



**headspace**

School Support

# Suicide Postvention Toolkit

A guide for  
secondary schools

[headspace.org.au/schoolsupport](https://headspace.org.au/schoolsupport)

**headspace** is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing under the Youth Mental Health Initiative Program. **headspace** provides mental health, drug and alcohol, physical health and education and vocational support to young people aged between 12 and 25. For more information visit **headspace.org.au**



### **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.

South Australia Department of Education and Children's Services, Catholic Education South Australia and Association of Independent Schools. (2010). *Suicide Postvention Guidelines: A framework to assist staff in supporting their school communities in responding to suspected, attempted or completed suicide*. South Australia: Government of South Australia, Department of Education and Children's Services.

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# Foreword

The *Suicide Postvention Toolkit - A guide for secondary schools* has been compiled by **headspace** School Support, an initiative funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing.

This Toolkit is heavily informed by the exemplary work of the South Australia Department for Education and Child Development, Catholic Education SA, and Association of Independent Schools of SA, who together have developed recently-revised suicide postvention guidelines. I thank them for granting permission for us to replicate their groundbreaking work here.

The work of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and Suicide Prevention Resource Centre has also been invaluable in creating this resource.

The death of a student by suicide is a tragic event. It can have wide-reaching impacts on students, families, teachers and the broader school community. This new and innovative service offers support to secondary schools after such an event. The service is designed to provide an individually tailored, flexible response to the needs of schools in order to address immediate issues and build capacity in the longer term.

This document will assist secondary schools in planning and managing their response to a completed, attempted or suspected suicide within the student community. A coordinated and informed postvention response can help schools address the needs of students and staff following a suicide, and this in turn can reduce the risk of further suicides occurring.

**headspace** is excited to be able to work with and support secondary schools across Australia and anticipate that the Suicide Postvention Toolkit, as well as the other resources that are available on the **headspace** website, will be informative and helpful. Evaluation of the service and the resources provided will be a key part of the growth and ongoing development of the initiative. As such, the Suicide Postvention Toolkit and other resources will be updated on an ongoing basis.

The suicide of a young person can have enormous consequences for schools, both in the short term and long term. We hope that the **headspace** School Support service and this Suicide Postvention Toolkit can assist in supporting school staff, and reduce the distress experienced by school communities affected by suicide.



**Chris Tanti**  
headspace CEO



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# Introduction

**When a suicide occurs, the effect on those touched by it – families, friends, communities – is immediate and traumatic. The impact on a school community is no different; it often happens unexpectedly and leaves a school with many questions about what to do next. Students often struggle to cope, and it can be difficult for the school community to know how it should respond. In these circumstances, schools need clear, practical and reliable information, which they can rely on for guidance and direction.**

When a student takes their own life, it can increase the risk of suicide in other vulnerable young people. International research has identified a phenomenon known as suicide ‘contagion’, where a person’s knowledge of (or exposure to) a suicide increases the likelihood of them viewing suicide as an option. Young people have been found to be particularly susceptible to suicide contagion. It is therefore vital that schools support students and staff as they deal with the trauma that follows a suicide.

This toolkit aims to support and assist schools in responding to the suicide of a student – a process known as suicide postvention. It is a practical guide that offers suggestions about managing such a traumatic event. It is divided into five sections, which focus on what to do straight after the suicide, in the first 24 hours, in the first week, in the first month and then in the longer term.

An Emergency Response Team is referred to throughout the toolkit. Ideally, schools should have established this team prior to any suicide or crisis and clear policies and procedures around the team’s function should already be in place. However, what is more important is that the school provides a team response once a suicide has occurred and that responsibility does not sit with just one individual.

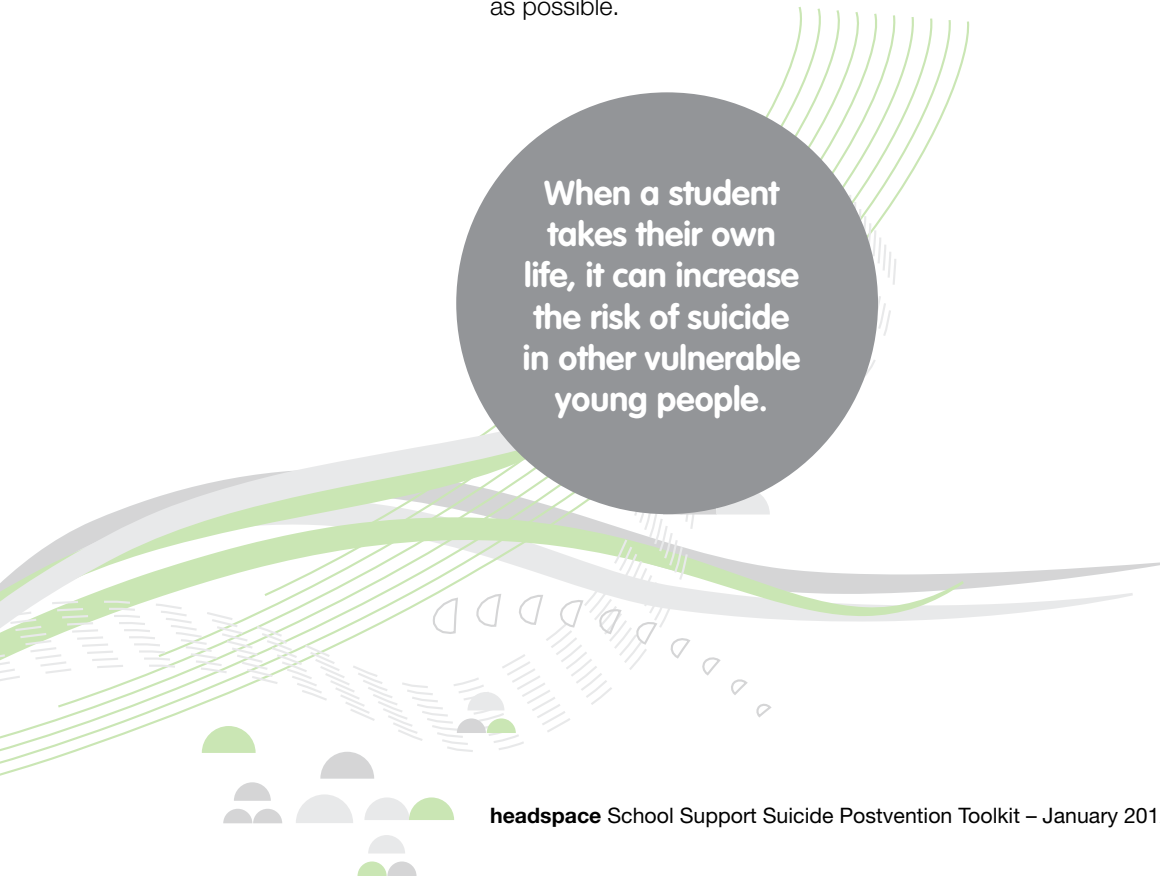
It is also important that schools have policies and structures in place to support the implementation of the tasks laid out in this toolkit. This includes processes for the swift reporting of suicide to the relevant authority (such as the Department of Education) and an emergency response plan (along with clear guidelines for its use). Schools also need to be well supported by their relevant education authority and local mental health services during these difficult and stressful times. A coordinated response will help schools support students and staff affected by such a traumatic event.

Finally, ensuring schools have clear and concise documentation is also important in the management of a student suicide. Each step of the management process – including identification of at-risk students and referrals for extra support – should be documented. This will assist in the critical incident review, which should take place following the suicide.

**headspace** School Support ([headspace.org.au/schoolsupport](http://headspace.org.au/schoolsupport)) can assist you in any part of the process outlined in this toolkit, from developing an emergency response plan to follow-up training options, and if needed can attend the school to assist in the emergency response. Clinicians are also available to provide extra support and to speak with you and other members of the school community. Even if your school has the appropriate policies in place, this can be helpful.

While this toolkit generally refers to suicide, many of the same principles apply when dealing with an attempted suicide.

We hope this toolkit can restore the routine of your school – and therefore the emotional wellbeing of the students and staff – back to normal as soon as possible.



When a student  
takes their own  
life, it can increase  
the risk of suicide  
in other vulnerable  
young people.

# Postvention checklist

## **This page will give you a snapshot of what needs to be done when managing a suicide in your school.**

As you progress through the tasks, you can tick off each section. Please read the toolkit document completely, and then re-read each section as they become relevant to your situation. This will give you the information you need to manage this difficult situation successfully.

