

Remembering a young person: Memorials and important events



Young people affected by a suicide often want to have some kind of memorial for the person who has died.

A memorial could be an event commemorating the person's life or an object which reminds others of the person who has died.

A memorial gives friends, families and their communities the chance to mourn together, share their grief and demonstrate the significance of their loss.

When it is a young person who has died the urge to create a memorial can be particularly strong. This can play an important role in the grieving process of friends and fellow students.

While it is beneficial for young people to grieve in this way, it's important to memorialise the deceased person in a respectful way. Memorials should address the needs of family and friends and avoid glamourising the person or the way that they died. Glamourising suicide refers to actions or messages that may make suicide seem desirable to other young people; increasing the risk of suicide contagion amongst other vulnerable young people (see [headspace School Support fact sheet Suicide Contagion](#)).

How to avoid glamourising or stigmatising suicide

Treat the death as you would any other. This ensures that suicide is not glamourised in any way. It sends a message to young people that any death is tragic, painful and worthy of acknowledgement.

Discuss the connection between suicide and mental health problems to help limit glamourisation and reduce the risk of suicide contagion. This also helps to open up discussion around strategies aimed at preventing suicide.

Avoid prohibiting a memorial as this may stigmatise the family and friends of the person who has died, leading to anger and further distress for those affected. However, setting some limits around the material, the content, the location and the length of time it remains in place can reduce potential distress and reduce risk to vulnerable people.

Safe and respectful memorials

There are many ways to create a respectful and meaningful memorial. Including friends and family in the planning of a memorial is a good way of making sure that those closest to the deceased person are not caused any further distress.

Formal services, such as funerals, will probably be organised by the family. It is important to ascertain and be respectful of the wishes of the family in regards to staff and student attendance. Although students may want to attend, the family may wish for a small, private funeral for family members only. The staff member liaising with the family should clarify this and communicate this to the school community.

Services can be extremely upsetting for young people, so if students are attending encourage parents to attend with their children and have counsellors available after the service. For more information about preparing and supporting students around a funeral see [fact sheet Funerals following suicide: supporting the school community](#).

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Spontaneous memorials

After a suicide young people may create spontaneous memorials. Often they will leave messages, flowers, photos or other items at the site where the person died or another significant place.

It is important that such sites don't inadvertently glamourise, vilify or stigmatise the deceased student or their death – or cause distress to others who may see them. As discussed above, setting some limits around the memorial can reduce potential distress and reduce risk to vulnerable people.

Online memorials – on social networking sites, blogs or at a dedicated website – are also common. **See fact sheet *Managing social media following a suicide.***

Planning for important events

The anniversary of a person's death, and events such as their birthday or school graduation, are often difficult times for friends and family. These dates serve as reminders that the person they were close to is no longer with them. Even for those coping well, events like these can bring up old feelings of grief, sadness and loss. They may also experience feelings of anxiety – about not being able to cope or about having to deal with these emotions again.

Anniversaries and important events can also be a time of increased risk for vulnerable young people and may trigger suicidal thoughts or behaviours.

Giving friends and family opportunities to mark these dates in meaningful ways can help the grieving process.

You can support young people in coping with anniversaries and important events in a number of ways:

- Let them know it's normal to re-experience grief and sadness at significant times. Remind them that things will get easier over time.
- Suggest activities that make the young person feel good and remind them of the times they shared with the person.
- Encourage them to contact supportive family members or friends rather than spending their days alone.
- Remind them that there is no 'right' way to mark an anniversary. Help them find a way of coping that they feel comfortable with.
- Help them connect with counsellors or other support services if they are feeling overwhelmed or unable to cope in the lead-up to the event.

Organised memorials to mark an anniversary, or important event, can help provide a focus and acknowledge the event's significance. Ideally, these should be arranged with small groups of close friends and family, and always with the permission of parents. Having counsellors or teachers available to provide support following the memorial is a good way to manage any distress experienced by those attending.

Consider marginalised young people

When thinking about issues related to youth suicide it is very important to be aware of the unique needs of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse

(CALD), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) or Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Intersex (LGBTI) young people and respond appropriately. Please see the **headspace** School Support website for more information.

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

Acknowledgements

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and Suicide Prevention Resource Centre. (2011). *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*, Newton, MA: Education Development Centre, Inc.
Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. (2011). *LIFE Fact Sheets*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, accessed at www.livingisforeveryone.com.au

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