

**Suicide
Postvention
Resources:**
*Short-term
response*



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Introduction

When a suicide occurs, the effect on families, young people and communities is immediate and traumatic. The impact on a school community is equally profound and staff often feel unprepared and uncertain about how to respond.

Schools must respond with considerable care to mitigate the serious implications for their community.

This resource offers evidence-based and practice-informed guidelines to inform decision-making and actions during the short-term response to a suicide.

You can find more information in the Complete Toolkit, including scripts and templates. There is also a shorter resource, like this one, covering the longer-term response.

Your Be You Consultant can also provide onsite, phone or email support and guidance for your school.

While reading or referring to this resource, prioritise your wellbeing and seek support if needed. You can find a list of mental health services and support helplines [here](#).

Action Checklist

The list below outlines the key actions that schools can undertake to respond to and recover from a death by suicide. Further detail about these actions is provided throughout the Complete Toolkit.

Short-term response

- Restore the school to its regular routine.
- Plan the school's involvement in the funeral.
- Continue to identify, monitor, support and assess young people at risk. Develop support plans for impacted and high-risk young people. If necessary, refer them for further mental health support.
- Monitor any memorial sites and communicate with young people about any required changes to processes or activities. For offsite memorials, liaise with the police if you have concerns.
- Organise regular staff meetings. Communicate updated information and provide a space for concerns or questions.
- Ensure staff have support within the school, and access to external professional advice where required.
- Keep families informed about supports offered at school, changes in routines or activities and supportive resources.
- Collect all the belongings of the deceased student for the police and family.
- Continue to monitor staff and young people's wellbeing, and review your list of at-risk students.
- Consider the impact of the suicide on the planning for school events like yearbook photographs, award nights, graduation and reports.
- Conduct a critical incident review.
- Consider facilitating an information session for families.
- Continue to document all the school's postvention activities and actions.

Return the school to regular routine

Where possible and appropriate, school routines should return to normal about one week after the death to support recovery.

The use of the support room should reduce as time passes. You'll need to use your discretion to decide when it closes and normal counselling processes resume.

Returning to regular routine doesn't mean that vigilance and awareness of student and staff wellbeing can be reduced. This should continue for a number of months, or longer for some young people.

Plan the school's involvement in the funeral

Funerals are important as they help the bereaved to acknowledge the death and say goodbye.

They can also be a difficult time and can be distressing for some young people.

Plan how staff and young people will be involved in the funeral, whether it's in person or online. This must be informed by discussion with the family of the deceased, and examination of school policies.

You should:

- ask the bereaved family's wishes regarding the attendance and participation of staff and students
- inform the school community of these wishes

- if student attendance is welcomed, allow young people, in most cases, to decide if they want to attend
- request families notify the school in advance if their young person is attending the funeral
- allow families to take the lead role in the preparation, transportation and support of their attending young person
- ideally, allow staff to make the decision about their own attendance
- clarify what role, if any, staff will have at the funeral. Staff attending for themselves shouldn't be expected to hold any supervising role.
- consider extra support for those who have a role in the proceedings
- follow up any student absences on the day of the funeral immediately
- avoid allowing the funeral or memorial service to be held on school grounds
- maintain regular routine if the service is held during school hours.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become common practice for funerals to be streamed online for people who are unable to attend in person. It can be difficult for schools to know how to navigate this space and you may feel pressure to have the funeral live streamed on school grounds.

It is not the responsibility of school staff to stream an online funeral or monitor students wishing to view the funeral online. A streamed funeral should be treated in the same manner as if a student was attending a funeral in person. Families need to support their young person in viewing the funeral online.

Identify, monitor, support and assess young people at risk

In the first 24 hours after the death, identify young people at immediate risk and provide support and appropriate referral to those who require it. Continue to identify young people at risk.

Develop response and support plans for all impacted young people

This is the ERT's role in collaboration with mental health professionals where appropriate.

You might like to:

- contact or meet with the identified young person to check in
- contact their family
- ensure any mental health professionals engaged with the young person are informed of the impact of the suicide (talk to the family about who'll do this)
- talk to school wellbeing staff if the young person has been identified as at risk (or possible risk) of suicide, and refer to a mental health professional for suicide risk assessment
- develop a written plan outlining the support each young person will receive from the school, their family and any external support agencies (to be given to all the parties involved).