### **Immediate response (see Section A)**

- ☐ If the incident has happened at school: Ensure the immediate safety of school staff and students (e.g. provide first aid, call ambulance and police).
- ☐ If the incident has happened away from school: Find out as many of the facts and circumstances as possible. Do not ignore rumours – investigate them immediately. Confirm facts with the family and/or police.
- ☐ Ensure those affected (students/parents/staff) are not left alone.

### **The first 24 hours (see Section B)**

- ☐ Inform the relevant representative at the Department of Education (or equivalent body for your school).

Convene the Emergency Response Team (ERT) and plan the following steps:

- ☐ Contact the relevant mental health agency.
- ☐ Identify and plan support for students who are at risk.
- ☐ Set up a student support room in the school.
- ☐ Inform staff. Give them a script explaining what has happened, so that all staff are giving students that same consistent message.
- ☐ Inform students via a script. Do this in small groups, not at a whole school assembly. Do not describe the method of suicide.
- ☐ Inform the wider community via a letter.
- ☐ Contact the media liaison advisor in the central office of your relevant education authority (the Department of Education or equivalent authority for non-government schools). Refer all media enquiries to that office.



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will give you the  
information you  
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successfully.

### The first week (see Section C)

- ☐ Restore the school to its regular routine.
- ☐ Liaise with the bereaved/affected family.
- ☐ Plan the school's involvement in the funeral.
- ☐ Organise regular staff meetings, to ensure they are provided with up to date information.
- ☐ Monitor students and, in collaboration with the relevant mental health agency, begin assessments of students identified as being at risk.
- ☐ Monitor staff wellbeing and provide opportunities for debriefing.
- ☐ Keep parents informed via notices.
- ☐ Collect all the belongings of the deceased student for the police and family.
- ☐ Continue documentation of all the school's actions.

### The first month (see Section D)

- ☐ Monitor staff and student wellbeing.
- ☐ Plan for relevant events that will be held by the school (year book photographs, award nights, graduation).
- ☐ Gather information from staff that is relevant for a critical incident review.
- ☐ Conduct a critical incident review.
- ☐ Consider offering parents and/or the community information sessions with a mental health agency.
- ☐ Continue documentation of all the school's actions.

### Longer term (see Section E)

- ☐ Continue to support and monitor students and staff.
- ☐ Keep parents, staff and students informed.
- ☐ Plan for anniversaries, birthdays and other significant events.
- ☐ Implement the recommendations of the critical incident review.
- ☐ Include your school's postvention plan in its staff induction process.

# Section A

## Immediate response

### **If the incident has happened at school, ensure the immediate safety of all school staff and students**

- Ensure no other students or staff are in immediate danger.
- Administer first aid where necessary.
- Call 000 for emergency services.
- Alert the Emergency Response Team for assistance.
- Move witnesses to safe locations. They must be supported and supervised by staff/ counsellors until police have taken statements or advised about other actions.
- Isolate the site of the suicide from student and unauthorised staff access by using screens, blocking corridors and using evacuation procedures. Do everything possible to protect others from viewing the site, without disturbing the area which police will need to inspect. Do not remove or disturb items from the site until police have concluded their work and advised that the area is no longer a secured area.
- Depending on the means of the suicide, think about making changes to the environment or limiting access to materials.
- If the student has attempted suicide but is physically unharmed, it is important they have a risk and mental state assessment. This is best done by an experienced mental health practitioner (possibly at the local emergency department, by the local mental health crisis team or by the local GP).

### **If not a school based event, find out the facts**

- Do not ignore “rumours” about suicide from students, parents or staff. Do not ignore suicide notes/emails/messages sent to staff by students. Immediate follow up should occur in both these situations.
- If, after following up on notes or rumours, a student is found safe in the school, it will be important to organise a mental state and risk assessment. In most cases, it will be essential to share this information with the student’s parents and refer the young person to a mental health provider (if one is not already involved).
- If the student cannot be located at school, make contact with the family immediately. If parents are unaware of the student’s whereabouts and safety, contact police.
- Reports of suicide that do not come from immediate family members should be verified through the police, hospital staff or, with extreme sensitivity, the family.

### **If a suicide report is made or confirmed by the family, ask them if others can be informed**

It is appropriate to seek the family's feelings about informing the school community of the incident straight away. If the family asks for advice, it is appropriate to talk about:

- the recommendations of these guidelines;
- the damaging impact of misinformation;
- the needs of other affected parents to know, so they can support their own children's grief; and
- the option of their child only being named to their peer group and referring anonymously to the incident with the rest of the school population.

### **Ensure that affected students, parents and staff are not left alone**

Exposure to suicide is a traumatic experience. Staff, students and parents immediately affected by a suicide should not be left alone. They should be comforted and supported by others until family members can take over that care. Your emergency response plan should identify safe and secure places where this kind of crisis support can be provided. Refer to fact sheet *Grief: How young people might respond to a suicide* for further information.

### **Inform the relevant Department of Education office**

Youth suicide can lead to other vulnerable young people being at an increased risk of harm. International research confirms the risk of suicide 'contagion', where a vulnerable person's knowledge of a suicide increases the likelihood of them viewing suicide as an option.

It is important that you alert other schools to any immediate connections between the deceased student and members of their own school community. Schools should also be informed of the possible influence of information about the suicide being exchanged between the student populations. Given the instant and global communication networks that young people utilise, schools need as much advance warning as possible, so that sensitive enquiries can be made between schools and extra monitoring can be put in place for identified vulnerable students.

**Staff, students and parents immediately affected by a suicide should not be left alone.**

## Section B

# The first 24 hours

### Convene the Emergency Response Team (ERT)

Ideally, your school should have already selected the staff members who will be in your Emergency Response Team. New members can be added as necessary. These may include people from outside the school, such as mental health professionals.

If your school does not have this team in place already, you should put it together as soon as possible, and have it meet immediately.

Emergency response teams should be made up of five or six people. The team should have a nominated leader. The team should include your school's psychologist/social worker, other wellbeing staff and the principal (or senior staff). You should also consider including IT or computer staff to deal with social media. Other staff members who can work effectively under pressure with compassion and empathy may also be an asset. A mental health clinician from an outside agency may also be helpful.

After a suicide, many actions need to be coordinated in a very short period of time. However, unlike other kinds of emergencies, suicide postvention also needs to continue for many months. Therefore, it is essential for the ERT to ensure:

- the wellbeing of all members of the school community is monitored and protected;
- all responsibilities are undertaken efficiently;
- accurate and consistent advice is provided to students, staff and parents; and
- no single member of staff assumes the full burden of responsibility.

Once the immediate safety needs of staff and students have been met, the ERT must meet to establish the school's postvention plan.

It should delegate the following responsibilities to its team members:

- Liaising with family
- Identifying vulnerable students, staff and close friends for personal contact and follow up
- Preparing written information for students, staff and parents
- Liaising with mental health professionals
- Liaising with police
- Protecting student belongings (e.g. securing the student's locker)
- Liaising with department support staff
- Managing all incoming and outgoing information (e.g. sympathy cards or newspaper notices)
- Managing media contact
- Documenting all actions
- If the incident has happened at school, making appropriate environmental changes (e.g. barring access to a roof top; locking away ropes, poisons and other materials)

## Make contact with relevant mental health service

**Postvention collaboration between schools and mental health professionals is greatly enhanced by having a relationship or partnership already established.**

Having the immediate support of mental health professionals is invaluable in assisting a school to manage its postvention responsibilities. For this reason, it is sensible to invite a mental health representative to be a part of the ERT for an appropriate period. This will also assist the referral process for any students who are felt to be high-risk and in need of additional counselling.

Mental health professionals will be able to work alongside the school in the following key areas:

- the immediate counselling needs of affected students
- identifying other vulnerable young people
- screening young people at risk
- taking referrals from families and staff
- providing information sessions as required for parents, staff and students
- planning the management of significant occasions (funerals, anniversaries)
- liaising with hospital personnel and the media where relevant.

## Identify and plan support for students at risk

After a suicide, one of a school's main responsibilities is to ensure their processes of identifying, supporting, referring and monitoring vulnerable students are well understood and effective.

**In the first 24 hours**, it is important that:

- the student's closest friends (and any other students identified as vulnerable) are personally informed of the incident by appropriate staff and provided with immediate support and information about where they can receive continuing assistance at school;
- the affected students' cooperation is sought in not spreading sensitive information about the deceased student, and that they follow the protocols about leaving the school grounds;
- direct contact is made with the parents of these students, so that support at home can be planned; and
- direct contact is made with the principals of schools attended by the student's siblings or known close friends, to ensure awareness.

