

Suicide Response Resources

Family liaison, funerals and memorials after a suicide

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After a suicide your school has some important responsibilities.

You'll need to ensure communication with the family is respectful and compassionate. And that planning for the funeral and any memorials reflects the wishes of the family, while offering the school community an opportunity to express grief in a safe way.

Liaising with the bereaved family

Liaising with a family bereaved by suicide requires sensitivity and compassion.

Be mindful that the family will be grieving. They may be in a state of shock, disbelief, anger or despair, or experiencing a myriad of other emotions.

Contact with the family should be the responsibility of one staff member only. They should have knowledge of grief reactions – including the complexities of grief following suicide – and an ability to be sensitive to the grief the family is experiencing.

Usually, the principal or a senior staff member will be charged with this responsibility. Consider the relationship the staff member has with the family, the degree to which they're impacted by the death and how comfortable they're undertaking this role.

Early liaison with the family is important but families will respond to school contact in different ways.

If a family member is too distressed to talk, try to make a time to call in the next two days. Alternatively, if it's proving difficult to speak directly with the immediate family, ask if there's an extended family member or close family friend you can liaise with.

How to talk to the family

Before you talk with the family:

- be aware of any of the young person's belongings that will be returned
- be across plans and suggestions for supporting siblings, family members and friends who attend the school
- access information about local support services
- be aware of school plans to respond to possible media contact
- organise to debrief following the conversation (for example, with a member of the wellbeing team).

During the conversation:

- Offer the condolences of the school.
- Offer support and liaison with the school. Let them know that you'll be the staff member liaising with them during this time.
- Acknowledge that it must be very hard for them to talk to you. Sensitively advise that it would help the school's ability to support other students and the school community if you could discuss a few things with them.
- Seek permission to refer to the death as a suicide within the school community. If they ask for advice, discuss the damaging impact of misinformation and the importance of being able to talk to students about suicide and its causes to help keep students safe. Reassure them that this will be done sensitively without details provided.
- If they don't wish for the death to be referred to as a suicide, respect their wishes. If relevant, it's appropriate to inform them sensitively that information is already being exchanged between students about suicide as the cause of death. The family may change their perspective once it's gently explained that in that situation, open communication can help to keep other students safe.
- Ascertain plans for the funeral and the family's wishes regarding staff and attendance of friends and other young people. If there are no plans yet, enquire about getting the information later.

- Discuss and arrange for the support of siblings, close friends or extended family members who attend the school.
- Advise them of plans to return their young person's belongings to them.
- Ask whether they have access to their young person's social media accounts. Flag issues that may arise on social media and provide advice on how to manage these or how staff can assist.
- Provide information about local supports for the family should they wish to seek support, including grief counselling, external mental health services and survivor support groups.
- Provide information about potential media contact and how the school will respond to the media.
- Be aware that this is a lot of information to take in under very distressing circumstances. Explain that you'll send the information discussed in an email for their reference.
- Request permission to recontact them and make a time to do so if appropriate.

During the conversation, keep in mind:

- If the family member expresses strong emotions, keep calm, listen, take your time and acknowledge their feelings.
- Avoid using the phrase 'committed suicide' as it relates to a time when suicide was considered a crime and can be upsetting for family members. Use terms such as 'died by suicide', 'suicided' or 'took their life'.
- The experience of suicide can feel isolating for families due to stigma – your contact is likely to be supportive and helpful, even if it doesn't feel like it at the time.
- Keep a list of items to cover and gently steer the conversation to these items.
- If the family member is too distressed, remember it's OK to call back or speak to another family member.

Follow up with the family

Let the family know that it would be helpful if the school could maintain contact as required and seek permission to do this. In the shorter term, this may include discussing funeral arrangements and staff and student attendance, as well as providing information about the school's response plans and activities. In the longer term, it may include seeking input regarding memorials and important events (for example, year books and school formals).

Before the funeral

Funerals are important events

They help bereaved young people to acknowledge the death, remember the life and say goodbye to the person they loved or cared about.

In most cases, the funeral will be organised by the family of the deceased young person. Maintaining contact with the family helps you to clarify and be respectful of their wishes regarding attendance by the school community. Although staff, friends and other young people may want to attend, the family may wish for a small, private funeral for family members only. The staff member liaising with the family should listen to their wishes and communicate this to the school community.

If the family welcomes the school community to attend the funeral, young people should – in most cases – be allowed to decide if they want to attend. If they're not allowed to attend, they may feel they didn't get closure or a chance to say goodbye.

It's best to allow young people to make an informed decision by explaining what a funeral service is, why they're held and what they can expect to happen. This is especially important if they have never attended a funeral, wake or memorial service. Let them know that it's OK not to attend, too.

Families should be encouraged to take the lead role in the preparation and support of their young person attending the funeral service.

School involvement in the funeral

- Consider the role of staff and which staff members might attend. It will be helpful for one or more appropriate staff members to attend with the purpose of supervising and supporting young people; however, some staff may be attending for themselves and managing their own grief. In this situation, they should not be expected to support others.
- Young people who attend or play a role in the proceedings may require extra support after the funeral. Consider how this will be provided if they return to school immediately after the service.
- Your school may appear to be an obvious location for a funeral or memorial service because of the connection to your learning community and your ability to accommodate a large crowd. It's advised that such services are not held on school grounds. This enables the school to focus on maintaining its regular schedule and routine. Using a room in the school can also inextricably connect that space to the death, making it difficult for young people to return there for regular classes or activities.

