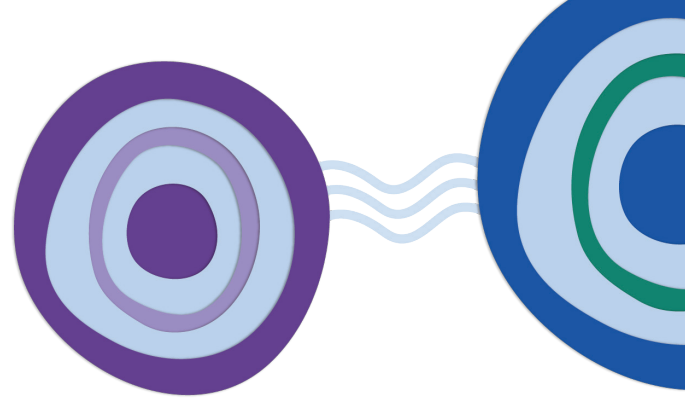
### NOT RECOMMENDED

Don't stop memorials! This may stigmatise family and friends of the person who has passed on and result in further anger and distress for those affected by grief

Do not normalise a suicide

Do not mention the method and the location of death. Provide factual information without the unnecessary detail

Do not make assumptions, be cautious when using names or displaying photographs of loved ones who have passed away. Family permission is required as well as an understanding



## Important events

**In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, Sorry Business is an important period of mourning that involves responsibilities and obligations to attend and participate in funerals and other cultural ceremonies.**

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

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

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 that the person they were close to is no longer with them. Occasions like these can bring up old feelings of grief, sadness and loss. Anniversaries and important events can also be a time of increased risk for vulnerable young people and may trigger 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 them that everyone will remember the anniversary differently and encourage them to use their support network during this time. Organised memorials to mark an anniversary or event 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 the permission of parents. 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.

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

### Other 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

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

**Reducing risk of suicide contagion**