After a suicide,  
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# Section B

## The first 24 hours

### Set up a support room for students

A support room provides a safe, supervised location where students' grief and needs can be expressed, responded to and monitored. An appropriate staff member (such as a counsellor or a mental health provider) must supervise the room at all times. The room's door should be left ajar rather than shut (as per normal protective practices). The support room should be quiet and out of the way. Keep a sign-in sheet, so you can monitor which students are using the room and may be at increased risk.

Allow distressed students access to this room for several days after the incident. Monitor student movement to and from the room and ensure they are returning to class or being collected by parents or family members.

### Keep staff well-informed

It is vital that staff are informed of all available information regarding the suicide. Ideally, staff should meet at the beginning and end of the working day following the suicide. This allows for ongoing communication about decisions made by the ERT, while also providing space for staff feedback and support.

The leader of the ERT should brief staff about:

- the facts of the situation, including any parent wishes about information being shared/ withheld. If a death is not confirmed as suicide or parents have asked that the term suicide is not used, then refer to it as a student "death" at this stage;
- **immediately following up all unauthorised/unexplained student absences;**
- the members of the ERT and their roles, particularly identifying the person other staff members should come to if they receive any new or relevant information;
- the response plan for the day, in particular changes to responsibilities or routines, such as more staff on yard duty and interim measures to track movement;
- how phone enquiries are to be managed;
- the importance of **not** asking students for information relating to the suicide, but passing on what they are told or observe;
- forwarding items of the student's work to a nominated ERT member, including art, assignments, and journals (these will be held for police and family);
- the principles of postvention – to prevent further harm to others by identifying people at risk and by managing the school's response, so that suicide is neither glamorised nor made secret; and
- contact being made with staff who were absent at that time or who are on leave.

Relevant information about roles and special procedures should also be displayed in the staff room.

The team leader should also ensure all adults who will have contact with students in the following 24 hours are briefed. This includes regular bus drivers, sports coaches, canteen staff, school support staff, out of school hours care staff and tutors.

Teaching staff should be provided with:

- a script which they should follow to inform students (see sample documents at the end of this toolkit);
- information on how to offer support, how to manage a discussion about suicide, signs to watch out for and information on grief;
- sources of support they can access for themselves; and
- the option of not being involved in supporting students or reading the statement, if they feel this will put their own wellbeing at risk.

Individual staff members who are considered particularly vulnerable should be spoken to ahead of the meeting. However, it is important to encourage **all** staff to access support or respite whenever they need it.

Ask staff which students they consider will need particular support and which students are of concern. Also ask them about relevant information they may have, such as connections with other students, particular events that need to be monitored or changed, and possessions of the deceased student that need to be collected for the family.

All staff briefings in the postvention period should be used to pass on information, as well as to seek it out. This contributes to a sense of collegiality and shared responsibility, which helps protect the wellbeing of staff.

It is vital that staff are informed of all available information regarding the suicide.



## Section B

### The first 24 hours

#### Inform students, but do not provide details of the method of suicide

The ERT should prepare a statement for teachers to read to students (see sample documents at the end of this toolkit). This is an important way of supporting staff who find the task of informing students stressful. It also ensures that accurate and consistent information is provided to students, which helps counter the rumours and misinformation that inevitably arise in a crisis. Students need to look out for each other at times like these, and this statement should promote this important notion.

**Friends closest to the student** should be spoken to individually, or in small groups. This should be done by a counsellor or a staff member. Depending on their responses, they should be offered the use of the support room. You may also consider making arrangements for them to be collected by their parents.

No students affected by the news should be allowed to leave the school unaccompanied, unless by direct arrangement with parents.

**Students in the same year level** should be provided with a modified statement (see sample documents at the end of this toolkit). This is done in recognition of their close association with the student, their anticipated desire for more information, and their different need for support.

**Students in the same class as a sibling** will need to be given additional assistance in understanding how to support their classmate once they return to school. It may be appropriate to have the counsellor or mental health professional speak to this group, as well as to the class teacher.

**Home or pastoral groups, class groups or year level groups** are the preferred environments in which to inform students about the incident, assuming staff are comfortable to do so.

**Whole school assemblies are not recommended**, because student reactions are more difficult to manage in this environment, and it is harder to support individuals there.



## Inform parents

The ERT should also consider contacting the parents of affected students to inform them of the suicide and the possible impact it may have on their child.

This should be done via a letter sent home with the students (see sample documents at the end of this toolkit). Giving parents immediate and accurate information about the school's response to the suicide is supportive of students and parents. It also protects the school in a number of ways:

- limits misinformation and distress to the parent population;
- reduces the number of enquiries;
- encourages actions and attitudes that complement the school's postvention plan;
- helps parents to take supportive and protective action with their own children;
- promotes communication with the school about wellbeing concerns; and
- gives parents confidence in the school's capacity to return to a normal routine.

Parents may appreciate additional information and support, in particular, information on how to talk about suicide and answers to frequently asked questions and concerns. Mental health services will be able to provide the ERT with this information (you can also find fact sheets and other information at [headspace.org.au/schoolsupport](http://headspace.org.au/schoolsupport))

## Inform the wider community

How you let the wider community know of the suicide will vary, depending on your school's location and its links to the local community. However, information of this nature spreads quickly, via social media and word of mouth, and can have a profound effect on young people not connected to the school. For this reason, it may be important for the ERT to liaise with local sports groups and other agencies that involve young people.

## Help the media report on the incident in an appropriate manner

Give one member of the ERT the role of media liaison person. This will assist you in giving an accurate and consistent message to the media. All contact with the media should be made via this person. However, the ERT delegate should also liaise with the relevant spokesperson at the Department of Education (or equivalent body). Your media liaison person should prepare a statement that contains accurate information and is agreed to by the ERT and/or parents. They may also refer the media to experts on youth suicide, who can give them further material.

The media liaison person can reduce the risk of contagion by helping the media report on suicide in the most appropriate manner. *(For more information, refer to the **headspace** School Support Suicide Postvention Toolkit, Responding to the media and Suicide contagion.)*

Giving parents immediate and accurate information about the school's response to the suicide is supportive of students and parents.

# Section C

## The first week

### Ensure regular school routine

As far as possible (and appropriate), school routines should return to normal after approximately three days. The use of the support room should reduce as time passes. Schools will need to use their discretion to decide when this is “closed” and normal counselling processes resume. The return to regular daily routines and activities is an important contribution to the recovery of all affected members in the school community.

Returning to normal routines does not mean that vigilance and awareness of student and staff wellbeing are lessened. This should continue for a number of months, or longer for some individuals.

### Liaise with family

One member of the ERT should have the responsibility of liaising with the family at this time. This role should be done with sensitivity and compassion, given the grief the family will be experiencing. There may be great variation in the accessibility of the family and their capacity and willingness to communicate. A number of factors may influence this:

- the family's existing relationship with the school
- the family's cultural or religious practices regarding death and suicide
- the level of support the family has
- whether there are siblings also attending the school.

This early liaison with the family is important for a number of reasons, including to:

- offer the condolences of the school;
- offer support and liaison with the school, including giving them information about the school's postvention plans;
- alert the family of potential or advised media contact;
- determine the family's wishes on the school's representation at the funeral/service; and
- discuss and arrange support of siblings if they also attend the school.

If there was a suicide attempt, this early liaison is important to plan support for the student's return.

If it is proving difficult to speak directly with the family, it may be possible to liaise with an extended family member or a close family friend. This may also limit the number of times the family have to relay distressing information.

If the family do not wish the incident to be referred to as a suicide or attempted suicide, keep them or their liaison person informed of the information being exchanged between students. If the family are made aware that attempted or completed suicide is being discussed by many students, they may change their mind about confirming this aspect of the incident.

## Plan the school's involvement in the funeral

After discussion with the family, it is important to consider and plan how the school and students will be involved with the funeral.

In order to monitor and support students and staff, the school should know who attends the funeral. If it occurs on a school day, students must have parental consent to attend.

Ideally, attendance at the funeral should be limited to close friends and staff, and this should only happen after liaison with the family. It is important to consider the need for increased support of those people who attend the funeral or who may play a role in the proceedings.

Students and/or family members may wish to hold a memorial service in the school. Generally, memorials involving large numbers of students are not recommended. Schools could consider using their support room for reflective activities that involve smaller groups of students. It's possible for staff to use large routine assembly opportunities to acknowledge the grief felt by friends and family. However, it's critical that the messages are delivered in a way that ensures the suicide is not glamourised.

## Ensure regular staff meetings

Staff should meet regularly during this first week. This allows for regular debriefing, which ensures staff feel supported and up to date with relevant information. In turn, this helps create calm and restores order to a distressed school population.

At each meeting, staff should share any information, concerns or observations which they consider important. The ERT can also use these meetings to provide feedback and information about what has occurred during the last day. It is important the ERT's mental health representative attends the staff meetings so they can hear information about students who staff feel may be at risk. The ERT may also be required to support staff.

