

How to talk about suicide with young people



When a suicide occurs, it is a traumatic event for a school or community and the impact on young people can be significant. Suicide can elicit a range of emotional and behavioural responses.

These will be unique for each individual and will depend on factors such as past experiences, level of support, personality type and how close a student was to the deceased person.

Talking to young people about suicide can feel daunting. Many people fear it will cause increased distress or even lead to the development of suicidal thoughts or suicide 'contagion' (see **headspace** fact sheet on *Suicide Contagion*).

However, talking about suicide in a calm and straightforward way, as well as providing information and support, is actually very important in helping young people to manage their feelings and make sense of what has happened.

It's important to be thoughtful and sensitive when you talk to young people about suicide. The aim is to limit the harmful impact of the death and to promote positive coping strategies and good mental health. Below are some important factors to keep in mind.

1. Give accurate information about why people suicide

Suicide is a complex behaviour caused by a range of factors and is rarely the result of a single event or problem. Many people who suicide had been experiencing mental health difficulties such as depression at the time of their death. This illness can make people feel hopeless and impact on their ability to think clearly and rationally. Providing information on the link between mental illness and suicide can encourage people to seek help for themselves or others, which will decrease the risk of suicide.

2. Avoid blame

Young people often want answers about why a suicide has occurred, and this can lead to them blaming the death on a particular event or person. Explain that suicide is not simple and is often the result of a range of contributing factors. This can reduce the likelihood that blaming or scapegoating will occur.

3. Don't focus on the method of suicide

Avoid talking graphically or in detail about how the person died. Detailed descriptions of the death can be overwhelming and distressing, and can increase the risk of imitation by vulnerable young people. Keep the focus on how to manage the emotions brought up by the person's death, and away from details of how someone has died.

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4. Address feelings such as anger and responsibility

Provide reassurance that a range of responses following a suicide are normal. Young people may feel angry towards the person who died or feel that they could have prevented the death in some way. Such feelings can lead to increased confusion and distress. Reassure them that they are not to blame and that feeling angry doesn't mean they didn't care about the person. Normalising these feelings and allowing young people to talk through their emotional responses can help in the grieving process.

5. Encourage help-seeking

If a young person finds themselves or a friend feeling overwhelmed, unable to cope or developing thoughts of suicide, encourage them to seek help. Let them know what their support options are. This will allow them to choose a person they feel comfortable with and increase the likelihood that they will seek help. Options for support could be a parent or trusted adult, such as a teacher, school counsellor or family doctor.

6. Ask about suicidal thoughts

If you are worried that a young person might be at risk of suicide, it's important to talk to them directly about your concerns in a calm and non-judgemental manner. It can feel uncomfortable asking someone directly about suicidal thoughts or plans, but it's necessary in order to check whether a person is at risk and how imminent that risk is. Asking questions directly can also be a huge relief for a young person struggling with thoughts of suicide. It gives them permission to speak openly about how they are feeling and the opportunity to gain support.

Other fact sheets that may be of interest: *Identifying risk factors and warning signs for suicide, Managing social media following a suicide. Mythbuster: suicidal ideation "Asking young people about suicidal thoughts or behaviours will only put ideas in their heads"*

If you believe that a young person is at risk of suicide, you should seek professional support from your local mental health service or emergency department and keep the young person safe until help arrives.

Remove any means of suicide available to them in the immediate vicinity, such as medications or weapons. Stay with him or her (or arrange for supervision) until they can be seen and assessed.

For more information on suicide or support and assistance visit headspace.org.au/schoolsupport or headspace.org.au

Please refer to the **headspace** School Support *Suicide Postvention Toolkit – A Guide for Secondary Schools* for further guidance.

Acknowledgements

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and Suicide Prevention Resource Centre. (2011). *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*, Newton, MA: Education Development Centre, Inc.
 Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. (2011). *LIFE Fact Sheets*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, accessed at www.livingisforeveryone.com.au
 South Australia Department of Education and Children's Services, Catholic Education South Australia and Association of Independent Schools. (2010). *Suicide Postvention Guidelines: a framework to assist staff in supporting their school communities in responding to suspected, attempted or completed suicide*. South Australia: Government of South Australia, Department of Education and Children's Services.

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