

Suicide Response Resources

Grief: how young people respond to suicide

Grief is a normal and expected response to the loss of a family member, friend or someone else close to us — everyone experiences grief in different ways and it can last for months and even years

Grief relating to suicide can be particularly complex.

The suddenness and shock, perceptions of preventability and difficulty comprehending why the deceased ended their life contribute to a complicated set of emotions.

Young people may wonder if they could have prevented the suicide, leading to feelings of guilt or remorse. They may also question why a loved one left them and feel rejected, angry or resentment towards the person who has died. Cultural issues like stigma can also complicate the grieving process.

Young people may react differently to adults.

Their response to suicide is shaped by their developmental stage, family situation and relationship with the person who has died. Suicide can also have an impact on the young person's support network, including friends and teachers, and their local community.

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. This can also be true for different multicultural groups. It's important to seek consultation from the bereaved family about their cultural, religious and family practices relevant to death and their grieving processes.

Common responses to grief

There isn't a standard response to suicide but there are a range of normal grief-related reactions that young people may experience.

These include:

- shock and disbelief that the person has died
- longing for the person and wishing they were around to touch or be comforted by them
- feelings of anger, resentment or rejection at being abandoned, for the unfairness of the loss or towards people responsible for the suicide
- feeling sad that the person has died
- guilt that they were unable to help the person or that they were in some way responsible for the death
- anxiety about the future and how things will be without that person in their life
- preoccupation with thoughts about the person who has died
- difficulty concentrating
- changes to sleep patterns and appetite.

Some young people may appear unaffected by the suicide and seem to be getting on with their lives, but this in itself may cause feelings of guilt. Rituals or creative expression, such as art or music, are sometimes preferred to talking about their grief. Other young people may act out in more challenging ways through drinking alcohol, drug use or other risk-taking behaviours.

Most young people carry on with their lives while they grieve, but it's important to be aware that there's a higher risk of complicated grief reactions in suicide bereavement than other forms of death.

These include persistent, severe or overwhelming variations on normal grief reactions, such as sleep problems, irritability or anger, persistent low mood, feeling that life is meaningless, not being able to accept the death, avoiding things that trigger reminders of the loss, intense guilt, intrusive thoughts about the death or persistent rumination on explaining or making sense of the death.

Supporting a grieving young person

There's lots you can do to support grieving young people.

This includes:

- acknowledging the young person's loss and the need for taking time to grieve
- allowing time to discuss what's happened and how the young person is dealing with the loss – the stigma around suicide can prevent people from talking about it and leave those affected feeling isolated
- communicating openly about the death as a suicide (if the family have permission to do so) to help destigmatise suicide
- providing information about grief reactions and normalising the young person's experience
- encouraging participation in enjoyable activities, such as sports or hobbies, and contact with supportive friends
- supporting the gathering of stories and memories of the person who died, including collating photos, writing blogs and journals, and conducting memorials
- helping the young person to anticipate times that may be particularly difficult, such as birthdays or anniversaries of the death, and developing a plan for managing that period
- providing some flexibility with schoolwork where appropriate as the young person may have trouble concentrating and remembering things
- being alert to times when the young person needs additional support.

Supporting a young person to seek help

It's normal for young people who are grieving to experience intense emotional pain, want to avoid the pain of grieving or experience delayed grief responses that emerge weeks or even months after the death.

Young people often go through ups and downs while they deal with the death of a loved one. They usually find that things get easier in time and as such they experience more good times and fewer difficult times.

But if a young person's grief is persistent and severe, or their coping strategies are not helping or exacerbating their distress, it can interfere with their day-to-day life and have a significant impact on their development. Getting help early can lessen the impact of mental health problems and improve the young person's chances of a full recovery.

Young people can often be reluctant to seek professional help so finding someone they trust and feel comfortable with is important. If they've had a positive experience with a general practitioner (GP) or counsellor in the past, you might encourage them to contact that person again. You could also help them to contact their local **headspace** centre or mental health service.

If a young person is experiencing suicidal thoughts or thoughts of harming themselves, seek help immediately.

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](#)
-  [Family liaison, funerals and memorials after a suicide](#)

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