The return to regular daily routines and activities is an important contribution to the recovery of all affected members in the school community.

# Section C

## The first week

### Suggested example of topics for all staff meetings

#### *Students of concern*

- Staff should be provided with a handout describing risk factors and how to respond to a student who may be at increased risk (refer to fact sheet *Identifying risk factors and warning signs for suicide*).
- Staff should be encouraged to discuss this information and ask questions, particularly of the mental health professional.
- Staff should be directed to immediately pass on names of students they are concerned about to the ERT member delegated with coordination of this information.

#### *Activities of concern*

- Use staff to brainstorm all upcoming events or activities which might need to be altered or cancelled in view of the suicide. Staff should think about:
  - projects, plays, research, novels or other items in the curriculum that could invite a focus on suicide;
  - excursions or camps which may now be seen as inappropriate or too difficult to manage safely;
  - all the roles that a deceased student would have been playing in the near future (e.g. sporting, academic or community roles); and
  - events where a deceased student would be expected to be honoured.

You do not need to decide how to manage the situation immediately, just to know what has to be planned.

### The Emergency Response Team's responsibilities during staff meetings are:

- Inform staff about what has been planned for funeral attendance, parent consent requirements and provisions for student support.

Explain:

- the presence of additional personnel (such as social workers from sector offices or mental health agency staff) and their roles;
- when staff can expect that a deceased student's name will be removed from the roll (this is easier for staff to cope with if it is anticipated, rather than a surprise);
- media involvement;
- any new information/requirements; and
- the need to collect information for the documentation process.

## Monitor students and begin assessments of those identified as being at risk

This needs to be done in collaboration with a mental health agency. Ideally, a mental health professional will be on the ERT and will be helping with this work from the outset. This is also the role of the school counsellors.

In the first 24 hours, the closest friends and associates of the student and any students who witnessed the suicide will have to be contacted and provided with immediate support.

The following information can help you identify other young people who may be at increased risk. Developing a plan to support them and respond to their risk is vital.

### 1. Identify students who are immediately or already considered at risk

This may include:

- siblings of the student concerned;
- students with a history of suicide attempt;
- students who are (or have been) accessing mental health services for depression/suicide ideation/self harm; and
- students known to be struggling with grief or trauma related to other events (such as deaths, accidents, catastrophes, family breakdown or emotional, physical or sexual abuse).

### 2. Identify other young people who may be profoundly affected

This can be done with the help of staff, student, parent and family networks.

This group may include:

- friends or boyfriends/girlfriends who attend other schools (this is best followed up by counsellor-to-counsellor communication);
- friends/acquaintances who communicated with the student in any fashion in the hours before the incident; and
- students who are expressing guilt about “messages” that they were given by the student, but did not act on or share with an adult.

### 3. Identify other students of concern

This can be done via referrals from staff, students or parents.

- Information sent home to parents should encourage parents and students to contact the school if they are worried about any young people they know.
- Staff will be encouraged to discuss any students they are concerned about with wellbeing/mental health staff and this may result in the young person being referred for support or monitoring.

# Section C

## The first week

### **4. Develop response and support plans for all identified students (in collaboration with mental health professionals)**

As part of these plans, the ERT should:

- contact the identified young person;
- contact the identified person's parents (unless it is believed that such contact will place the student at further risk);
- give the at-risk person a referral to a mental health professional for suicide risk screening (if appropriate); and
- develop a written plan outlining the support the student will receive from the school, their family and any external support agencies (this should be given to all the parties involved).

Only mental health professionals should assess students for suicide risk.

### **Monitor staff wellbeing**

Staff wellbeing must be monitored and responded to at regular intervals. Encourage staff to put their own wellbeing first and to ask for respite, support or a change in role if they need it. The good mental health of staff will assist the school in returning to regular routines and help make students feel well supported and cared for.

Staff may experience their own feelings of guilt and grief about the suicide. Regular meetings and opportunities for them to debrief are important. Consider referring them to the appropriate professional support staff.

Once normal routines have been re-established, the ERT should consider all avenues of support that can assist the school in maintaining this condition. Schools can help manage the extra load placed on staff at this time by bringing in additional social workers/counsellors, as well as relief teachers. All outside support staff must be briefed on the school's emergency response plan and must follow it.

### **Keep parents informed**

Ensure that parents are advised of any significant events or changes to the school's routine. In this early stage, this could include:

- funeral arrangements and consent requirements;
- changes to previously planned activities or excursions;
- availability of additional counselling services in the school;
- changes to attendance and/or sign-in/sign-out procedures; and
- planned building changes.

Alternatively, schools may choose to organise a parent meeting to distribute this information. This can also provide parents with a forum to ask questions, express concerns and seek support. It is important that ERT members attend, as well as the principal and counselling staff. This meeting should have a clear agenda and be chaired carefully. The chair should allow for information to be shared and for parents to express their concerns.

Depending on its size, it may be helpful to break the meeting into two parts. Use the first part to provide general information to the whole group. Areas to cover include the school's response and plans for the next week. Also provide parents with information on suicide, risk factors and how to talk with their child about suicide. The second part of the meeting could involve splitting into smaller groups, with each group facilitated by a counsellor or mental health professional. This allows for discussion or questions in an environment that can easily be contained.

### **Protect the student's belongings for the police and family**

The protection of a student's belongings is an important act of respect for a grieving family. It is also critical to the work that police will undertake. When other students take/distribute these belongings, they may unwittingly cause distress for the deceased student's parents and compromise police work. It is vital this does not happen. Any item can assume a precious status for family members and be significant to the work of police or the coroner.

Once the police give you their approval, a staff member should empty the student's locker. This should only be done when students are not present. These items should be kept together with the student's other belongings. An inventory should be made of these items and they should be stored securely in the school until they are collected by the family.

Schools need to be prepared for the grief that parents will be experiencing. By bringing all these items together, you protect the family from having to move around the school (perhaps in a distressed state) looking for items or emptying a locker in the presence of other students.

An empty locker space can be a particularly distressing symbol for close friends, so it is appropriate to forewarn them when this is going to happen.

### **Ensure good documentation**

All the actions of the ERT must be clearly documented, ideally by one team member. This will help the school provide the details of its postvention actions to an authorised agency, if need be. It also means the information needed for the critical incident review process is ready.

Having one team member manage this documentation ensures actions are not lost. It also protects the school from stress if there is urgent request for information from outside agencies.



# Section D

## The first month

### Continue to monitor staff and student wellbeing

In the first month, the ERT should be looking for obvious signs of staff or student distress and responding to them in the ways outlined earlier. This should be done in partnership with mental health professionals.

The ERT may consider that the needs of staff and students and the impact on ERT members themselves warrants longer term support, and this should be negotiated with the relevant agencies. The interim appointment of an additional, experienced school leader can provide invaluable support to a school managing suicide postvention. It can relieve school leaders from the day-to-day administrative responsibilities and allow them to devote their attention to specific postvention tasks.

If other crises in the school community occur following a suicide, it is possible that this will impact on those who have been affected by the suicide. If further deaths, attempts or accidents occur, it should be anticipated that many staff and students will return to their earlier levels of grief and therefore require their earlier levels of support and monitoring.

### Plan for and consider school events of relevance

Following a suicide, the school may be faced with some dilemmas around how to manage events or documents that represented the deceased student, including yearbooks, graduation nights, and award ceremonies. Decisions will need to be made about how to manage these situations. Schools can and should celebrate the young person's achievements in the normal way without fear that they are sensationalising the suicide. However, very careful liaison with the family should occur regarding their wishes, and these should be respected.

Each school community will approach these decisions differently, but cultural and family sensitivity and awareness must guide the decisions. Refer to fact sheet *Remembering a young person: memorials and important events* for further information.

### Conduct a critical incident review

Another role of the ERT is to conduct a critical incident review. The purpose of a review is to evaluate the processes and procedures employed by the school in response to a critical incident; that is, an event outside the normal range of experience of the people involved. During this review it is helpful to allow all staff an opportunity to contribute their views on how the school community has managed its postvention responsibilities. It is also important that the review considers the school culture that preceded the suicide. The easiest way to collect candid staff opinion is to provide a written survey (which can be completed anonymously). A member of the ERT should collate the responses and provide them to all staff, as well as those participating in the critical incident review.



It is important to perform a critical incident review so that ideas on how to improve your school's emergency response or practices can be shared, considered and incorporated into school policy and planning. It is also important to acknowledge the efforts of the school community and highlight what has worked well. All members of the ERT usually participate in the critical incident review, along with a facilitator from the Department of Education (or equivalent body).

