# Considerations for boarding schools following a suicide

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## Suicide can be a traumatic event for any community.

For the boarding school community the impact of a death by suicide can be greatly extended due to the multiple communities existing within, connected to or impacting on the one school.

To ensure a safe response to a death by suicide in boarding schools there are four key areas to address; the communication between teaching and boarding staff, supporting mental health in boarding students, managing the multiple communities making up the school community and managing risk issues for all students. Below is some information to assist with a safe response to a death by suicide in this setting.

**Effective communication is critical to managing risk after a suicide.**

## Disseminate information immediately to all staff

Effective communication is critical to managing risk after a suicide. Sensitively notify all staff of the death as soon as possible. This includes staff not currently on school grounds to ensure that they are aware of the death and postvention plans before arriving for their next class or overnight shift.

Email is the quickest method to reach all staff with information, when a meeting is not possible. However it may not be appropriate to inform some staff members via email. Consider the relationship the staff member had with the student, the impact of the information and the support they may require on hearing the news.

Establish communication pathways. Teaching and boarding staff operate on different timetables and may not see each other at all but both will have responsibilities following a student suicide. Staff need to be able to communicate effectively regarding at-risk students, early warning signs for risk and risk management plans.

## Understand the social location of your students

Boarding school students may originate from varied communities and cultures. Following a suicide it is important to be aware of the:

- Family and community factors for each student that may increase their vulnerability, such as exposure to family conflict, death or suicide in their community of origin
- Specific challenges faced by boarding students after a traumatic event, such as separation from their family and community supports
- Staff: student ratio and the impact this may have on students seeking support after hours
- Issues relating to the cultural and religious identity of students (e.g. a student who originates from a remote community and is of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background may need to return to their community following a death).

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Informal communication channels in the boarding setting mean that boarding staff are well placed to understand the background of their students and how relevant factors may contribute to risk. They are also well placed to observe changes in behaviour or mood and check in with students about how they are coping.

## Ensure appropriate staff training

Appropriate staff training is critical to managing risk. This should be considered over three areas:

1. Ensure both teaching and boarding staff are up to date with:
   - Identifying risk
   - Mental health first aid
   - Referral pathways for at-risk students.

2. Specific, identified staff such as well-being staff, should be proficient in risk assessments and risk management planning.

3. Boarding staff should have a thorough understanding of their role (in general and particularly in a crisis); this should be part of their induction. Schools should offer additional support and training if boarding staff do not feel sufficiently equipped to identify and manage risk.

Training should be reviewed annually and form a critical part of preparedness training; taking into account changes in staffing and the need for appropriate refresher training.

## Support mental health in boarding students

Boarding students face specific challenges including their:

- Limited access to 'time out' away from the school setting and their peers
- Inability to seek face-to-face and/or physical support and comfort from their family and community
- Reliance on each other; often leading to close bonds forming between students. This has implications for risk of suicide contagion, particularly if the deceased student was a boarding student **(see the headspace School Support fact sheet *Suicide contagion*)**
- Connection to community and cultural identity, which has implications for their well-being.

School staff can address these challenges and promote self-care and mental health for students by:

- Normalising their need for time out and time for grieving
- Working with students and communities to maintain connections to family, community and cultural identity
- Encouraging mental health care strategies; maintaining involvement in positive activities, exercising, eating well and developing regular sleeping habits
- Providing education on study/work/life balance, resilience and coping strategies
- Promoting awareness of the relationship between suicide and mental illness, risk factors, help-seeking strategies and where to seek help.

*See fact sheet How to talk about suicide with young people.*

## Be aware of memorialising on school grounds

If the suicide occurred on school grounds or in a student room consider:

- Supporting safe and respectful memorials, with consideration to appropriate timeframes and locations **(see fact sheet *Remembering a young person: Memorials and important events*)**
- Use of the room and how to best address this for your school
- Structures around well-being after hours and access to support.

### Consider marginalised young people

When thinking about issues related to youth suicide it is very important to be aware of the unique needs of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) or Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Intersex (LGBTI) young people and respond appropriately. Please see the **headspace** School Support website for more information.

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Please refer to the **headspace** School Support *Suicide Postvention Toolkit – A Guide for Secondary Schools* for further guidance.

For more information on suicide or support and assistance visit **headspace.org.au/schoolsupport** or **headspace.org.au**