

# Grief and Loss



Talking to students  
following a suicide

# Talking to students following a suicide

Suicide is a difficult topic to talk about and deal with, particularly after the suicide of a student. Despite this, talking with students about what has happened is a very important step in helping them cope with the trauma and grief associated with suicide. This leaflet is designed to highlight some of the important considerations when talking to students and give some tips for when discussing suicide with students either individually or within the classroom.

Following a suicide, teachers can often feel uncertain about their role in engaging with students. In these times it is OK to talk about suicide in and outside of the classroom in response to the needs of students. Teachers are encouraged to acknowledge what has happened and reiterate that this type of trauma is likely to affect people in different ways. It is important to include messages that outline options to seek help and positive coping in these discussions. Talking to students and listening to their concerns can also help to highlight students who may be having difficulty coping, and who could benefit from some extra support from pastoral staff or other professionals.

## When talking about suicide it is better to use phrases like:

- Death by suicide.
- Take one's own life.
- A suicide attempt.
- A completed suicide.
- Person at risk of suicide.

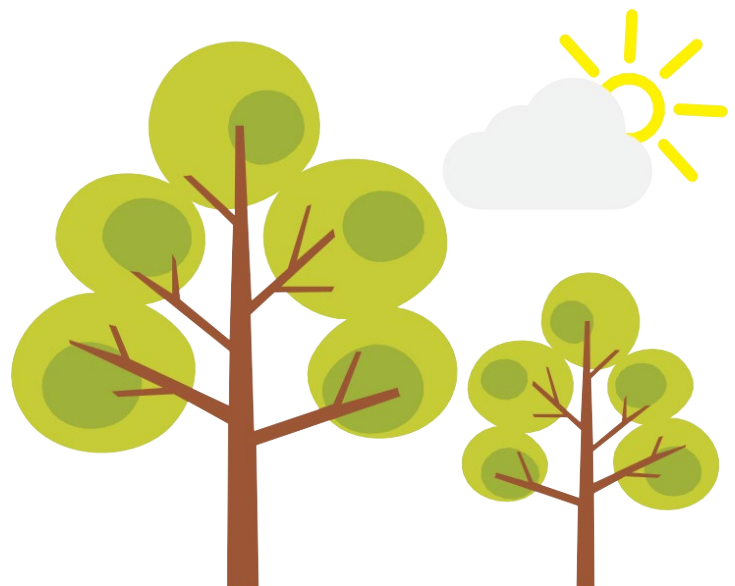
## Try to avoid phrases like:

- A successful suicide attempt.
- An unsuccessful/failed suicide attempt.
- Commit suicide.
- Suicide victim.
- Just a cry for help.
- Suicide-prone person.

## If providing information to students or the school community in the aftermath of suicide you should include and reinforce:

- Facts (not rumours).
- An understanding that death is permanent.
- An exploration of normal and wide-ranging reactions to suicide (expressions of anger and guilt are entirely normal).
- An understanding that, with support, people can cope.
- An understanding that fleeting thoughts of suicide are not unusual.
- An awareness of suicidal warning signs and resources available to help.
- An understanding of funeral expectations.

Here are some further tips to assist you in both discussing suicide with students and also in knowing when to refer a student to a school pastoral staff member for further support



## DO

### Listen to students if they want to talk

It is important for students to feel that they can talk with a trusted adult about how they are feeling or what they are experiencing. By making a student feel listened to and supported, they are more likely to be open about their risk and discussing options for accessing further help.

### Be empathetic

This is very important in helping students feel supported. It helps demonstrate that you are listening and can reflect some understanding of what the young person is feeling or experiencing. However it's also important to be aware of clear boundaries and to know when it's time to refer the student on to pastoral staff.