Prior to the critical incident review, it is helpful for ERT members to consider a number of issues and whether these could be improved:

- identification and support of students at risk of suicide
- staff and student understanding about what to do when they have concerns about a young person's safety
- communication within the school
- communication with parents
- support for staff
- communication with and support from sector offices and mental health agencies.

It is also helpful for the ERT to have data from the staff survey and a summary of the documentation to date. They should also have thought about the above information prior to the critical incident review.

Critical incident reviews are most effective when all participants come prepared and have thought through their ideas and opinions. They need to feel safe to openly express their views and believe the school will use this opportunity to improve processes and acknowledge achievements.

### Consider running an information session for parents

Schools should use their mental health partners or **headspace** School Support to run these sessions.

It is important that the ERT continues to consider what parents may need. This may vary greatly, depending on the circumstance of the suicide and the location and size of the school and community. The following are examples of what schools have offered parents under varying circumstances:

- General information sessions on recognising signs of suicide risk, current research on building resilience, understanding grief and loss, and supportive parenting.
- Year level or general parent sessions to discuss the outcomes of the critical incident review.
- Information sessions targeted at parents of an identified group of at-risk students.

### Ensure good documentation

As is the case in the second phase, it is important that you continue documentation of any decisions or actions in the postvention phase. The amount of documentation will decrease over time, but good practice would be to ensure that documentation occurs for approximately 12 months.

# Section E

## Longer term

### Continue support and monitoring of staff and students

#### Students

By this time, students who are at increased risk will have been identified and should be receiving ongoing support and monitoring, in partnership with mental health professionals and parents. The management of this group of students should be conducted as part of the school's ongoing and multi-layered systems of student support.

However, specific attention should be given to identified students whose social support networks may change through:

- a holiday period
- an exam period
- leaving the school (transition to work, further learning or a family move).

Similarly, identified students whose family support is likely to change (e.g. through divorce/separation) should also receive increased attention.

It is also important to be mindful that despite some high-risk students having been identified and supported by this stage, it does not mean that other students will not continue to be identified as high risk. These students should be referred for assessment and possibly treatment by mental health staff.

Close friends of a deceased student can put pressure on each other by insisting on a particular way of “remembering” their friend and forgetting that people manage grief in very different ways. Staff can help these students by reinforcing (at appropriate times) that there is no right way to remember or grieve the loss of a friend and that they must be kind to each other and respect their differences.

#### Staff

At this stage, the school leadership and ERT should again consider the need for additional personnel support in the school. This applies particularly if the school has been managing more than one critical event. School leaders should also take advice from the ERT about whether changed roles/appointments should be offered to identified staff. Continued liaison with the relevant educational authority is important in helping to quickly facilitate this kind of support.

### Keep parents, students and staff informed of relevant information

Giving parents, staff and students regular and relevant communication is just as important in the long term as it is in the short term. Advice about anniversaries involving the deceased student, media coverage or any other forms of potential stress will continue to help protect the wellbeing of the school community and reinforce a consistent and supportive approach from the ERT.

People's desire to see something positive emerge from a tragedy like suicide is very strong. The results and recommendations of the critical incident review can help the community achieve some of this sense of moving forward.

### **Plan for important anniversaries**

As with deaths from any cause, the anniversary of a death or the birthday of someone deceased are occasions that can take friends and family members back to their original levels of mourning. Being aware of (and prepared for) this possibility is a significant long term postvention responsibility.

Students may wish to do something to recognise different anniversaries. If this is the case, discourage large group memorials. These occasions are best handled in very small groups, with parent knowledge/consent and where an adult can be close by, if not actually present.

A limited group of staff, students and parents may also need to be kept informed of police processes, inquests and legal proceedings. These events have the potential to create high levels of stress. Again, schools need to be alert and responsive to people's needs.

### **Implement recommendations from the critical incident review**

It is important that schools begin to plan and implement any recommendations that were agreed to as part of the critical incident review. Implementing the results of the critical incident review helps people appreciate the positive work that the school community has undertaken.

### **Include postvention plan in staff inductions**

All new staff (teaching and non-teaching) and volunteers should be made aware of your school's postvention plan. In particular, teaching staff must be made familiar with the school's support processes for identified students, as well as your referral pathways and relationships with mental health professionals. Nominate a member of the ERT to whom new staff can direct queries regarding the school's postvention work.

ERT meetings should be held until the affected population of students have completed their schooling. These meetings need to be included in the postvention plan.

People's desire to see something positive emerge from a tragedy like suicide is very strong.

# Other information to consider

## Memorials

School communities often wish to have a memorial for a student who has died. Being compassionate while maintaining the school's primary focus of education can be a tricky balancing act. In the case of suicide, schools must consider how to appropriately memorialise the student without increasing the risk of suicide contagion.

It is very important that schools try to treat all deaths in the same way. Having one approach for memorialising a student who died of cancer or in a car accident and a different approach for a student who died by suicide reinforces stigma and may affect the student's family and friends.

It is important to memorialise the student in a way that does not inadvertently glamourise or romanticise either the student or the death. Schools can do this by emphasising the connection between suicide and underlying mental health issues. These issues can cause difficulties, though they may not be apparent to others.

Wherever possible, schools should meet with the student's friends and family to work out a meaningful and safe way of acknowledging the loss.

Refer to fact sheet *Remembering a young person: memorials and important events* for further information.

## Funerals and memorial services

It is important to remember to keep the regular school routine intact as much as possible. This benefits the whole school, including those who may not have known the deceased.

Schools may appear to provide an obvious setting for a funeral or memorial service because of their connection to the community and their ability to accommodate a large crowd. However, it is advised that such services not be held on school grounds. This enables the school to focus instead on maintaining its regular schedule, structure and routine. Additionally, using a room in the school for a funeral service can inextricably connect that space to the death, making it difficult for students to return there for regular classes or activities.

In situations where school personnel are able to collaborate with the family regarding the funeral or memorial service arrangements, it is also strongly advised that the service be held outside of school hours.

If the family does hold the service during school hours, it is recommended that the school remain open. Students should be permitted to leave school to attend the service only with appropriate parental permission. Parents should be encouraged to attend the funeral or memorial with their children, so they can provide additional emotional support. It also gives parents the opportunity to open a discussion and remind their child that help is available if they or a friend need it.

The school principal and other senior school staff should attend the funeral, and also consider the possibility that extra counsellors would also be beneficial.

### Spontaneous memorials

In the immediate aftermath of a suicide, it is not unusual for students to create a spontaneous memorial. For example, they may leave items like flowers, cards and poems in a place closely associated with the student (such as their locker or classroom seat). They may do the same at the site where the student died.

In these circumstances, the school must balance the students' need to grieve with making sure that death is not glamourised. In all cases, schools should have a consistent policy, so that suicide deaths are handled in the same manner as any other deaths. A combination of time limits and straightforward communication can help to restore equilibrium and avoid glamourising the death in ways that may increase the risk of contagion. Although it may be necessary in some cases to set limits for students, it is important to do so with compassion and sensitivity. For example, schools may wish to make posters and markers available so that students can gather and write messages. Set these posters up in an area that may be avoided by those who do not wish to participate. Do not put them in places like the cafeteria or at the front entrance. After a few days, the posters can be removed and offered to the family.

When a memorial is spontaneously created on school grounds, monitor it for messages that are inappropriate (hostile or inflammatory) or indicate students who may be at risk. Schools can leave such memorials in place until after the funeral (or for up to approximately five days). After this time, the tribute objects may be offered to the family.

The emptiness of the deceased student's chair can be unsettling and evocative. After the funeral (or after a few days), seat allocations may be re-arranged to create a new environment. Teachers should explain in advance that the intention is to strike a balance between showing compassion and ensuring the classroom continues to be an effective learning environment.

When a spontaneous memorial occurs off school grounds, the school's ability to exert influence is limited. However, it can encourage a responsible approach among the students. The school should explain that it is recommended that memorials be time limited (again, until after the funeral or a few days), at which point the memorial would be disassembled and the items offered to the family. Another approach is to suggest that the students participate in a (supervised) ceremony to disassemble the memorial, during which music could be played and students could be permitted to take part of it home. The remaining items can then be offered to the family.

School communities often wish to have a memorial for a student who has died.

# Other information to consider

## **Yearbooks**

All deaths should be treated the same way. This is the guiding principle. So if there is a history of dedicating the yearbook (or a page of the yearbook) to students who have died, that policy is equally applicable to a student who has died by suicide, provided that final editorial decisions are made by an adult.

## **Graduation**

If there is a tradition of including a tribute to deceased students who would have graduated with the class, then students who have died by suicide should also be included. For example, schools may wish to include a brief statement acknowledging and naming those students from the graduating class who have died. Final decisions about what to include in such tributes should be made by an adult.

