

Returning to school following self-harm or attempted suicide



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An act of significant self-harm or attempted suicide by a young person can have a significant effect on a school community, causing distress and anxiety for fellow students, school staff and parents. The young person themselves may also feel anxious about returning to school and will need additional support and understanding. With these considerations in mind, school staff can play a crucial role in supporting the young person and assisting with the successful transition back to school. A successful transition may impact on decreasing the risk of ongoing suicidal behaviour of the young person.

Below are a few considerations to help with the planning process:

Collaborative approach to supporting the young person at school

– It is not the sole responsibility of the school to manage the future risk of the young person therefore, when possible, it is preferable that the young person engages with an external mental health service or General Practitioner (GP) prior to returning to school. Ideally, parents/caregivers should also play a central role in supporting the young person in their return to school. Regardless of the individuals involved in supporting the young person, there needs to be a collaborative approach to information sharing and delineating responsibility while also incorporating the needs and wishes of the young person. If the young person is involved in the decisions regarding their return to school, this is likely to influence their re-engagement and thus successful reintegration into school.

Identify a key contact at school

– Ideally, if your school has wellbeing staff, these would be the most appropriate people to be key contacts for the young person. If not, a staff member well known and trusted by the young person e.g. year level coordinator, pastoral care worker, sports coach or classroom teacher would be appropriate. This person should act as the school liaison with parents/caregivers and external mental health service

providers (if available). They will also be the key contact the young person goes to if they need additional support or assistance during school hours.

Information sharing with school staff

– It is important for the young person to know how communication within the school will be managed. School staff should be reminded at all times of the young person's rights to privacy, confidentiality and respect. The key contact person should co-ordinate a 'release of information' to be signed by the parents and mental health service, so that all parties can openly communicate to provide the best possible support for the young person. The key contact person should inform teachers who have contact with the young person of relevant information from their school re-entry plan e.g. graduated return, study load, etc. Whilst it is important for school staff to know about the circumstances of the young person, including their recent incident, they do not need to know detailed clinical information.

Safety plan – It is suggested that the young person has an agreed safety plan. A safety plan or management plan is a document written in collaboration with the young person, key contacts at school, parents/caregivers and any external mental health services or GP (if available) about what support they need and who will provide this, in order for them to feel

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safe and supported. It might also detail situations that the young person finds difficult and how these situations will be managed. All teachers involved with the young person should be given relevant information from the plan to help guide them in assisting the young person during class time.

Graduated return to school – It may be appropriate for the young person to return to school on a part-time basis until they feel well enough to attend full-time. Returning to school should be negotiated after discussion with the young person, parents/caregivers and other support staff (if available).

Study load – It may be more manageable for a young person to be on a partial study load until they feel well enough to manage a full workload. This should be discussed with the young person, the school key contact, parents/caregivers and external mental health services (if available).

Catching up on missed school work – The young person's length of absence from school will determine how much school work they have missed. This may feel quite overwhelming and they may need extra support to prioritise their work load. The young person's need to catch up on missed work and how this will be approached should be discussed with the young person and relevant school staff. Depending on the time missed, it may be worth considering an exemption for missed work, assignments or exams.

Discussing the attempted suicide or self-harm in the classroom – Above all it is important to keep in mind the young person's rights to privacy, confidentiality and respect, while also being collaborative in negotiating their return to school.

Discussing the suicide attempt or self-harm with other students will depend on some of the considerations below:

- Whether the young person communicated any information about their suicide attempt or self-harm to the school community
- Whether the young person posted any suggestive or explicit messages on social media regarding their suicide attempt or self-harm

When students know of the suicide attempt or (significant) self-harm, it will be important to discuss it in the classroom even if the young person is not well known by their peers.

In cases where a young person has been open about their self-harm or suicide attempt, either through direct verbal communication or social media, it is important to consult with the young person and their parents/caregivers and reach agreement upon how to discuss this in the school. If students do know about the details of the suicide attempt or self-harm it will be important to have a general discussion in the classroom conveying the importance of dispelling rumours, encouraging help-seeking behaviours and reminding the students of respecting the rights of others.

If the young person has been actively informing others about their suicide attempt or self-harm, a conversation between the young person, their parents/caregivers, school key contact and mental health provider (if available) needs to occur. It may be helpful to explain the importance of not discussing it at length with fellow students as this information may be distressing and harmful to others. Alternative appropriate avenues for the young person to discuss their self-harm or suicide attempt should be explored.

Marginalised Groups and Youth Suicide

– Suicide is a difficult topic for many people; however for young people who identify as being part of a marginalised group such as Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) or Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Intersex (LGBTI), there are additional considerations to be aware of. When thinking about issues related to youth suicide it is very important to be aware of the unique needs of these groups and respond in the most appropriate way.

If you believe that a young person is at imminent 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 the young person (or arrange for supervision) until they can be seen and assessed.

Other fact sheets that may be of interest:

Self-harm, Suicide attempts, and Identifying risk factors and warning signs for suicide available www.headspace.org.au/schoolsupport

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

Acknowledgements

The Maine Youth Suicide Prevention Program (2009). www.maine.gov