

Staff grief after a suicide

Suicide Response Resources

The suicide of a young person or colleague can be a traumatic experience and have a profound emotional effect on school staff.

Everyone reacts to death by suicide in different ways and experiences different emotions.

Shock, disbelief, confusion and deep sadness are common, but suicide can also elicit a range of complex emotions like guilt, hurt, anger and remorse. Some people may struggle with unanswered questions about what happened and what they could have done to help. These emotions can alter behaviour and affect the ability to cope with the death.

School staff are often expected to lead, coordinate, support others 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.

Just like the oxygen mask on a plane, it's important to take time to care of yourself before supporting others.

How school staff may respond

Grief is a normal and expected response to loss, but grief relating to suicide can be particularly complex.

The suddenness of the death, perception of preventability and difficulty comprehending why the deceased ended their life contribute to a complicated set of feelings.

Cultural issues like stigma can also affect the grieving process.

It's common for school staff to experience:

- shock, disbelief or numbness
- guilt or feelings of failure that the death was not prevented
- anxiety, nightmares or intrusive thoughts and feelings about the suicide
- preoccupation with thoughts of the person who died, and trying to make sense of the death and understand why it happened
- withdrawal from others
- increased irritability or anger
- difficulty concentrating

- changes to sleep patterns
- changes to appetite
- restlessness
- confusion
- low motivation and energy
- reduced enjoyment of usual activities.

Grief can last for months and even years. And there's no right or wrong way to grieve – some people may appear to be unaffected while others have visible difficulties. Most people carry on with their lives while moving through a grieving process.

Self-care

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 teachers, an employee assistance program or 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.

Monitor your reactions and look after your needs

After exposure to a traumatic incident such as a suicide, you might notice ongoing changes in your behaviour. These may include withdrawing from others, increased irritability and difficulty concentrating. Adverse reactions to a suicide may also emerge over time, particularly when the school observes special events or anniversaries of the suicide.

During this time, you may need a break from the classroom and direct contact with young people.

Don't ignore the need to care for yourself or to ask for more support.

Have a contingency plan for difficult situations

It's common to find everyday situations challenging after a suicide. You may struggle when young people are disruptive, or families demand more of your time.

Recognise the situations you find difficult and come up with strategies to manage them.

Maintain structure and routine in the classroom

Following a suicide, it's important for the school, but also for you, to try to return to a normal routine as soon as possible. This can help young people and school staff feel less overwhelmed by the incident. When you're in the classroom, after discussing any issues that have arisen because of the suicide, try to return to that day's lesson plan.

Practise effective time-management

Give yourself enough time to get to places and complete tasks to reduce stress. Try not to overload yourself with too much work or take on extra responsibility.

Use positive coping strategies

Combat unhelpful thoughts like “I should have done something to stop the suicide” and “I won’t be able to help anyone else” with relaxation, breathing exercises and meditation. These techniques can help to change your perspective and minimise distress.

Avoid unhealthy coping strategies

Using drugs and alcohol to cope can increase emotional difficulties and the time it takes you to process what’s happened.

Maintain a healthy work-life balance

Try to:

- maintain a healthy diet to strengthen your immune system
- maintain an exercise routine to help combat stress
- maintain a consistent sleep routine to give you enough energy to get through the day
- plan pleasurable activities to manage your mood
- keep to regular working hours
- avoid taking work home with you.

Arrange for time out if you’re struggling

If you feel unable to carry out your professional responsibilities, speak with the school principal and explore options for taking time either outside of the classroom or the school.

It may be detrimental to your wellbeing, the young people in your care and your colleagues to continue in your role if you feel you’re not coping.

Supporting colleagues

Just like you, your colleagues may be grappling with strong emotions and feel overwhelmed after a suicide.

To support colleagues, you might like to:

- acknowledge the loss and the need for taking time to grieve
- share what information you have about expected grief reactions
- allow time to discuss what has happened, sometimes repeatedly
- offer practical support
- encourage participation in enjoyable activities like sports or other hobbies
- encourage contact with supportive friends, which can make a real difference to a bereaved person’s capacity to manage grief
- provide a safe, non-judgemental and supportive environment
- consider cultural differences as differences in cultural background can affect how people respond to suicide and how they feel about sharing information and seeking help
- look out for signs that a colleague is not coping and encourage self-care or provide information about additional support.

When to seek help

There's no standard timeline for grieving.

It's normal to:

- experience intense emotional pain
- want to avoid the pain of grieving
- experience delayed grief that emerges weeks or even months after the death.

If difficulties persist beyond a few weeks, seek additional support or professional help.

Seek professional help, and recommend a colleague does the same, if you're:

- experiencing overwhelming, severe and persistent grief symptoms
- experiencing suicidal thoughts
- not coping despite using normal coping strategies or signs that a colleague is not coping and encourage self-care or provide information about additional support.

Where to go for help

The [Beyond Blue Support Service](#) provides support any time of the day or night. To talk with a trained mental health professional, please call 1300 22 4636.

Your general practitioner (GP)

A psychologist or counsellor
(your GP can refer you)

Your employee assistance program

[Lifeline](#) is a 24-hour telephone counselling service that includes crisis support: 13 11 14

[13Yarn](#) is a 24-hour dedicated support service for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people: 13 92 76

[Suicide Call Back Service](#) is a 24-hour crisis counselling service for people at risk of suicide and affected by suicide: 1300 659 467

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