Managing social media following a suicide

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Social media commonly refers to websites that facilitate communication and networking between people. These include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat and more.

Social media is ever changing but is a primary means of communication for people of all ages, especially young people.

While this kind of communication can provide valued links between young people, promoting a sense of social connectedness and mutual support, messages posted on social media platforms can quickly reach a vast number of people. This can have an enormous impact and contribute to suicide contagion from far afield.

> Suicide contagion refers to the process whereby one suicide or suicidal act within a school, community or geographic area increases the likelihood that others will attempt or complete suicide. **See headspace School Support fact sheet *Suicide contagion.***

Managing social media is an important part of a safe response to suicide. Below is some information for school staff to consider following a suicide.

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Following a suicide students are likely to turn to social media for a variety of purposes. These include sending news out about a death (both accurate and rumoured), posting online messages (both appropriate and inappropriate), calling for impromptu gatherings and creating virtual memorials.

This can cause anxiety for parents and school staff as it is impossible to control this kind of student interaction when it takes place outside of school hours and away from the school itself.

While social media can feel overwhelming at a time like this, and schools may consider social media to be outside the scope of their role, it can be used in collaboration with students to help share health-promoting information and minimise risk. This information may include:

- Where students can go for help within the school
- External mental health services
- Crisis services (such as Kids Helpline and Lifeline)
- Organisations that promote positive mental health and wellbeing (e.g. **headspace**, ReachOut.com, Youthbeyondblue)
- Resources about mental health, mental illness and the causes of suicide
- Suicide prevention messages
- A safe memorial page for the deceased person.

Collaborate with students to address concerning messages on social media

Students should not be asked to monitor social media, as this exposure can be distressing and the perception of responsibility might have implications for their own mental health. Instead an appropriate member of school staff (such as welfare staff) should meet with the friends of the deceased and other key students to talk with them about what is being shared on social media. In these conversations the school staff can ensure that students know who they can contact if they are aware of, or concerned about, messages they see on social media sites.

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Concerning messages may include:

- Rumours
- Information about upcoming or impromptu gatherings
- Messages that suggest the suicide was a positive outcome for the student
- Messages that bully or victimise current students
- Comments indicating students who may themselves be at risk (such as "I am going to join you soon" or "I can't take life without you").

If school staff become aware of concerning posts they should:

- Speak directly with students or members of the school community who have posted inappropriate comments
- Dispel rumours
- Notify parents and/or local authorities about the need for security at a late-night student gathering
- Contact emergency services and/ or parents when information posted online may indicate risk to a person's safety
- Report offensive material; most sites allow you to report offensive material and request that the content be removed (although be aware this can take some time)
- Guide students on how to report offensive material if they wish to report it themselves.

As part of this process students should be reassured that school staff are only interested in supporting a healthy response to their friend's death, not in interfering with their communication.

Staff can also offer to arrange additional support if the online conversations have been causing distress to the students.

Reminding students about the possible risks of online activity is another important role of school staff in these situations. Conversations might focus on how comments may become public without their permission, that online memorials can attract negative and hurtful comments, and/or that anything that talks about suicide in a positive way can be harmful to other students.

Memorial pages

Memorial pages are a common way that young people pay tribute to their deceased friends. Most memorial pages will have an administrator (a friend or family member who manages the page). If the page is administered by a fellow student then school staff should offer to assist with the page, in doing so, helping to honour the deceased friend's life appropriately and safely. When talking about the memorial page help the student to understand the impact that the site may have on other young people. Encourage them to:

- Avoid any details about the death
- Include messages about where young people can get help
- Take care not to give the impression that suicide was a positive outcome for the young person
- Remove any inappropriate comments that are offensive, rude or disrespectful to the deceased or others posting on the page
- Report any concerning comments made by contributors to a nominated staff member.

Tips for schools

Consider creating a general school account which can become a platform for communication in the event of a crisis. Research has found that if schools establish a presence on social media sites before a crisis occurs they are better able to reach parents and community members in the event of an emergency. Schools should assess the culture of their school community to determine which social media tools to use, bearing in mind that these can change rapidly.

Integrate cyber safety into the school's wellbeing curriculum. This will equip students with cyber safety skills and knowledge and teach them to think critically about the effects of any messages and images they post online.

Keep up to date with information about social media safety and sites being used by young people, for example at www.cybersmart.gov.au.

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

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