## **Permanent memorials and scholarships**

Some schools or communities wish to establish a permanent memorial. This can be a physical item such as a tree, bench or plaque or something commemorative, like a scholarship. Permanent memorials can prove to be upsetting reminders to students, and can therefore disrupt the school's goal of maintaining normal routines and emotional regulation for its students.

Whenever possible, it is recommended that permanent memorials be established off school grounds.

Also, the school should bear in mind that once it plants a tree, puts up a plaque, installs a park bench or establishes a named scholarship for one deceased student, it should be prepared to do so for others. This can become quite difficult to sustain over time.

## **Liase with students**

Some schools may resist any kind of memorialisation, for fear of glamourising suicide and risking suicide contagion. But simply prohibiting any and all memorialisation is problematic in its own right. This may be perceived as stigmatising to the student's family and friends. It can also generate intense negative reactions, which can make an already difficult situation even worse.

It is important to channel the energy and passion of the students (and the greater community) in a positive direction. It can be helpful for schools to be proactive. Suggest a meeting with the student's close friends to talk about the type and timing of any memorials. This can provide an important opportunity for the students to be heard and for the school to sensitively explain why certain activities are allowed and others are not.

## Media

The media can sometimes be interested in youth suicide, especially if there has been more than one. However, the reporting of suicide needs to be done with care, as media coverage can increase the risk of suicide contagion. It is important that only one member of the ERT is given the role of media liaison. This will help to ensure the school gives a consistent message.

When you speak to the media, it's important to reinforce some principles about the reporting of suicide:

- Do not glamorise the victim or the suicide itself.
- Do not oversimplify the cause of suicide.
- Do not give details of the method of suicide.
- Do not include pictures of the death scene or distressed mourners.
- Always include information and phone numbers for crisis support service and local mental health services.

Refer to the *Responding to the media* fact sheet for more information.

Refer reporters to [mindframe-media.org](http://mindframe-media.org), a very good website looking at suicide, mental health and how the media should report on these issues. The site includes:

- an overview of reporting about suicide and how to do this with the least risk of contagion ([mindframe-media.info/client\\_images/1002445.pdf](http://mindframe-media.info/client_images/1002445.pdf))
- tips and tools for how to work with the media ([mindframe-media.info/client\\_images/1002449.pdf](http://mindframe-media.info/client_images/1002449.pdf)).

Another good resource covering important issues about suicide and the media can be found at [reportingonsuicide.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/Recommendations14.pdf](http://reportingonsuicide.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/Recommendations14.pdf).

The media can sometimes be interested in youth suicide, especially if there has been more than one.



# Other information to consider

## Social media

The term 'social media' commonly refers to websites that facilitate communication and networking between people. These include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and MySpace. Social networking can also occur via mobile phone text messaging.

Messages posted on these social media platforms can have a large impact because they can quickly reach an enormous number of people.

This new and evolving form of communication can cause anxiety for parents and school staff. In the emotion-charged atmosphere that follows a suicide, schools may be inclined to try to control this kind of student interaction. This is almost impossible, given that most communication takes place outside of school hours and away from the school itself.

Schools can, however, utilise social media to promote suicide prevention, mental health and distribute other important information to students and the broader school community. Refer to the *Managing social media following a suicide* fact sheet for more information.

## Involve students

Working in partnership with students can enhance the credibility and effectiveness of your social media efforts. A member of the ERT should contact friends of the deceased and work collaboratively with them.

## Disseminate information

Schools may already have a website or an online presence (or page) on one or more social media sites (students can help identify others that are currently popular). These can be used to proactively communicate with students, teachers, and parents. You can use social media to pass on information about the funeral or memorial service and give out details of where students can seek help and support (including phone numbers for Kids Helpline and Lifeline). You can also use social media to distribute other information about mental illness and suicide.

## Monitor and respond

Where possible, social media sites (including the deceased's Facebook wall or personal profile pages) should be monitored for rumours, derogatory messages about the deceased and comments indicating other students who may be at risk.

Respond by dispelling rumours, reinforcing the connection between mental illness and suicide and offering resources for mental health care. In some cases, the appropriate response may require notifying parents and/or local authorities about the need for security at a late-night student gathering.



## Supporting staff

### Bringing in outside help

When dealing with a young person's suicide or a possible suicide contagion, school crisis team members should remain mindful of their own limitations. Too often, staff consider the wellbeing of the students at the cost of their own mental health. It is important to consider bringing in trained staff from local mental health centres and/or **headspace** School Support to help as needed. This can often feel difficult, as these staff do not know the culture of the school. However, assistance at such a stressful time can help the staff, students and school community return to normal functioning more quickly.

### Counselling for staff

Just as students are offered counselling to help them manage their grief, it is also important to consider the support needs of the staff. Senior school staff need to be aware that staff may need time off to help them cope with the emotional distress. They may also need extra support to manage their job. Staff should be made aware that they can request permission to be excused from performing some tasks that may be required of them if they do not feel able to do this (e.g. informing students, staffing the student support room). As with students, it is also important that counselling or support options be available to staff – at the time of the crisis and also longer term.

As with students,  
it is also important  
that counselling or  
support options be  
available to staff.

# Sample documents

## Initial staff meeting

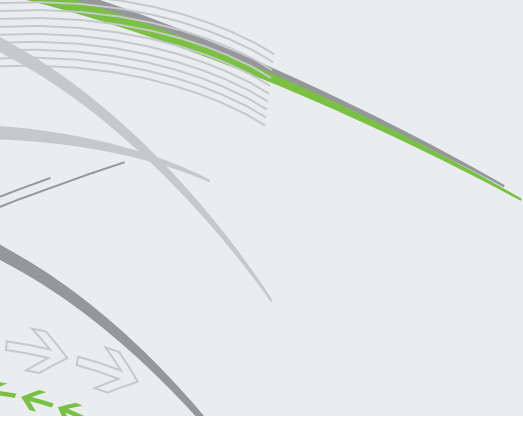
This meeting is typically conducted by the Emergency Response Team leader if one has been allocated, or the principal, and should be held as soon as possible (ideally before school starts in the morning).

Depending on when the death occurs, there may not be enough time to hold the meeting before students have begun to hear the news through word of mouth, text messaging or other means. If this happens, the ERT leader should first verify the accuracy of the reports and then notify staff of the death through the school's predetermined crisis alert system (such as e-mail or calls to classroom phones). Remember that information about the cause of death should be withheld until the family has been consulted.

### Goals of the initial staff meeting

- Introduce the Emergency Response Team members.
- Share accurate information about the death.
- Allow staff an opportunity to express their own reactions and grief. The ERT may identify staff that may need additional support and, following the meeting, refer them to appropriate resources.
- Provide appropriate staff with a scripted statement to read to students informing them of the death (see scripts in following pages). Arrange coverage for any staff who are unable to manage reading the statement.
- Prepare for student reactions and questions by discussing the issue with staff. You should also provide staff with the *How to talk about suicide with young people* factsheet
- Explain plans for the day, including locations of crisis counselling rooms.
- Brief staff about identifying and referring at-risk students, as well as the need to keep records of those efforts. (Refer to fact sheet on *Identifying risk factors and warning signs for suicide*)
- Inform staff of any outside support staff or others who will be assisting.
- Identify which ERT member has been designated as the media spokesperson and instruct staff to refer all media inquiries to him or her.

**Remember that information about the cause of death should be withheld until the family has been consulted.**



### **End of the first day staff meeting**

It can also be helpful for the ERT leader and/or the principal to have an all-staff meeting at the end of the first day. This meeting provides an opportunity to take the following steps:

- Offer verbal appreciation of the staff.
- Review the day's challenges and successes.
- Debrief, share experiences, express concerns and ask questions.
- Check in with staff to assess whether any of them need additional support (and refer accordingly).
- Disseminate information regarding the death and/or funeral arrangements.
- Discuss plans for the next day.
- Remind staff of the importance of self-care.

### **Scripts for notifying students**

It is important for an ERT member to liaise with the family to determine their wishes about communication within the school community.

#### **Script for notifying students in the general population**

*This script is to be read to all students in the school, except for students in the same year level as the student who committed suicide.*

Today/yesterday the school was given the very sad news that on ... one of our year ... students died by suicide. All of us are thinking of his/her family and friends. Some students in our school, particularly his/her friends in Year ... will find this news very difficult to understand and accept. Other students – not just close friends – are also likely to be upset, perhaps because it reminds them of another sad event in their own life. Because of this, a support room has been set up in ... for any students to go to if they feel they can't be in the classroom over the next few days. Someone will be available in the room at all times. The school counsellors will be available in the normal way to see students and we may have some extra counsellors in the school for a while. A notice is going home today to inform your parents about the death, so they will understand if you want to talk with them today or sometime in the future. Remember to use the normal signing out processes if you need to leave the school grounds, and if you are approached by anyone from outside of the school asking for information about this death, please tell them they should speak with Ms/Mr ...

