

Grief: How young people might respond to a suicide



Grief is the normal and expected response to the loss of a family member, friend or someone else close to us. Grief is experienced in different ways by different people and can last for months, if not years.

While grief is the normal and expected response to loss, grief relating to suicide can be particularly complex. This is in response to the suddenness and shock experienced, the perceptions of preventability and the difficulty in comprehending why the deceased ended their life. People may wonder if there was something they could have done to prevent it, leading to feelings of guilt or remorse, or they may question how a loved one could have left them, leaving them with feelings of rejection, anger or resentment towards the person who has died. Cultural issues, such as stigma, can also complicate the grieving process.

A young person's reaction to a suicide may be different to an adult's and will be shaped by their developmental stage, their family situation and their relationship with the person who has died. Suicide can have an impact not only on the individual young person, but also on their support network (such as friends and teachers) and community.

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Common grief-related responses when someone dies by suicide

While there is no standard way in which young people will respond to a suicide, there are a range of normal grief-related reactions which they may experience. These include:

- Shock and disbelief that the person has died
- Longing for the person – wishing they were around to touch or be comforted by them
- Feelings of anger, resentment or rejection – for being abandoned, for the unfairness of the loss or towards those seen as responsible for the loss
- Feeling sad that the person has gone
- Guilt – that they were unable to help the person or that they were in some way responsible for the death
- Anxiety – about the future and how things will be without that person in their life
- Preoccupation with thoughts of the person who has died
- Difficulty concentrating
- Changes to sleep patterns and appetite.

Some young people may appear to be unaffected and getting on with their lives, and this in itself may cause a sense of guilt. Some may choose to express their grief through rituals or creative expression (such as art or music), rather than talking about it. Others may act out in more challenging ways, like drinking, drug use or other risk-taking behaviours.

Most young people will carry on with their lives while moving through the grieving process. However it is important to be aware that complicated grief reactions are higher in suicide bereavement than other forms of death. These include persistent, severe or overwhelming variations on normal grief reactions, such as sleep problems, irritability or anger, persistent low mood, feeling that life is meaningless, not being able to accept the death, avoidance of loss reminders, intense guilt, intrusive thoughts about the death or persistent rumination on explaining or making sense of the death.

Following a death by suicide it is helpful for staff to be aware of possible grief reactions that students may experience, including the time frames over which they may emerge and persist.

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Supporting a young person who is grieving following a suicide

There are a range of things you can do to provide additional help and support to young people who are grieving:

- Acknowledge the young person's loss and the need for taking time to grieve
- Allow time to discuss what has happened and how the young person is dealing with the loss – the stigma around suicide can prevent people from talking about it and leave those affected feeling isolated
- Communicate openly about the death as a suicide (note the family need to have given permission) – this de-stigmatises suicide and allows for a focus on help-seeking messages
- Provide information about expected grief reactions and normalise their experience
- Encourage continued participation in enjoyable activities (such as sports or hobbies) and contact with supportive friends
- Support the gathering of stories and memories of the loved one in ways that appeal to the young person – writing, photos, talking, blogs, memorials, and journals
- Help the young person to anticipate times that may be particularly difficult (such as birthdays or anniversaries of the death) and develop a plan for managing that period

- Provide some flexibility with schoolwork where appropriate – concentration and memory may be affected
- Be alert to when a student might need additional support.

Supporting a young person to seek help

It is normal for young people who are grieving to experience intense emotional pain, want to avoid the pain of grieving, or experience delayed grief responses which emerge weeks or even months after the death.

It is not unusual for young people to go through ups and downs while they deal with the death of a loved one. Generally, people find that things get easier as time goes on and they will experience more good times and fewer difficult times.

If a young person's grief is persistent and severe, or their coping strategies are not helping or exacerbating their distress, it can interfere with their functioning and have a significant impact on their development. If this occurs, getting help can lessen the impact of any emerging mental health problems and improve their chances of recovering fully.

Young people can often be reluctant to seek professional help so finding someone they trust and feel comfortable

with is important. If they've had a positive experience with a GP or counsellor in the past you might encourage them to contact that person again. You could also help them to get in contact with their local **headspace** centre or mental health service.

If a student is expressing suicidal thoughts or thoughts of harming themselves, seek help immediately. **See headspace School Support fact sheets *Identifying risk factors and warning signs for suicide and Suicide contagion.***

Remember that to support a grieving person you need to maintain your own well-being.

See fact sheet *Self-care for school staff for tips on looking after yourself following a suicide.*

Consider marginalised young people

When thinking about issues related to youth suicide it is very important to be aware of the unique needs of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) or Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Intersex (LGBTI) young people and respond appropriately. Please see the **headspace** School Support website for more information.

For more information on suicide or support and assistance visit headspace.org.au/schoolsupport or headspace.org.au

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

Acknowledgements

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and Suicide Prevention Resource Centre. (2011). *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*, Newton, MA: Education Development Centre, Inc.
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 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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