

Grief and Loss



Advice to school
leaders following
a suspected suicide

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When you first discover that someone within the school community has died unexpectedly through suspected suicide, you will probably experience a range of emotions and physical sensations. As school leaders there is a dual responsibility both in terms of looking after yourselves, but also responding to the unfolding situation appropriately and constructively in order to rebuild the well-being of the school community. This leaflet is designed to help you think through some of the important factors that may arise.

1. When first hearing the news

It is important to consider how to respond to the news of a suspected suicide early to prevent rumour and misinformation and to consider the best actions to take in such cases. Some things to consider include:

- Establish the facts before acting on news of a suspected suicide. Contact the police or the family as soon as you can to confirm the death and whether or not it is being treated as suicide.
- Where a death has not been confirmed by the police or the coroner as a death by suicide you should use language such as 'accidental death' or 'sudden death' rather than suicide.
- Be aware that it is likely to be many months before an inquest is held, and that in many cases narrative verdicts may mean that the death is not officially recorded as suicide. It is important to note that there may be a great deal of speculation within the school community, and that schools often have to act on the basis that the death is being treated as suicide by many in the community whilst still being clear that it is still unconfirmed.
- Notify the local authority. It is important to act quickly, while at the same time preparing the school leadership team and administration for continuous enquiries once the death is made known.

2. Breaking the news

Breaking the news to young people can be extremely difficult. Usually it is best to tell staff first and give them time to take in the news before addressing students. Make sure that staff know where and to whom they can turn for their own emotional support. Best practice suggests that, where possible, it is better to break the news to students in small groups or classes.

- When breaking the news it is important to be factual but to avoid excessive detail about the suicidal act itself. Rumours may be circulating and people may ask directly but try not to disclose details about the method used, whether there was a suicide note, or its contents.
- Consider preparing a statement for staff to use to ensure consistency across the school.
- Consider providing immediate emotional support to students and staff at the school, for example being able to speak to someone about their initial reactions. A counsellor or pastoral staff with relevant experience may be able to take on this role. It may be helpful to arrange for someone from outside of the school with the relevant skills to be available.
- Try to strike a balance between sensitivity to those who are grieving and in shock, on the one hand, and the need to maintain the school routine, on the other.
- It may be helpful to set aside a room where students can go if they are upset.

Informing the wider community/parents

Communicating with parents can help to avoid rumours, speculation and also help contain anxiety within the wider community. If writing a letter or email it may be useful to think about including the following:

- Stating briefly what has happened.
- What support the school is putting in place.
- What actions the school will take with regards to funerals and memorials.
- Where to find further information about suicide and grief.
- Where to access support for themselves.
- What to do if they are worried about someone else.



3. Memorials

Those affected by a suicide often want to have some kind of memorial for the person who has died. The benefit of a memorial is that it gives friends, families and communities the chance to mourn together, share their grief and demonstrate the significance of their loss. When it is a young person who has died, the urge to create a memorial can be particularly strong. This can play an important role in the grieving process of friends and fellow students.

Any memorial will need to be carefully managed, taking account of the wide range of feelings that are likely to be displayed. It is important not to sensationalise or glamorise suicide but also to allow people in the school community to celebrate a life and express their sadness.

School managers should set a time limit for memorials [about two weeks is typical]. They may offer to forward cards and other tribute material to the family afterwards.

Spontaneous memorials

After a suicide (or any unexpected death), it is not unusual for young people to create spontaneous memorials. Often, they will leave messages, flowers, photos or other items at the site where the person died or another significant place. Online memorials – on social networking sites, blogs or at a dedicated website – are also common.

While there may be little harm in the creation of spontaneous memorials, it is important that such sites don't inadvertently glamorise the death or cause distress to others who may see it. Setting some limits around the material, the content, the location and the length of time it remains in place can reduce potential distress. However, this must be done with respect and sensitivity for those who are grieving.