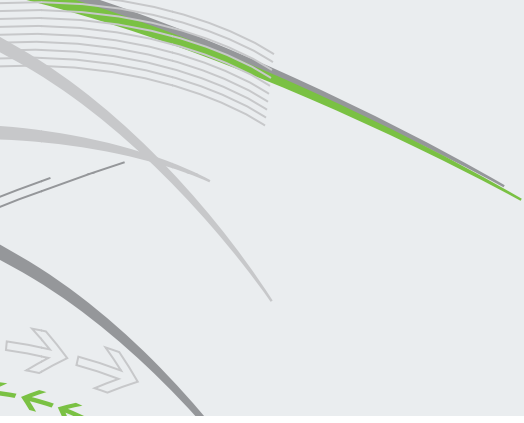
Be sensitive to people's feelings about this death, look out for each other and let a teacher or your parents know if you are worried about anything or anyone.

# Sample documents

## Script for notifying students in the same year level

Today/yesterday the school was given the very sad news that ... [name of student] died by suicide. This happened away from school/at his/her home. This will be a very difficult time for [name of student's] family and close friends and for all of us who knew him/her. For a while, it might be difficult for some students to think about anything else. For this reason, a support room has been set up in ... for any students to go to if they feel they can't be in the classroom over the next few days. Someone will be available in the room at all times for you to talk with if you want to. Otherwise it is a quiet place for you to retreat to if you need to. The school counsellors will be available in the normal way to see students and we may have some extra counsellors in the school for a while. A notice is going home today to inform your parents about the death, so they will understand if you want to talk with them today or sometime in the future. Remember to use the normal signing out processes if you need to leave the school grounds. If you are approached by anyone from outside the school asking for information about this death, please tell them they should speak with Ms/Mr ...

We will keep you informed as much as possible over the next week. This is a time to be especially sensitive to each other's feelings and to look out for each other. Let a teacher or your parents know if you or your friends are worried about anything or anyone.



## Letter to parents

The *Suicide in schools: Information for parents* fact sheet should be sent with this letter.

Consent from parents must be given if the deceased students name is used.

Dear parent/guardian,

I am writing to you with some sad news about a member of our school community.

One of our Year ... students attempted suicide/died by suicide yesterday/today/  
Saturday/during the holidays.

Our thoughts are with the student's family and friends.

Today and over the coming weeks, you may be concerned about your son's/  
daughter's reaction or expression of feelings about this news. These reactions and  
feelings may be part of the grieving process. Many students will wish to talk with  
their parents, so I have attached some general information which may assist you in  
those conversations. I also encourage you to let your son/daughter know that you  
are aware of this incident and that you will listen to their concerns at any time they  
wish to share them. Staying connected and engaged with your son/daughter is one  
of the best ways to support them. When talking about the issue of suicide, try to  
include discussion about positive ways of managing problems.

Two important messages to promote are that all of us should seek help from others  
when we feel down or vulnerable, and that young people should tell an adult if they  
are worried about a friend hurting themselves.

Our school will be concentrating on supporting our students and staff over the next  
months. This means, among other things, returning the school to normal routines  
as soon as possible and recognising that students can be affected by this event  
for many months to come. If your son/daughter is already using the services of  
a mental health professional, you should ensure this information is passed on to  
them.


Please feel free to contact the following staff for information about the school's  
support plan or if you have any concerns about your son/daughter. Contacting the  
nominated staff member is an important way of ensuring you receive consistent  
and accurate information and for us to be aware of all parent concerns.

Ms \_\_\_\_\_ on \_\_\_\_\_

Mr \_\_\_\_\_ on \_\_\_\_\_

Yours sincerely,

Principal

The background of the page features a complex, abstract design of flowing, curved lines in shades of green and grey. Interspersed among these lines are numerous arrows, some pointing right and some pointing left, creating a sense of movement and flow. A dark grey circle is positioned in the upper left quadrant, containing white text.

The Suicide in  
schools: Information  
for parents fact  
sheet should be  
sent with the letter  
to parents.



# Suicide in schools: Information for parents



**headspace**  
School Support

**You will have been made aware that a suicide has occurred at your child's school.**

This is a very sad and traumatic event for all students, school staff, parents and the wider school community. Below is some information that may be helpful in assisting you and your child to manage during this difficult time.

## **Young people respond to suicide in unique ways, and a wide range of reactions is possible**

Your child's response will be influenced by their personality, their relationship with the deceased person, what is happening in their life and their ability to adjust to change.

Whatever age your child is they will need to find safe ways of expressing their feelings. They may feel:

- confusion
- anger
- aggression
- withdrawal
- fear
- guilt
- denial
- blame
- betrayal
- abandonment
- hurt
- sadness.

Parental understanding, reassurance and attention are very important at this time. Be guided by your child's need to talk, and make it clear to them that you will be available whenever they need you.

## **Young people who have experienced other stressful situations in their lives may find it harder to cope**

These experiences may include the separation/divorce of parents, the death of a relative/pet and moving house/school. They may become upset and need to express their feelings about these other concerns, even if they had appeared to be coping. If your child is already using the services of a psychologist or psychiatrist, make them aware of the suicide.

## **Your child may have a lot of questions**

They may want to know exactly what happened. The school will have provided your child with information about the incident. Details about the way a suicide occurred will not be given to students, as this information is potentially harmful to their wellbeing. As parents, it is important to steer discussion towards the positive "help-seeking" actions which young people can take. This includes talking to a trusted adult, such as a parent, counsellor, teacher, relative or friend.

**Whatever age your child is they will need to find safe ways of expressing their feelings.**

# Suicide in schools: Information for parents



## “Tell an adult if you are worried about a friend”

This is an important message to share with your child, in any discussion about suicide. Adolescents sometimes share their feelings about death with friends – in conversations, letters, emails, text messages and on the internet. If they suspect a friend may be about to hurt themselves, they should tell an adult immediately.

## Be aware that you or your child may be affected by the media’s responses to the event

You may decide to protect your family against certain coverage. You may choose to watch the news together, so you can discuss any concerns that are raised and ensure your child feels supported. Hopefully, media reporting of specific youth suicides will not occur. However, if it does, be aware that it can contribute to young people’s vulnerability.

## Some reactions can happen weeks, months or a year after an event

If you are concerned about your child’s reaction and behaviour (such as changes in their socialising or school work), it is important to speak to the principal or student counsellor at their school or a GP. This may result in a referral to a counsellor for a mental health and/or risk assessment.

## Be aware that school staff will also be affected

While everyone will be working towards normalising school routines, some staff will be managing difficult emotions. Through the Department of Education and other relevant bodies adult counselling support is available to all school staff through a process outside the school.

## Respond to community concern with respect

When you speak with other members of the community, reinforce that the best approach is to:

- Respect the bereaved/affected family;
- Avoid glamourising/sensationalising suicide; and
- Encourage help-seeking actions in young people.

Young people should also encourage help-seeking in any friends they have concerns about.

## Where can parents and young people get more information and help?

**headspace** centres provide support, information and advice to young people aged 12 to 25. For locations and other information, go to **headspace.org.au**

**headspace** School Support is a service which supports schools following a suicide. More information is available on the **headspace** School Support website **headspace.org.au/schoolsupport**

**eheadspace** provides online counselling and telephone support to young people aged 12 to 25. Its services are available at **eheadspace.org.au** and on **1800 650 890**

## Other resources

beyondblue’s youth program, Youthbeyondblue, promotes the message that it’s acceptable to talk about depression. It encourages young people, their families and friends to look out for each other and to get help when it is needed. A set of youth fact sheets can be downloaded from **youthbeyondblue.com**

Reach Out! is a web based service that encourages young people to help themselves through tough times. The service aims to improve young people’s mental health and wellbeing by providing support, information and referrals in a format designed for young people. You can find them at **au.reachout.com**