Preparing young people for the funeral

- What happens at a funeral depends on a whole range of factors like culture and religion. Find out about the type of service being held so that you can explain what to expect to young people. Research traditions, rituals and etiquette appropriate to the family's culture to ensure you can provide informed support.
- If it's the first funeral a young person has attended, help them to prepare in terms of what to wear, what they can expect to happen and how to express condolences to relatives of the deceased.
- With younger children, it's helpful to describe the funeral process step-by-step – what they'll see, how other people might react and how they might feel. This can help to allay their anxieties about the event.
- Let young people know if an open casket is a possibility so that they're prepared to see their friend's body.
- Be clear, direct and honest in explanations – additional surprises and unfamiliar situations can complicate the grieving process.
- It's important to convey that crying or not crying are both okay.

Transport and attendance

- School staff should know in advance which young people are attending the funeral so that they can monitor their wellbeing and offer support.
- If the funeral is in school hours, young people need family permission to leave the school grounds.
- Ideally, families should transport their young person to the funeral and remain with them as the primary support during the funeral. This provides the parent with opportunities to observe their young person's behaviour and emotional response, as well as identify a potential need for further support. This is particularly the case for younger members of the school community who may find aspects of the funeral confusing or upsetting and need a parent nearby for comfort.
- The regular school schedule should remain intact to maintain normality for the school community. Any staff absences due to attendance at the funeral should be covered in the normal manner.
- School staff should be aware of the movements of young people after the funeral. Ideally, families will either return them to school (consider having additional support available) or take them home and stay with them to provide support.

Attending the funeral can help young people and staff to process the death and grief associated with the bereavement. Young people may also wish to remember and commemorate their friend and peer through memorials and other events.

Memorials

A memorial could be an event commemorating the young person's life or an object that reminds the school community of them.

Students may want to create a memorial for the young person. For example, they may leave flowers, cards and poems in a place closely associated with the young person (such as their locker or classroom seat). They may do the same thing at the site where the young person died.

Memorials can give friends, families and communities the opportunity to mourn together and provides a space for grief to be directed. But memorial sites or activities can be distressing for some people or be seen by vulnerable students as validating the suicide.

It's important that memorials don't inadvertently glamourise, vilify or stigmatise the deceased young person or their death — or cause distress to others.

To help the school maintain a safe education environment while also being compassionate and respectful to those wanting to memorialise, consider:

- Including friends and family in the planning of a memorial. This is a good way to make sure that those closest to the deceased young person are not caused any further distress.
- Setting some limits about the type of memorial. For example, discourage young people from wearing t-shirts or badges with images or tributes to the deceased young person as these may distress others.
- Timelines for the memorial (a few days or until after the funeral). After this time, the memorial objects can be offered to the family (ensure that messages or objects given are appropriate).
- An appropriate location. They should be in an area that can be avoided by those who don't wish to participate (not in places like the school entrance). If not, enlist key young people to help move items in a respectful way to a designated memorial site.

- Future use of the room, especially if the suicide occurred in a classroom, and how to best address this at your school.
- Avoiding permanent memorials such as a tree, artwork or a remembrance garden that may serve as a constant reminder of suicide for vulnerable young people.
- Responding to inappropriate memorials. Sensitively explain the purpose of a memorial site or activity to young people and the rationale for permitting certain kinds of memorials and not others. Help them understand the risk of suicide contagion.

Setting limits may lead to expressions of disappointment or frustration

In this case it's important to work with young people, and in consultation with family members, to consider helpful ways to commemorate the deceased person such as:

- organising a fund raiser and donating the funds to a mental health organisation
- organising a book where members of the school community can share memories or write condolences and supportive messages for the family
- volunteering in the community or offering community service in honour of the deceased young person
- creating a poster display where friends and other young people can write messages. (The posters can then be offered to the family)
- online memorials on social networking sites, blogs or at a dedicated website.

Treat the death as you would any other. This ensures that suicide is not glamourised in any way. It sends a message to young people that any death is tragic, painful and worthy of acknowledgement.

Anniversaries and important events

The anniversary of a young 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. Even for those coping well, events like these can bring up old feelings of grief, sadness and loss. They may also experience feelings of anxiety – about not being able to cope or having to deal with these emotions again.

Anniversaries and important events can also be a time of increased risk for vulnerable young people and may trigger suicidal thoughts or behaviours. Giving friends and family opportunities to mark these dates in meaningful ways can help the grieving process.

You can support young people by:

- Letting them know it's normal to reexperience grief and sadness at significant times. Remind them that things will get easier over time.
- Suggesting activities that make the young person feel good and reminding them of the times they shared with the young person.
- Encouraging them to contact supportive family members or friends rather than spending their days alone.
- Reminding them that there is no 'right' way to mark an anniversary. Help them find a way of coping that they feel comfortable with.
- Helping them connect with counsellors or other support services if they're feeling overwhelmed or unable to cope in the lead-up to the anniversary or event.

Other resources

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

-  [Suicide, media and social media](#)
-  [Responding to a death that can't be referred to as suicide](#)
-  [Grief: how young people respond to suicide](#)

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