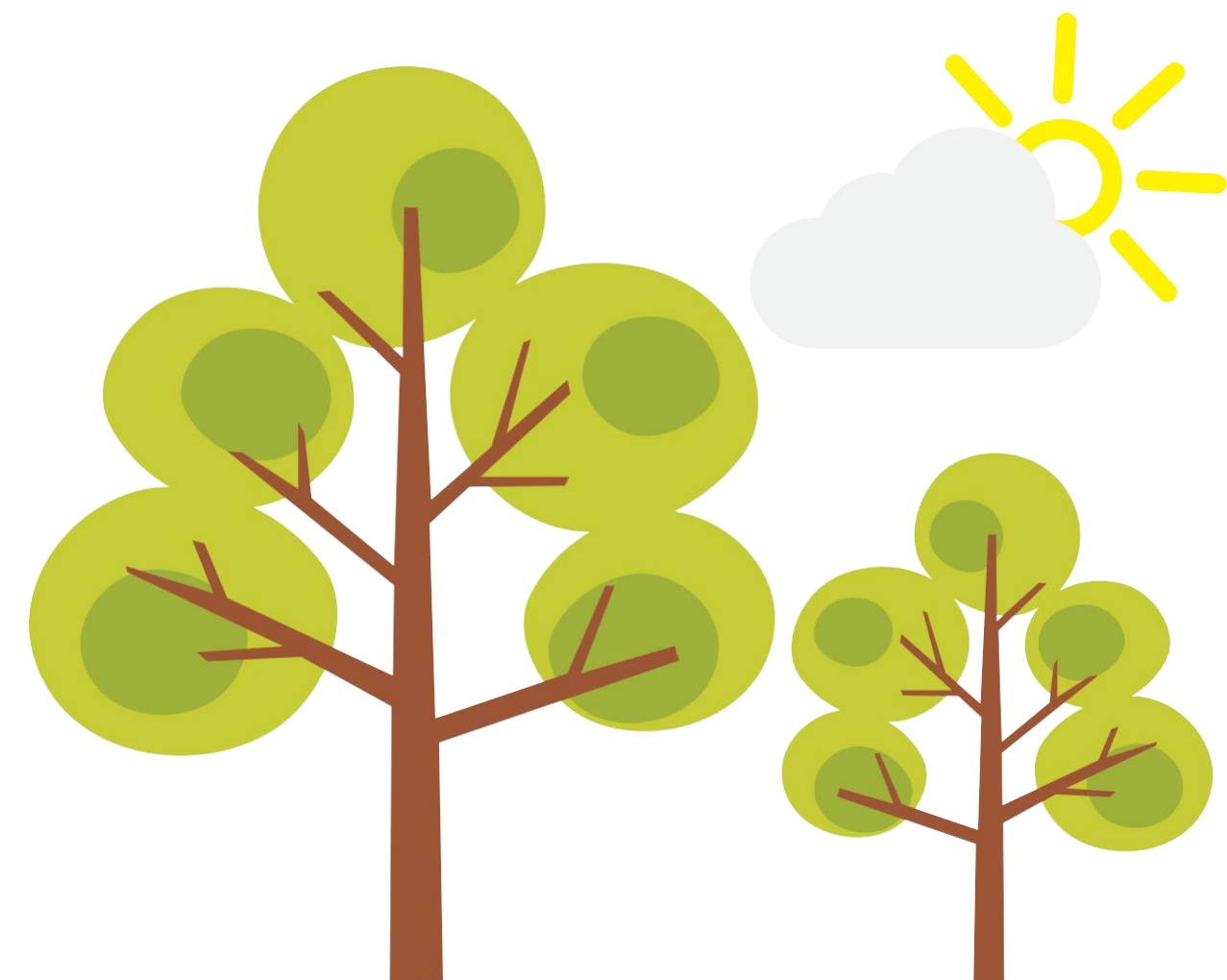
On-line and social media memorials

Following a suicide, students are likely to turn to social media for a variety of purposes. These include sending news out about a death (both accurate and rumoured), posting online messages (both appropriate and inappropriate), calling for impromptu gatherings and creating virtual memorials.

Schools cannot control online memorials and other social networking activity following a suicide. However, students should be warned about the risks of online memorials – their comments may become public/published without their permission, online memorials can attract negative and hurtful comment and anything that romanticises suicide can be harmful to those who are vulnerable.

Schools could consider establishing an online memorial on their own website, which they can then moderate and remove after an agreed time. This could also be used to promote suicide prevention, positive mental health and distribute other important information to students and the broader school community. If schools wish to utilise social media the following pointers may be useful:

- Involve students - Working in partnership with students can enhance the credibility and effectiveness of a school's social media efforts.
- Collaborate with students - Most memorial pages will have an administrator (a friend or family member who moderates the page). Making contact with this person and offering to assist and collaborate can be a good way to engage students in honouring the deceased's life appropriately and safely.
- Be available - It's important that students know who to contact if they are aware of, or concerned about messages they see on social media sites. In some cases it may also be necessary to intervene. Most sites allow you to report offensive material and request that it be removed (although be aware this process can often take weeks or even months).



