



Conversations
Matter

When communities are affected by suicide

A suicide has occurred in our community: What do I say? What do I do?



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When a suicide occurs, the effects can be far reaching. Questions come up about who to tell and what to say.

The way a suicide is discussed is important and should be handled with care.

Research suggests that when the news of a suicide is given, or a specific death is talked about in public settings, there is a chance that people can be upset or negatively affected.

While the death should not be kept a secret, some consideration should be given to how it is talked about, with whom and in what setting.

It is an introductory resource about community conversations following a suicide. This resource will be helpful for members of the community who may be involved in planning communication or advising others.

People who have lost a loved one to suicide need understanding and support. You can refer to the resource 'Conversations Matter to those bereaved by suicide' for tips on handling those conversations.

Things to remember:

- Be prepared and understand the potential risks
- Decide who to tell and how to tell them
- Plan how the news of a death will be told to others
- Explain suicide with care and sensitivity
- Avoid simplistic explanations about suicide
- Consider the language used
- Limit discussion about the method of suicide
- Monitor and respond to conversations online
- Memorials should be considered carefully
- Think about messages for community forums
- Encourage people to seek help
- Learn about other services and resources available.

Be prepared and understand the potential risks

When someone takes their own life, it can increase the risk of suicide and attempted suicide in other vulnerable people in the community, family, workplace or school.

This is sometimes referred to as ‘suicide contagion’. It is not fully understood why this occurs, but it may be related to:

- A means of escaping from unbearable pain after experiencing the suicide of another, particularly a close friend or relative;
- Imitation of another’s suicidal behaviour as away to deal with overwhelming emotions;
- A desire to be recognised, or be part of a group, which may occur if previous suicides are perceived to have received recognition;
- Exposure to a particular method, providing a ‘suggestion’ for that method.

Specific settings, which appear to be more at risk of further suicides occurring following one death include schools, prisons, mental health facilities, Aboriginal communities and communities where there have been groups of suicides in the past.

Although it is important to talk about suicide, raise awareness of warning signs and encourage people to get support, there are some forms of communication that may need extra consideration.

- Research evidence suggests that media reporting of suicide deaths has been associated with further suicides or attempted suicides, particularly if it sensationalises suicide or provides explicit detail of how it happened.
- Although less is known, there is concern that the speed and reach of social media can make it difficult to control the way in which a suicide is talked about.
- In Aboriginal communities, there are indicators that hearing ‘word of mouth’ about the death of a family member or another member of their kinship group or community can increase the chances of suicidal behaviour in others who are affected.

Decide who to tell and how to tell them

While most people will not be adversely affected by discussion of a suicide death, people who may already be vulnerable or thinking about suicide may be adversely impacted if the conversation is not handled sensitively.

- Before discussing a suicide with people, especially in a group setting or online, ensure that those directly affected by the death have already been notified. It would be hurtful to find others have information before those closest to the person.
- Where possible it is better to conduct the conversations either one-on-one or in a small group so that peoples’ responses can be monitored and questions answered. Personal stories are often an effective way to engage people, but there is a need to plan how they are best used.

People will respond to information differently and express grief in various ways, depending on their age, culture, gender and other factors.

Involve support services if groups of people need to be notified of a death in a particular setting or for individual settings look up telephone or online services before starting the conversation.

Plan how the news of a death will be told to others

In settings such as schools and other educational settings, workplaces, residential settings and small communities it will particularly important to plan your approach to notifying people of a death.

- It is best to avoid making assumptions or announcements before a suspected suicide has been discussed with someone close to the person or a reliable source. Sometimes there will be uncertainty about whether the death was a suicide or not.
- If the death has been confirmed, it is generally best to have the discussion as soon as possible, but first think about who can make the decision about telling others.

For example, it is not appropriate to inform others about a death without considering whether the family knows and whether the people you are telling are themselves vulnerable.

Informing people of a death early will help to manage any rumours or misinformation. Having community members talking about reasons for the death based on ‘half-truths’ or speculation can be unhelpful and also hurtful to those affected by the death.

Informing people early will also enable you to identify people who may have been affected and need support.

Given the speed of modern communication information about the death may spread quickly via text, email, social media etc.

- While it will not always be possible, you may want to group people according to their connection to the person.

For example, it may be better to tell close friends together and more distant acquaintances or colleagues separately.

- If needing to tell a group of people (e.g. in a school, TAFE, workplace) about a suicide death, give staff some key talking points they can use to explain what has happened, to ensure a consistent message is given.

This will include agreed ways of describing the cause of death (based on the information you have from the family and authorities) plans for supporting people, and how further information will be provided.

