

Suicide: How prepared is your school?



When a suicide occurs in a school community it is important to have a co-ordinated and planned response.

A planned response can help to minimise the effects of this difficult and traumatic event. This will enable students, staff and the school community to return to normal routine as soon as possible. This document may be used to complement an existing school emergency management response policy or plan.

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The following are some questions to consider in preparing your school for a response to a suicide.

1. Who is on the Emergency Response Team?

The first step in having a planned response to a suicide is assigning an Emergency Response Team of approximately 5-6 staff. Your school may already have established this team to manage emergency situations. It may be worth assessing whether the most appropriate staff members to manage a suicide are part of this team. Depending on the resources of the school, some emergency response teams may also be made up of employees from external agencies (such as a local mental health service). Emergency Response Team members should be thoughtfully selected based on their experience, suitability and skill level. Some examples of appropriate staff may include the school principal and other senior staff, school wellbeing staff, year level co-ordinator or pastoral care staff. It may also be important to consider back up staff if the selected staff are unable to be involved for any reason.

2. What are the roles within the Emergency Response Team?

Team members should be selected based on their appropriate experience and ability to carry out the particular responsibilities of the role. Below are suggestions for allocating roles and responsibilities to the Emergency Response Team. These are suggestions only.

Emergency response team leader:

This role is typically suited to the school Principal or a senior staff member. They oversee the direct management of the response including informing staff of the suicide, chairing staff meetings and ensuring the critical incident review occurs. The team leader should be made aware of all activities occurring in relation to the response to ensure co-ordination and efficiency.

Liaison with family, police and management of social media:

Ideally the person assigned to this role should have an already existing relationship with the family, while also being confident in the area of social media. It may not be possible to assign this role prior to the event occurring. Following a suicide, the family may be involved with social media and could need support from the school in managing this.

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Liaison with mental health services and identification of vulnerable staff and students:

This role may be best suited to a wellbeing staff member given their area of expertise and training.

Liaison with Department of Education/relevant school authorities and mainstream media contact:

This role may be suited to a senior staff member who already has a connection to the relevant education authority and should be limited to one person.

Preparation of written information for students, staff, parents and/or community:

This person may also be the contact point for parents and community members who have questions or concerns following the suicide.

3. What factors should be considered when developing a school suicide response plan?

In addition to establishing an Emergency Response Team and allocating roles to the team members, there are some other important points a school should think about. These are things that assist the school in responding in a timely and effective manner while also minimising stress to staff and students. Schools should:

- Have a clear process for informing school staff about the suicide e.g. telephone tree used to inform staff prior to school commencing. Ideally the Principal/emergency response team leader would contact other emergency response team members before school starts and organise a whole school staff meeting prior to classes starting.
- Identify a student support room. This is a quiet space within the school for students, which allows for confidentiality and privacy for those needing extra support.
- Create/source a script to inform students (refer to *Suicide Postvention Toolkit - a guide for secondary schools* pg. 34).

- Create/source a letter to parents (refer to *Suicide Postvention Toolkit - a guide for secondary schools* pg. 35)
- Ensure you have the details of the media liaison advisor from Department of Education or relevant school body.
- Source and initiate links (if not already in place) with local mental health agencies to ensure prompt support for students following a suicide.
- Consider the process of documentation of all actions and responses carried out by the emergency response team leader. This documentation will be vital in the review of the critical incident.

It would also be helpful to look through the *Suicide Postvention Toolkit - a guide for secondary schools* (available at headspace.org.au/schoolsupport). This document aims to support schools following a suicide and schools would benefit from reviewing the information as part of their emergency management response preparation.

A blank template has been provided to assist you to clearly identify which staff will carry out each role in the suicide response plan and to note the tasks they are responsible for.

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