Only those trained in suicide risk assessments should conduct them. Ideally, schools work in collaboration with mental health professionals and agencies to identify and support young people at risk.

Memorial sites

Young people affected by suicide often want to have some kind of memorial for the deceased.

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

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

Memorials can give friends, families and communities the opportunity to mourn together and provides a space for grief.

However, memorial sites or activities can be distressing to others, or seen by vulnerable young people as a way to receive recognition after suicide.

To help the school maintain a safe education environment while also being compassionate and respectful to those grieving and wanting to memorialise, ensure that any memorial sites or activities:

- don't glorify, vilify or stigmatise the deceased young person or their death
- are the same as they would be for a non-suicide death

- are culturally appropriate
- are in a suitable location. They should be in an area that can be avoided by those who don't wish to participate — not in places like the school entrance. If not, enlist key young people to help move items in a respectful way to a designated memorial site.

If any memorials are inappropriate, sensitively explain to young people the purpose of a memorial site or activity and the rationale for permitting certain kinds of memorials and not others. Help them understand the risk of suicide contagion.

For memorial sites on school grounds, a nominated ERT member should:

- look out for objects or messages that are inappropriate (hostile or inflammatory) and remove them
- look out for messages that indicate young people who may be at high risk
- sensitively communicate a time limit for the memorial to young people. After this time, the memorial objects can be offered to the family (ensure that messages or objects given are appropriate).
- consider making cards and markers available so that young people can gather and write messages. After a few days, the cards can be removed and offered to the family.

For memorial sites off school grounds, your ability to exert influence is limited.

However, you can:

- encourage a responsible approach among the students that's guided by postvention principles

- inform the police if you become aware that young people have established a memorial off school grounds and are concerned about the safety of young people congregating near the site (for example, if the memorial is near a railway line).

Permanent memorials and scholarships

Some families, schools or communities may 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.

The below are suggestions based on practice-informed principles — however, you should be guided by your own school processes and your leadership team.

Think about school traditions, previous practices and postvention principles when considering this request, including:

- Has the school created permanent memorials in the past? If so, this death should be treated in the same way. If not, it's worth remembering that if you commit to a permanent memorial in one instance, you must be prepared to do so for other deaths, and this could be difficult to sustain over time.
- Permanent memorials can be an upsetting reminder to young people and staff. It's recommended that permanent memorials aren't established on school grounds or organised by the school. However, you could consider creating something like a reflective garden that can be used by any young person as a space to reflect on painful feelings or circumstances.



Memorial services on school grounds

Sometimes friends and family wish to hold a memorial service onsite at the school.

Generally, memorials involving large numbers of young people are not recommended. Consider using your support room for reflective activities that involve smaller groups of students. Large assemblies may provide 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 glamorised. Any memorial services organised should ideally occur outside of school hours and be monitored and supported by families or other appropriate adults.

Develop a policy about memorials relating to any student death to maintain consistency.

Be You Fact Sheets

-  Speaking with the bereaved family after a suicide
-  Funerals and memorials

Promotion of online fundraising sites

Sometimes the bereaved family may ask school leadership to promote an online fundraising campaign (such as GoFundMe) on the school's social media pages.

Think about whether the school has promoted fundraising sites in the past and use the principle of 'no more, no less'. It's generally recommended not to promote these sites as it's not possible for schools to monitor posts or comments associated with the site, and promotion may inadvertently glamorise the death.

Supporting staff

Ensure regular staff meetings

Staff should meet regularly during the first week after a suicide.

This allows for regular debriefing, which ensures staff feel supported and up-to-date with relevant information. In turn, this helps create a supportive environment and restores order to a distressed school population.

At these meetings:

- provide information about any additional personnel at the school (such as mental health professionals or staff from sector offices)
- provide information about the school's activities moving forward
- provide feedback about the previous response activities
- direct staff to inform a nominated member of the ERT about any student or staff member they're concerned about
- give staff a select few of the most relevant Be You Fact Sheets about suicide
- provide support options for staff that are available at school and outside of school
- inform staff of media involvement, if any
- inform staff when they can expect the deceased's name to be removed from the roll and other school records, any changes to seating arrangements and locker reallocation
- advise of the need to collect and document information in relation to how young people are coping and the support plans in place
- provide any other information requirements

- encourage staff to discuss the information provided and ask questions
- encourage staff to share any concerns they have about upcoming school activities such as projects, plays, curriculum, excursions, reports or graduations.