- Where a particular death is going to lead to a range of public and private discussions, ensure information about the death and the follow-up response comes from a consistent spokesperson with a connection to the community.

This might be a school principal, a community leader or Elder, a manager, or a representative of the family who feels capable of filling this role.

- Obtain the cooperation of friends and colleagues in not spreading unconfirmed information about the person who has died or explicit details of the death. This includes not spreading information through social media.

There are specific considerations when planning and managing conversations about a suicide within school settings. There are links to useful resources to guide responses within schools provided at the end of this resource and further links online at conversationsmatter.org.au

Give advance notice and be clear about expectations

People have a range of views and opinions about why suicide occurs. Make sure you get access to accurate information about suicide before talking to those affected.

- Using personal opinion or inaccurate information can be unhelpful to people who are grieving.
- Consider the individual circumstances of people who are part of (listening to) the conversation - for example their age, their connection to the person, their connection to the community, and whether you know anything about their mental health and wellbeing.
- Ensure that the information you provide and the language you use is culturally appropriate. If you don't know, ask a local Elder.

For many Aboriginal communities there are cultural protocols around naming and showing pictures or video of a person who has died. In many cases mentioning the person's name can cause distress to the family and community.

Avoid simplistic explanations about suicide

Conversations about suicide should try to outline the complexity of the issue.

- Discussions should be framed in relation to the many things that may increase someone's risk and the things that may protect someone from suicidal behaviour.
- People will often want answers about why a suicide has occurred which can lead to blaming a certain person or event. Try not to reinforce these views as suicide usually occurs because of more than one factor.
- When having conversations about a suicide, find a balance between ensuring that suicide is not being kept secret and ensuring that the way it is talked about does not present suicide as a way of dealing with problems.

Avoid describing suicide as "common" among particular age groups or communities.

Avoid explanations that suggest the person is "in a better place" or the person is "free from pain and suffering"

Consider the language used

While it is most important to use words and language that engages the audience you are talking to, certain words can negatively impact on people bereaved by suicide or people vulnerable to suicidal thinking.

- It is most important to consider the words you use when talking to groups of people, where it is harder to monitor their reactions to the information or their understanding.
- Certain ways of talking about suicide can alienate members of the community or inadvertently contribute to suicide being presented as a glamorous, ideal or common option for dealing with problems.
- It is best to avoid judgemental phrases or language, which glamorises or sensationalises suicide, as well as language that exaggerate suicide rates or trends.
- Some specific suggestions are provided below.

Limit discussion about the method of suicide

Talking in graphic detail about the method of suicide can create images that are upsetting and can increase the risk of someone copying the behavior.

- Conversations that include details about the method or location of a suicide should be avoided, especially where the conversation is occurring in a group or as part of public conversations.

If someone asks about the method of suicide or cause of death, you could respond by saying:

“Some people can be affected by hearing a description of what happened so I’d prefer not to go into detail at this stage.”

| Do say | Don’t say | Why |
|---|---|---|
| ‘non-fatal’ or ‘made an attempt on his/her life’ | ‘ unsuccessful suicide ’ | So as to not normalise or glamorise a suicide attempt |
| ‘took their own life’ or ‘ended their own life’ | ‘ successful suicide ’ | So as to not present suicide as a desired outcome |
| ‘died by suicide’ or ‘deaths by suicide’ | ‘ committed ’ or ‘ commit suicide ’ | So as to avoid the association between suicide and ‘crime’ or ‘sin’ |
| ‘concerning rates of suicide’ or ‘number of deaths’ | ‘ suicide epidemic ’ | To avoid sensationalism and inaccuracy |

Did you know?

Media have codes of practice that suggest the method and location of suicide should only be reported in general terms. This is because of strong research evidence to suggest that specific descriptions can be associated with further attempts or deaths using that method.

While less is known about community conversations, it is generally agreed that the same rules should apply.

For more information around safe reporting, visit mindframe.org.au

Monitor and respond to conversations online

When people who are not closely connected with the person discuss the death, speculation and misinformation can spread quickly.

- Public posts that can be seen by lots of people are not the ideal form of communication about suicide. Consider who might view online content before posting information.

People who are vulnerable or thinking about suicide can be adversely affected by hearing about the details of another person's death. It can sometimes make suicide seem like an option for solving current problems.

- While online may not be the ideal place for conversations, it does provide an opportunity to engage with people talking about the death and provide accurate information and links.
- If possible, conversations online should be monitored and content and comments moderated by someone with knowledge and experience in suicide prevention.

Some tips for managing online discussions

Communities, schools, workplaces and families affected by a suicide death may want to have a basic plan for understanding and managing conversations online.

