

Grief: How Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people might respond to suicide



Grief is a normal response to the loss of someone that you have cared about or loved. Everyone will grieve differently and experience different emotions. Grief following a suicide can be particularly hard, it can last for months and can sometimes last for years.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people grief is usually referred to as part of Sorry Business. Intergenerational grief can be passed down through the family due to unresolved Sorry Business as extensive grief is experienced in some communities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are more likely to have been affected by suicide at a young age due to the high rates of suicide in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations.

Young people can respond to suicide and grief differently to adults. The way they behave while they are grieving will depend on their age, their family situation, their connection to their culture and community and the relationship they had with the person who passed on. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities the impact isn't only felt by an individual, it has significant impacts on the whole community. This can include people who would usually support them like their family, Elders, friends, traditional healers, teachers and others who live and work in their community.

Hearing of a suicide, especially of a loved one, can leave young people with lots of questions. They might question how someone could have left them, and this can leave them feeling rejected, isolated or resentful. They can also experience a range of emotions including guilt, sadness, shame and anger. When someone passes suddenly in some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities they may look to cultural reasons and blame someone or something and this can lead to payback. Cultural blame and payback is part of cultural practices that are not often spoken.

How young people might grieve

It is normal for young people to respond to suicide in a number of ways.

Their reactions may include:

- Shock and disbelief
- Feeling numb about the person who has gone/passed on
- Disbelief that the person has died
- A sense of shame on the family and community
- Longing for the person – This may include spiritual visions or hearing the person's voice; this is an acceptable cultural practice
- Longing to go home to country
- Feeling angry towards those they feel are to blame
- Feeling sad that the person has gone and having a weakened spirit
- Feeling depressed and having thoughts of suicide or self-harm
- Guilt that they couldn't help the person, or that they were in some way responsible for the death
- Anxiety about the future and how life will be without them, as well as worry about payback

- Difficulty concentrating at school or not wanting to be at school
- Changes to sleeping and eating.

Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people may show unhelpful ways of coping with the death.

These can include:

- Blaming themselves or someone else for the death
- Engaging in payback
- Isolating themselves from others
- Drinking alcohol, taking drugs or smoking too much
- Acting out of character or picking fights with friends and family
- Not looking after themselves or their family
- Acting impulsively or aggressively
- Mucking up at school, or skipping school or classes.

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Practical ways to support a grieving young person

There are a range of things you can do to provide additional help and support:

- Acknowledge the young person's loss and the need for taking time to engage with Sorry Business
 - Be approachable so a young person can get help when they are ready
 - Provide a safe space for young people to go to if they need some time out
 - Provide a place for young people affected by grief to talk to and connect with each other, with Elders or recognised community leaders from their cultural background, or with a professional
 - Focus your conversations on help seeking, healing and recovery and limit the discussion about method and other graphic or distressing facts
 - Provide information about normal grief reactions and give examples that help them to understand that their experience is normal
 - Encourage their continued participation in enjoyable activities (such as sports or hobbies) and discuss other ways of expressing their grief through dance, storytelling, artwork etc.
- Support the gathering of stories and memories of the loved one in ways that appeal to the young person – cultural practice needs to be considered. While it may include writing, talking, blogs, memorials and journals this may not always be the most appropriate practice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people
 - Help the young person to anticipate times that may be particularly difficult (such as birthdays, tombstone unveiling or anniversaries of the death) and develop a plan for managing that period
 - Encourage 'healthy goals' – regular sleep, healthy eating and doing exercise
 - For communities who have experienced a lot of suicide deaths, suicide can seem a 'normal' way of dealing with problems. Help the young person to find other ways of dealing with problems by supporting the young person to reflect on connections to life and encourage more helpful coping strategies.

Other considerations

Some young people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities have a long history of grief and tragedy, including deaths by suicide. This history can impact on their grief responses. It also means that a young person may react strongly to the death of what may seem to be a distant relative or family friend.

Supporting a young person to get help

It is important that young people seek help from someone that they trust and feel comfortable with, so they can sometimes be reluctant to see a health professional that they do not know. If they've had a positive experience with getting help before, you might encourage them to contact that person again. A trusted community Elder or adult may be a helpful support person or they might prefer to contact their local health worker, their Social and Emotional Wellbeing Team. You could also help them to get in contact with their local **headspace** centre.

Other fact sheets that may be of interest:

Suicide Contagion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, Remembering a young person: Memorials and important events in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, Suicide in Schools: Information for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families

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



headspace acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples of Australia and we pay our respects to their Elders past, present and future.

Acknowledgements

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