Monitor staff wellbeing

Just as young people are offered counselling to help them manage grief, it's also important to consider the support needs of staff.

Continue to:

- follow up with staff impacted or at risk
- promote access to short and long-term support options available within the school and externally (note that longer-term counselling for staff shouldn't be conducted by school wellbeing staff)
- provide details of employee assistance program (EAP) support options available to staff on and off site
- be aware that staff may need time off to help them cope with emotional distress
- be aware that staff may need extra support to manage their job
- ensure staff know they can request permission to be excused from performing certain tasks if they don't feel able to do so (for example, informing young people or staffing the student support room)
- encourage staff to prioritise their own wellbeing and to ask for respite, support or a change in role or responsibilities if required. Staff who look after their own wellbeing will, in most cases, be better able to support students and assist the school in returning to regular routine.

Staff may experience guilt and grief about the suicide.

Regular meetings and opportunities for staff to share their concerns are important. Refer staff to the appropriate staff support person when necessary.

Front office and administrative staff will likely continue to receive questions and need to respond to distressed families. Consider their wellbeing and support needs, too.

Be You Fact Sheet

 Staff wellbeing

Bring in external support

Once normal routines have been re-established, consider all avenues of support that can help the school maintain this (for example, bringing in additional casual teachers, support staff and counsellors). This will help to manage the extra load placed on staff at this time.

Professionals such as teaching staff are often expected to lead, coordinate, support and carry on in times of stress or crisis. They may inadvertently put their own needs aside while they try to support the school community or feel that this is necessary or expected in their role. When impacted by suicide, it's important that school staff and the ERT remain mindful of their own strengths, limitations and personal circumstances.

Consider bringing in trained staff from local mental health services and your Be You Consultant as needed.

You may be hesitant to do this due to concerns that they're not familiar with school culture or that there may be a perception that the school's not managing the situation well. However, assistance at such a stressful time can help support the staff, which, in turn, strengthens the support staff are able to offer students and broadens the overall support network of the school.

All additional staff must be briefed on the school's critical incident management plan and must follow it.

Keep families informed

Ensure families 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 or sign-in and sign-out procedures, and planned room changes.

Ensure front office staff are kept updated with information so they can respond to questions.

Protect the deceased young person's belongings for the police and family

This is an important act of respect for a grieving family.

When other young people take or distribute these belongings, they may unintentionally cause distress for the family of the deceased young person. They may also compromise the work of the police or the coroner. It's crucial this does not happen.

Once police give you their approval, collect the deceased young person's belongings from their locker and classrooms. This should be done sensitively when students aren't present. The items should be kept together and stored in a box or other neutral container. An inventory should be made of the items and they should be stored securely in the school until they're able to be collected by the family.

Consider that an empty locker or changes in classroom seat allocations can be particularly distressing for close friends, so it's appropriate to forewarn classmates when this is going to happen.

Ensure good documentation

Clearly document all actions of the ERT.

This will help you to provide details of the postvention actions to an authorised agency, if required. It also means the information needed for the critical incident review process is readily available.

Allocating one team member to manage the documentation process ensures actions aren't lost. It also protects the school from stress if there's an urgent request for information from outside agencies.

Continue to monitor staff and young people's wellbeing

By this time, people at increased risk will have been identified and should be receiving ongoing support and monitoring at the school, in partnership with mental health professionals and families.

Continue to monitor staff and young people and review your most impacted or at-risk student list. Maintain contact with your local mental health services.

Be aware of the impact of other critical incidents.

If other crises in the school community occur after a suicide, this may further impact young people affected by the suicide. If further deaths, suicide attempts or critical incidents occur, many staff and young people will return to their earlier levels of grief and therefore require additional support and monitoring.

Consider the interim appointment of an additional experienced school leader.

This can provide invaluable support, relieving school leaders from day-to-day administrative responsibilities and allowing them to focus their attention on specific postvention tasks.