Monitor

Social media pages of the person who died in consultation with the family in case there is any inappropriate comments posted. This will also allow you to get a sense of whether there are any rumours that may need to be challenged or anyone posting comments that appear to be at risk themselves.

Respond

To any inappropriate posts on social media about the person who died, any misinformation, or indications of others who may be at risk. Consider who may best placed to respond - this may be a local health service or trusted adult in the community.

Promote

Useful information and links through social media - especially places where people can get support or further information.

Connect

With support services (specifically services that specialise in suicide prevention and ways to respond following a suicide) to get further support and advice.

Memorials should be considered carefully

Memorials can include community events or pages set up on social media to remember the person who has died. People who are vulnerable may participate in these events.

- Memorials can be a chance for people to mourn as a group and seek support. Annual events or activities have been described by some as helpful and a valid way of coming together to express grief.
- Public memorials for someone who has died by suicide (whether online or in the community) should be carefully planned and monitored to ensure the messaging does not inadvertently glamourise suicide. In some settings, such as schools, they may be discouraged.
- Where possible, work with those organising memorials to discuss where the memorial will occur, how information is managed or and how people who are upset will be supported.

Think about messages for community forums

- If a community forum is deemed appropriate, organise it in collaboration with relevant services, community leaders and stakeholders and in consultation with services that have specific expertise in grief and loss and ways to support a community following a suicide.
- Ensure that community forums do not focus on a specific suicide event. The forums should emphasise understanding grief and bereavement, promoting support and care for those affected and encouraging people to get help.
- Community forums occurring soon after a suicide death should consider the audience and their needs to ensure that any messages presented do not increase feelings of guilt and distress in those directly affected.

Community members affected by suicide may want to know how they can be involved in suicide prevention. Be aware, however, that discussion about the fact that suicide is largely preventable can also increase feelings of guilt and blame in those affected if not handled sensitively.

Some introductory tips for community forums:

- Collaborate with a service that specialises in supporting families and communities following a suicide.
- Ensure the content and speakers are appropriate to the target audience. For example the content should focus on the needs of the audience and emphasise ways to support those bereaved and others who may be impacted.
- Select a well-known and respected facilitator who understands grief, loss and the ways people may respond following a suicide.
- Ensure it is culturally safe and inclusive, by considering the language used, the way the issue is discussed and whether a community leader or Elder should also be present.
- Choose a neutral venue where people will feel comfortable and safe.
- Determine whether media will be invited and plan messages if they are. For tips on managing media messages related to suicide refer to mindframe.org.au
- Ensure counsellors or other support people are present for those who may become upset or need additional support.

Encourage people to seek help

Encourage those affected to seek help from others close to them, bereavement support services or health professionals.

- Sometimes specialist bereavement services will be available to communities affected by suicide.
- Talking to a doctor, other health professional, school or college counsellor, Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or a telephone or online counselling or bereavement support service can be a good start.
- Refer people affected by suicide to accurate and helpful information and resources.

Learn about other services and supports

This resource is a basic introduction to what you can say or do if a suicide has occurred in your community. There are a range of other services and resources that can assist.

Take a look at the links on the Conversations Matter website, for further information – conversationsmatter.org.au

Services and supports

Lifeline

13 11 14 | lifeline.org.au

Kids Helpline (5-25 years)

1800 55 1800 | kidshelpline.com.au

Suicide Call Back Service

1300 659 467 | suicidecallbackservice.org.au

StandBy - Support After Suicide

standbysupport.com.au

beyondblue

1300 22 4636 | beyondblue.org.au

headspace (12-25 years)

headspace.org.au

MensLine Australia

1300 78 99 78 | mensline.org.au

GriefLine

1300 845 745 | griefline.org.au

QLife

1800 184 527 | qlife.org.au

Useful resources

Life in Mind: National suicide prevention gateway | lifeinmind.org.au

headspace Schools: Supports the mental health and wellbeing of school communities | headspace.org.au/schools/headspace-schools

Suicide Prevention Australia: National peak body for suicide prevention suicidepreventionaust.org

Embrace Multicultural Mental Health: Empowering Australians from multicultural backgrounds to embrace mental health and wellbeing embracementalhealth.org.au

Social and emotional wellbeing and mental health services in Aboriginal Australia: Online resources and information on cultural concepts of social and emotional wellbeing and mental health, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and service providers | sewbmh.org.au

R U OK?: Suicide prevention charity, encouraging Australians to notice the signs of mental health struggle in friends, family and colleagues | ruok.org.au

Mindframe: Supports safe media reporting, portraiture and communication about suicide, mental ill-health and Alcohol and Other Drugs (AOD) mindframe.org.au

For a more comprehensive list of links refer to the 'Supporting information' section at conversationsmatter.org.au



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