### Maintain normal routine as much as possible

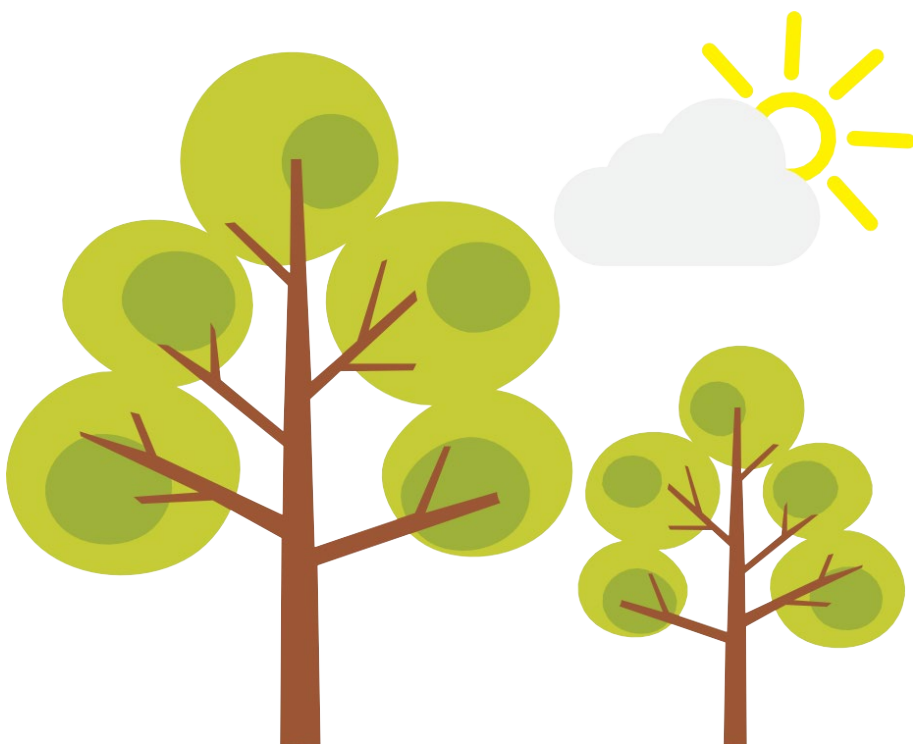
This is important for both you and your students. Having routine provides some certainty and comfort which is often temporarily lost when any traumatic event occurs. Maintaining routine will also help to minimise students excessively engaging in discussion around the suicide which may increase their distress.

### Guide a discussion about suicide if you think it is necessary

If you notice students are distracted and consumed by the topic of suicide it may be appropriate to facilitate a class discussion about what has occurred. If you deem this is appropriate, it should be time limited to between 5-10 minutes and focus on messages of accessing help, and healthy coping strategies. Additionally, you may need to limit how many conversations of this nature take place. It is also important to try and dispel any rumours circulating about the student's suicide and explain that rumours are likely to increase their own distress.

### Be aware of risk factors

Having a basic awareness of risk factors will assist you in being able to identify students who may be at risk. If you are concerned about any students or identify students who you believe to be at risk, it is necessary to refer them to school pastoral staff. Having an idea of risk factors may also assist in alleviating your anxiety around which students may or may not be at risk.



## DON'T

### Take on the role of being a counsellor

Unless qualified, this is not your role. Students will need your support and understanding following the suicide. However, it is important that only professionally trained staff explore and manage more complex and significant issues related to a student's level of distress and ability to cope.

### Do anything that makes you feel uncomfortable

If you do not feel comfortable engaging with students on this sensitive subject, ask for assistance from wellbeing staff that are trained in this area.

### Guarantee confidentiality to a student if you are concerned about their safety

If you are concerned about a student you need to communicate this to them as well as letting them know that you will be referring them to well-being staff. If a student asks you not to disclose any information relating to their safety or another student's safety, you need to inform them that keeping them safe is part of your job and that you are required to pass on this information to the appropriate people. Being transparent with students is essential to maintain their trust and respect.

### Allow the whole class time discussion to be focused on suicide

Whilst you may recognise students' need to discuss the suicide, it is important to contain this to a limited period within class time. Some students may feel the need to discuss the suicide; others may find this more distressing. If you choose to have a class discussion about it, make sure students understand that the next 5-10 minutes will be allocated to this discussion and that the remainder of the class time will be focused on the learning content.

### Make assessments or diagnose. It is not your role to assess or diagnose students

This should only be done by professionals with appropriate training. When discussing a student with pastoral staff it may be most useful to describe changes in their behaviour or other observed behaviours.

### Speculate on reasons for the suicide

Suicide is a complex issue, usually with no single cause. If the conversation drifts towards the reason for the suicide it may be useful to discuss the connection between suicide and mental health problems. This can also help to limit glamourisation and reduce the risk of suicide contagion. It will also help you discuss strategies aimed at preventing suicide.

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