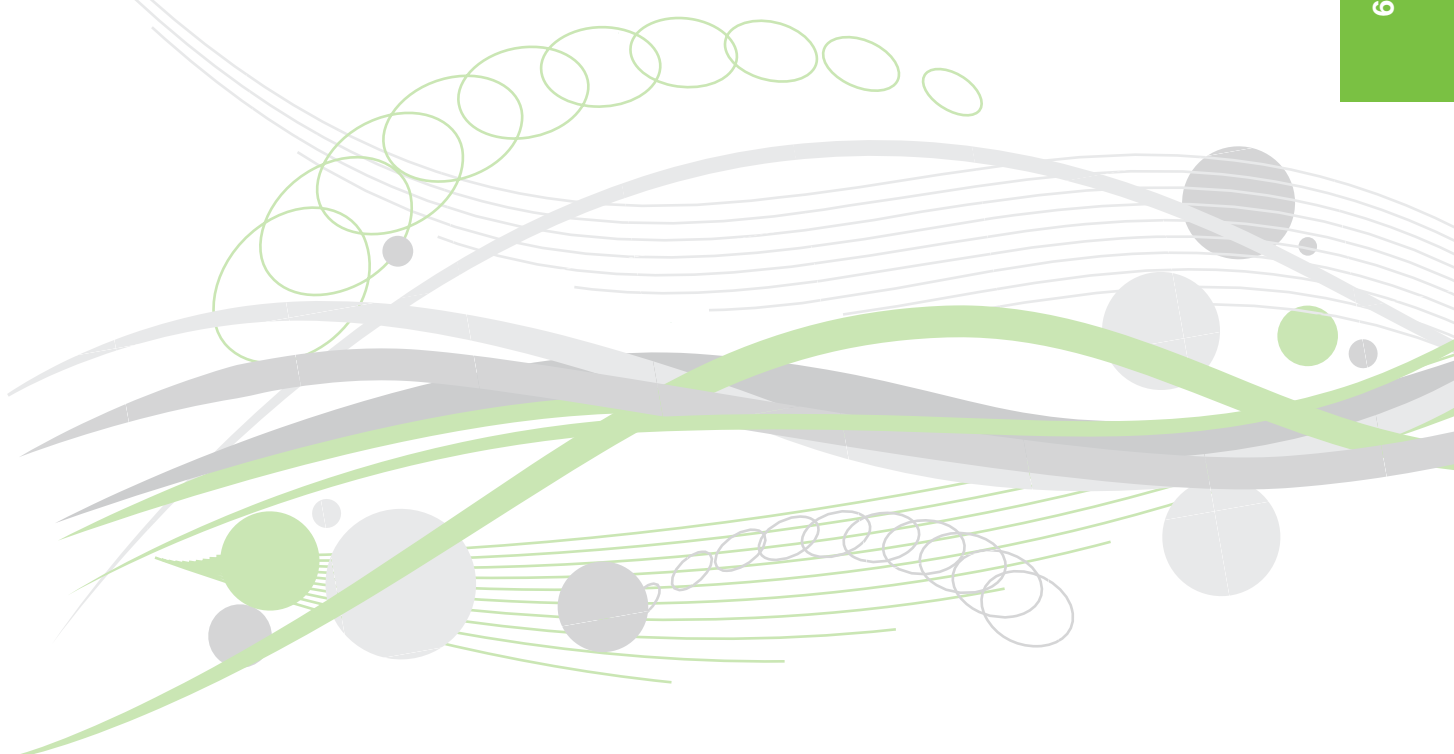
Kids Helpline is a 24-hour telephone and online counselling service for young people aged 5 to 25. They be contacted on **1800 55 1800** and at **kidshelpline.com.au**.

Lifeline (**13 11 14**) is a 24-hour telephone counselling service. **lifeline.org.au** has other online information and referral services.

### Acknowledgements:

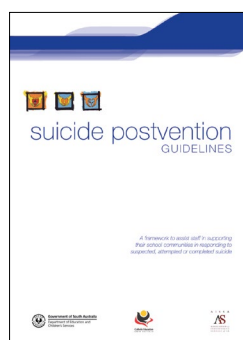
South Australia Department of Education and Children’s Services, Catholic Education South Australia and Association of Independent Schools. (2010). *Suicide Postvention Guidelines: a framework to assist staff in supporting their school communities in responding to suspected, attempted or completed suicide*. South Australia: Government of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services.



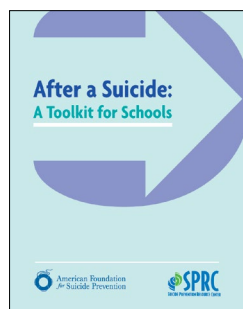


## Sources

**headspace** School Support gratefully acknowledges the work of the **South Australia Department for Education and Child Development**, **Catholic Education SA**, and **Association of Independent Schools of SA** (*Suicide postvention: Guidelines*) and **American Foundation for Suicide Prevention** and **Suicide Prevention Resource Centre** (*After Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*) in informing the development of this Toolkit.



*Suicide postvention: Guidelines* can be downloaded at:  
<http://www.decd.sa.gov.au/docs/documents/1/SuicidePostventionGuide-1.pdf>



*After Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools* can be downloaded at:  
<http://www.sprc.org/library/AfteraSuicideToolkitforSchools.pdf>



## Contact Us

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### Disclaimer

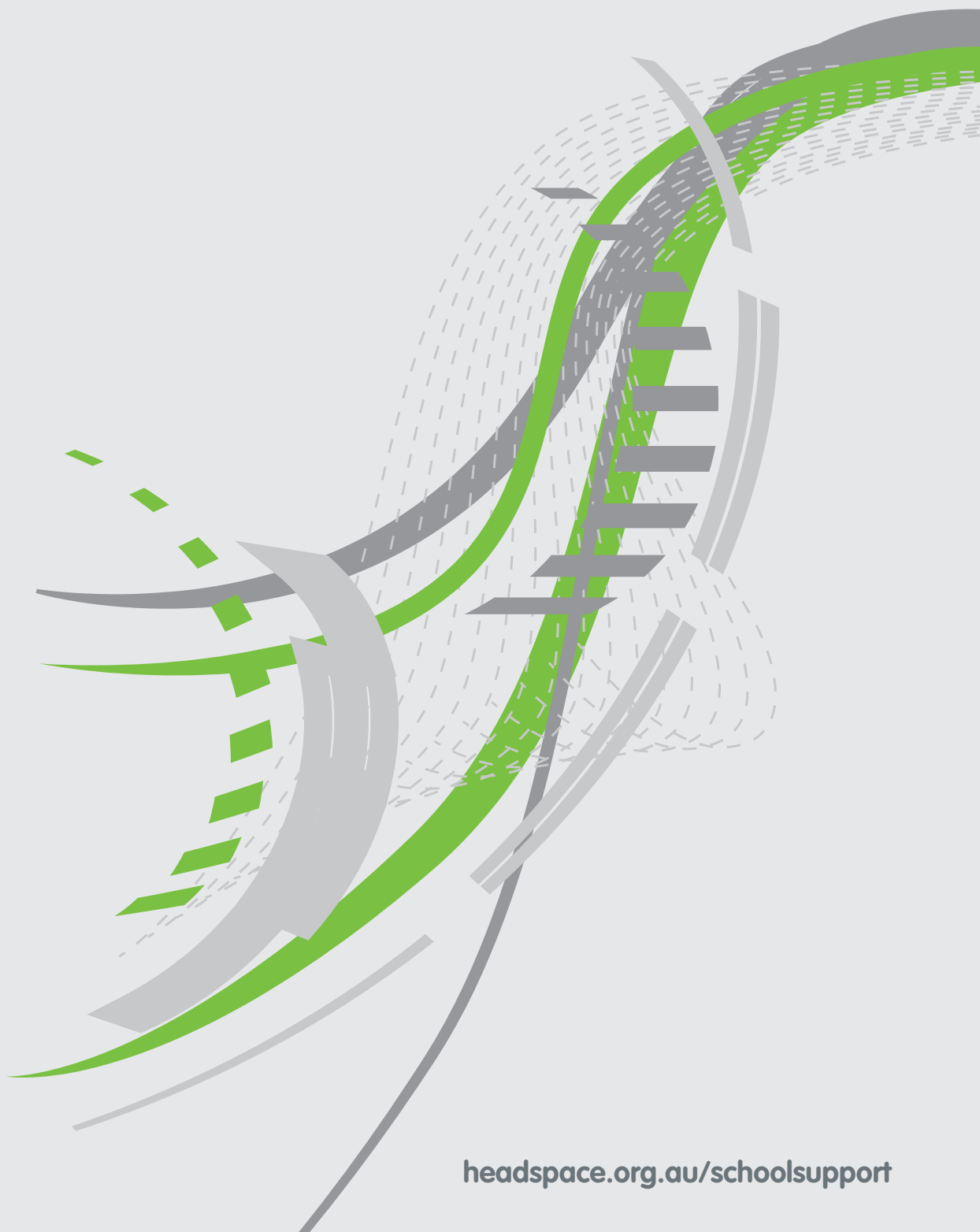
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