Consider the impact of the suicide on the planning of school events

You may be faced with questions about how to manage events or documents that would have usually included the deceased young person, such as yearbooks, graduation nights, reports and award ceremonies.

Each school community will approach these decisions differently but be guided by cultural and family sensitivity and postvention principles.

Treat the death as you would any other, ensuring the death is neither glamourised nor stigmatised.

If a school yearbook or graduation features any students who've died, then young people who have taken their own life should be included. Statements relating to these students should be overseen by the ERT. Liaise with the family regarding their wishes, which, where possible, should be considered.

Conduct a critical incident review

This should occur when the ERT believes the school has started to move into the recovery phase.

Indicators for this include:

- regular school routines and activities have resumed
- absenteeism has reduced
- visible distress has decreased in students, staff and families
- requests for future planned activities is occurring.

The timing of this will be dependent on the school context and the response – however, generally this will be several months after the death, once the school has returned to equilibrium.

All members of the ERT should participate in the critical incident review, unless they choose to opt out for personal reasons. It may also be beneficial to invite those who have supported the ERT (for example, your Be You Consultant or governing body staff).

The purpose of the critical incident review is to reflect on the processes and procedures undertaken by the school in response to a death by suicide, which is an event outside the normal range of experience of the people involved. It's important to perform this review so that ideas on how to improve the school's emergency response or practices can be shared, considered and incorporated into school policy and planning. It's also important to acknowledge the efforts of the school community and highlight what worked well.

Some education departments have their own process and documentation standards for the critical incident review.

However, you could also use the following key areas to guide reflection and the structure of this review meeting:

- Communication with the bereaved family (including seeking permission from the family about referring to the death as a suicide).
- Informing staff and communication with staff.
- Informing students and communication with students.
- Informing families and communication with families.
- Communication with the broader community.
- Identification of most impacted staff and support for staff.

- Identification of young people most impacted or at-risk, including staff and student understanding about what to do when they have concerns about young people's safety.
- Support for students.
- Collaboration with external mental health providers.
- Any additional comments about the response that have not been covered.

In order for the critical incident review to be most effective, before it happens:

- give members of the ERT a copy of these key areas so they can begin to reflect
- ask that all participants come prepared and have thought through their ideas and opinions
- provide all school staff with an opportunity, via an anonymous survey, to contribute their views on how the school community managed its postvention responsibilities. A member of the ERT should collate the responses and bring them to the critical incident review.

Outcomes of the critical incident review may include:

- a commitment to review and revise the school's postvention plan (or to develop one)
- identifying needs such as building staff capacity in specific areas (for example, recognising and responding to risk factors for suicide, grief and loss, mental health in young people or staff self care). Staff professional learning sessions can be facilitated with the support of local services and your Be You Consultant.

Consider facilitating an information session for families

If families express the need for additional information, consider facilitating a family information session.

Use your mental health partners or Be You Consultant to help facilitate the delivery of these sessions.

However, if there is major unrest within the community, a family session isn't recommended as it may lead to further distress for some family members.

The wishes of the bereaved family and the needs of the families in your learning community will inform the focus of the session. It may vary greatly, depending on the capacity to refer to the death as a suicide, the circumstances of the suicide, the location, capacity and size of the school, cultural considerations and the needs of the school community.

Ideally, attendance should include school leadership staff, wellbeing staff, representatives from external mental health services and mental health professionals from the relevant education body. Some of these representatives may present information or form a panel to answer questions from families.

Ensure that:

- an experienced facilitator who has the skills to contain the group runs the session, in order to preserve the safety of the space
- all presenters are clear about their role and the session format

- sessions are set up as information sessions rather than as group therapy or debriefing sessions
- families register to attend, where possible – this means you can inform presenters if any families who may need extra support are attending
- families understand the session is for adults and that it's not appropriate for children or young people to attend
- details are shared about help services that can be accessed at different times and in different modes (for example, in person, phone or online).

Often, it's helpful for families to be able to send questions ahead of the session so that presenters can make sure their questions are answered. This also helps you to understand the needs of the community.

Be aware of any media representation at the session and decide whether the school is comfortable with their presence.

Continue documenting all decisions and actions

The amount of documentation will decrease over time, but good practice is to ensure that documentation occurs for any postvention response activity.