4. Funerals

The nature of the death should not by itself encourage greater attendance at the funeral than it would for any other tragic death within the school community. We recommend that parents or guardians accompany students who want to attend. Those who don't attend should have normal classes to go to. If appropriate, engage the faith leader prior to the funeral to suggest that eulogies should be fitting and do not sensationalise what has happened.

5. Responding to the Media

The media can sometimes be interested in suicide, especially if there has been more than one instance of attempted or completed suicide within a school or community.

It is recommended that only one member of the school staff is given the role of media liaison. This will help to ensure a consistent message is being given by the school. However, you should always contact your education department or equivalent body before speaking to the media. Refusing to speak to the media will not prevent coverage of a suicide.

Other things to think about when dealing with the media include:

- Do not glamorise the deceased or the suicide act itself.
- Do not oversimplify the cause of the suicide.
- Tell the media not to include pictures of the death scene or distressed mourners.
- Do not give details of the method of suicide.
- Do not allow TV cameras or reporters on to school grounds.

It may also be useful when dealing with the media to reinforce some principles about the reporting of suicide. For example:

- Highlighting the relationship between suicide and mental illness;
- Encouraging reporters to raise public awareness of the risk factors and warning signs of suicide, as well as the actions that can be taken to help a suicidal person; and
- Providing reporters with information about local support services, local mental health services and crisis support numbers.

6. Suicide contagion

Suicide contagion refers to the process whereby one suicide or suicidal act within a school, community, or geographic area increases the likelihood that others will attempt or complete suicide. While it's a rare phenomenon, young people seem to be more vulnerable to suicide contagion than older people. This is largely because young people identify more strongly with the actions of their peers, and because adolescence is a period of increased vulnerability to mental health problems which increase the risk of suicide.

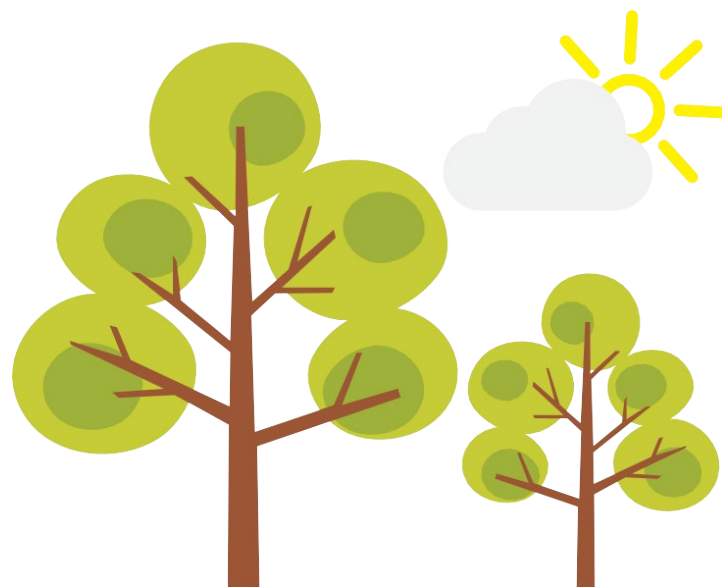
The most significant factor contributing to suicide contagion appears to be the glamorising or romanticising of suicide that can occur in the process of communicating about a suicide death. This doesn't necessarily happen intentionally – it's common for people to remember the positive things about someone who has recently died and to focus less on the difficulties they may have been having with their mental health or in their relationships. While giving positive attention to a person who has taken their life can seem well meaning, it has the potential to encourage suicidal thoughts and behaviour in vulnerable young people.

Reducing the risk of suicide contagion

There are a number of ways to reduce the risk of suicide contagion in a school or community. These include:

- Identification and monitoring of people at increased risk (such as those particularly close to the deceased or those with pre-existing mental health issues).
- Appropriate support and treatment for people at risk including initial one to one support for distressed students as well as ongoing treatment by mental health clinicians.
- Appropriate reporting of suicide in the media.

Avoiding discussion of suicide with young people does not help manage the risk of suicide contagion. Many people believe that talking to young people about suicide will put the idea into their minds, but if a suicide has occurred amongst their friends or peers young people will already be thinking about it. Providing permission and a safe place for young people to talk about their feelings can actually reduce distress, and may decrease the likelihood that suicide will be romanticised in their minds.



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