

Speaking with the bereaved family after a suicide

suicide
response
resources

Speaking with a family bereaved by suicide requires sensitivity and compassion.

Be mindful that the family will be grieving. They may be in a state of shock, disbelief, anger or despair, or experiencing many different emotions.

Contact with the family should be the responsibility of one staff member only. This person should have knowledge of grief reactions – including the complexities of grief following suicide – and an ability to be sensitive to the grief the family is experiencing.

Usually, the principal or a senior staff member will have this responsibility. Consider the relationship the staff member has with the family, the degree to which they're impacted by the death and how comfortable they are having this role.

Early liaison with the family is important but families will respond to school contact in different ways.

If a family member is too distressed to talk, try to make a time to call in the next 2 days. Alternatively, if it's proving difficult to speak directly with the immediate family, ask if there's an extended family member or close family friend you can speak with.

How to talk to the family

Before you speak with the family:

- be aware of any of the young person's belongings that will be returned
- remove the young person from any automated messaging systems, such as absentee alerts or fee reminders
- be across plans and suggestions for supporting siblings, family members and friends who attend the school
- access information about local support services
- be aware of school plans to respond to possible media contact
- organise to debrief following the conversation (for example, with a member of the wellbeing team).

During the conversation:

- Offer the condolences of the school.
- Offer support and connection with the school. Let them know that you'll be the staff member liaising with them during this time.

- Acknowledge that it must be very hard for them to talk to you. Sensitively advise that it would help the school's ability to support other students and the school community if you could discuss a few things with them.
- Seek permission to refer to the death as a suicide within the school community. If they ask for advice, discuss the damaging impact of misinformation and the importance of being able to talk to students about suicide and its causes to help keep students safe. Reassure them that this will be done sensitively without details provided.
- If they don't wish for the death to be referred to as a suicide, respect their wishes. If relevant, it's appropriate to inform them sensitively that information is already being exchanged between students about suicide as the cause of death. The family may change their perspective once it's gently explained that in that situation, open communication can help to keep other students safe.
- Ascertain plans for the funeral and the family's wishes regarding staff and attendance of friends and other young people. If there are no plans yet, enquire about getting the information later.
- Discuss and arrange for the support of siblings, close friends or extended family members who attend the school.
- Advise them of plans to return their young person's belongings to them.
- Ask whether they have access to their young person's social media accounts and consider who within the family may manage that.
- Provide information about local supports for the family should they wish to seek support, including grief counselling, external mental health services and support groups.
- Provide information about potential media contact and how the school will respond to the media.
- Be aware that this is a lot of information to take in under very distressing circumstances. Explain that you'll send the information discussed in an email for their reference.
- Request permission to contact them again and make a time to do so if appropriate.

During the conversation, keep in mind:

- If the family member expresses strong emotions, keep calm, listen, take your time and acknowledge their feelings.
- Avoid using the phrase 'committed suicide' as it relates to a time when suicide was considered a crime and can be upsetting for family members. Use terms such as 'took their own life'.
- The experience of suicide can feel isolating for families due to stigma – your contact is likely to be supportive and helpful, even if it doesn't feel like it at the time.
- Keep a list of items to cover and gently steer the conversation to these items.
- If the family member is too distressed, remember it's okay to call back or speak with another family member.

Follow up with the family

Let the family know that it would be helpful if the school could maintain contact as needed and seek permission to do this. In the shorter term, this may include discussing funeral arrangements and staff and student attendance. It may also be providing information about the school's response plans and activities. In the longer term, it may include seeking input regarding memorials and important events, for example, yearbooks and school formals.

Take care of yourself

It's important to be aware of your own needs and to seek additional support when you need it. This not only safeguards your own wellbeing, but helps you support young people and the whole school community.

Find your support team

Some people may feel that the support of friends, colleagues and family is what they need. Others may prefer to use professional services.

Your school may have a designated support team, such as:

- school wellbeing staff
- chaplains
- a school counsellor or psychologist
- nominated teacher
- an employee assistance program

- support staff from your state or territory education department or relevant school body.

It may also be helpful to debrief with external mental health professionals who can offer a different type of support to what you may receive from family and friends. Talking with mental health professionals about your experience after a trauma can reduce the chance that you will experience long-term distress or difficulties.

Bibliography

Visit [Speaking with the bereaved family after a suicide](#) for a list of references for this Fact Sheet.

Further resources

Be You has a range of resources to help you manage issues related to suicide. Please see:

- Managing language and consent about using the word 'suicide'
- Media and social media

Fact sheets are for general information only. They are not intended to be and should not be relied on as a substitute for specific medical or health advice. While every effort is taken to ensure the information is accurate, Be You makes no representations and gives no warranties that this information is correct, current, complete, reliable or suitable for any purpose. We disclaim all responsibility and liability for any direct or indirect loss, damage, cost or expense whatsoever in the use of or reliance upon this information.

© 2023 Australian Government