

Tips for contacting the bereaved family following a suicide



Liaising 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, despair or a myriad of other emotions.

Contact with the family should be the responsibility of one staff member only. It should be undertaken with some knowledge of grief reactions – including the complexities inherent in grief following suicide – and sensitivity to the grief the family will be experiencing.

It is important to consider which staff member is best placed to liaise with the family during this time. This is usually the Principal or a senior staff member. Things to consider include the relationship the staff member has with the family, the degree to which they are impacted by the death and how comfortable they are to undertake this role.

Early liaison with the family is important but families will respond in different ways to school contact. If the family member is too distressed to talk, try to make a time to call within the next two days. Alternatively, if it is proving difficult to speak directly with the immediate family, ask if there is an extended family member or close family friend you can liaise with.

Considerations for the initial conversation with the bereaved family or representative

- Offer the condolences of the school.
- Offer support and liaison with the school. Let them know that you will 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. 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, in order to help keep students safe.
- If they do not wish for the death to be referred to as a suicide this needs to be respected. If relevant, it is appropriate to sensitively inform them that there is already information being exchanged between students about the cause of death being suicide. The family may change their perspective once it is gently explained that in that situation, open communication can help to keep other students safe.

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- Ascertain plans for the funeral and the family's wishes regarding staff and student attendance. If there are no plans yet, enquire about getting the information at a later time.
- Discuss and arrange for the support of siblings, close friends or extended family members who attend the school.
- Advise them of plans regarding returning their child's belongings to them.
- Ask whether they have access to their child's social media accounts. Flag issues that may arise on social media and provide information on how to manage these or how staff can assist in managing this (see [headspace School Support fact sheet Managing social media following a suicide](#)).
- Provide information about local supports for the family should they wish to seek support, including grief counselling, external mental health services and survivor support groups. Access this information prior to the contact with the family.
- Provide information about potential media contact and how the school will be responding to the media (see [fact sheet Responding to the media](#)).
- Be aware that this is a lot of information to take in under very distressing circumstances. Advise that you will send the information discussed in an email for them to refer to later if required.
- Request permission to recontact them and make a time to do this if appropriate.

Subsequent contact with the family or representative

Let the family know that it would be helpful if the school could maintain contact with the family as required, and seek permission to do this. Explain the possible reasons for contact may include providing information about response plans and activities; providing information about memorials and important events – for example year books, school formals; and how these will be managed (see [fact sheet Remembering a young person: Memorials and important events](#)).

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

Acknowledgements

Erbacher, T.A., Singer, J.B. & Poland, S (2015) *Suicide in Schools: A Practitioner's Guide to Multi-level Prevention, Assessment, Intervention, and Postvention*, first edition, New York, Routledge
headspace School Support Suicide Postvention Toolkit (2012)