

Self-care for school staff working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in remote areas



Suicide can have a significant effect on a school community. It can be traumatic for students, parents, school staff and the wider community.

Following a suicide, it is normal for people to react in varied ways and experience different emotions including guilt, hurt, confusion, anger, shame and remorse. These emotions can cause changes in people's behaviours and their ability to cope.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are complex, diverse and vary in cultural practices across Australia. Working in remote areas may include you living and working in communities that are predominately populated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. You may be exposed to some cultural practices and societal norms that you have never experienced before and you may find this confusing or confronting. This can be especially true if you only know the aspects of the culture you can see and are unfamiliar with the meaning and history of some practices.

It is important to be aware of your own needs, both cultural and personal, and to seek additional support when required. This not only safeguards your own welfare, but will help you to support your students. Below are some examples of common responses to the trauma of a suicide and ways to take care of yourself.

Common responses following a traumatic event/suicide:

- Sleeping difficulties
- Reduced appetite/increased appetite
- Difficulty maintaining concentration and attention
- Confusion
- Increased irritability and agitation

- Intrusive thoughts and feelings about the suicide
- Increased anxiety or restlessness
- Low motivation and energy
- Anger and blame.

How you can look after yourself following a suicide:

Seek out your support team. Some people prefer to seek help from professional services, whilst others may feel that seeking out the support of friends, colleagues and family is what they need. This may include spending time in the community with the local Elders and the family. This would be appropriate if you have a personal connection with them. It is important that you do what feels best for you, remembering that everyone's grief experiences will differ.

Debrief with external professionals. It may be helpful to debrief with mental health professionals as they offer a different type of support to family and friends. Talking with professionals can help you to understand what you are experiencing and can reduce the chance of long-term distress or difficulties. Don't wait until the holidays to seek help from an external professional. Many services can be accessed via telephone or internet. Some services that may

be helpful include *StandBy Response Service, Suicide Call Back Service, Lifeline or your school's Employee Assistance Program.*

Monitor your own reactions and take care of your personal needs.

After being affected by suicide, some people notice changes in their behaviour for some time following the event. Some of these behavioural changes may include: withdrawing from others, increased irritability and difficulty concentrating. Others may react quite differently and feel the need to take on all of the responsibility themselves. Sometimes when working in remote locations people can form a close bond with local families and make themselves available to support the family or individuals outside of their work at the school. It may be difficult to take a break from your teaching responsibilities and personal relationships within the community. However, it is important that you do take time to recharge when possible, such as on weekends, etc.

Plan ahead where possible and have a contingency plan to manage difficult situations in the classroom. Sorry Business is the term used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to explain the activities associated with the death of a loved one, including funerals,

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traditional ceremonies and tombstone unveilings. There are a diverse range of responsibilities and bereavement protocols related to Sorry Business and this may interrupt the usual flow in your classroom and school. Try and be flexible and prepared for this. Also be aware that some staff and students may take longer to move through the grieving process than others.

Maintain structure and routine in the classroom. Following a suicide, it's important for the school, but also for you and your students, to try and return to normal routine as soon as is practical. This can help to make the students and staff feel less overwhelmed by the incident. Allowing students to have a meaningful discussion about the loss they have experienced and what has been happening can help the healing process. It might also be helpful to consult with your Principal and other support staff if you are finding that your students are having difficulties managing the demands of their school work and assessment.

Time management. Give yourself enough time to get to places and complete tasks. Try not to overload yourself with too much work or take on extra responsibility, including over committing yourself and feeling rushed. This will likely increase your stress levels. Utilise other community services that support students and remember where your role ends. During times of grieving be mindful that some Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander communities will completely close all services as a sign of respect and also to allow everyone to participate in Sorry Business.

Use positive coping strategies to manage distress. There are a range of ways to manage distress; it is about finding what works best for you. Some strategies may include: challenging unhelpful thinking, relaxation exercises, breathing techniques, meditation, physical exercise, spending time outdoors, music, artwork, reading, getting enough sleep, eating well and the use of existing personal/spiritual belief systems may be useful.

Avoid unhealthy coping strategies. Utilising unhealthy strategies as a means of coping, such as drugs and alcohol are only likely to complicate things, as it can increase emotional difficulties and take longer to process what's happened.

Maintain a healthy work/life balance. Set realistic and achievable goals for each day/week. Try to maintain a healthy diet, as this can help to strengthen your immune system and prevent becoming physically unwell. Try and maintain an exercise routine which can be a healthy outlet for stress. Maintaining a consistent sleep routine is also important in feeling equipped to manage throughout the day. Try to plan pleasurable activities to assist in managing your mood. Staff are

encouraged to seek additional support or help if problems are persistent or overwhelming.

A suicide within the school community can have wide reaching impact but by ensuring there is support for students, staff and the broader community people will have the chance to grieve and heal in time.

Other fact sheets that may be of interest:

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

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

Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Care. (2010). *Working and Walking Together: Supporting Family Relationship Services to Work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families and Organisations*. Accessed at <http://healthbulletin.org.au/articles/working-and-walking-together-supporting-family-relationship-services-to-work-with-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-families-and-organisations/>Judith Austin. (2010).

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