

GUIDELINES FOR SCHOOLS

The following information has been prepared to assist schools in responding to bereavement in their school community, particularly suicide bereavement. The aim of this information is to increase awareness of the unique issues and experiences of those bereaved in order to enable appropriate and effective support.

If you would like to receive more information, to make a referral or to inquire about secondary consultation or professional development, please contact us.

Information about Suicide Bereavement

Why is Grief following Suicide Different?

Kalischuk and Hayes (2003-2004)¹ outline specific issues for the suicide bereaved:

- The grief is more intense and often never fully resolved
- The bereaved are more likely to become socially isolated and withdrawn because of the stigma that still surrounds suicide death
- The bereaved engage in a continuous search for the reason and are likely to assume greater responsibility for the death
- The bereaved experience significant guilt associated with not anticipating or preventing the suicide.

Possible Presentations:

- Children - heightened insecurities (e.g. fearful, clingy, tearful) and regressive behaviours (eg. changes in eating, sleeping and toileting patterns).
- Young People - increased risk-taking behaviours (use of alcohol / drugs, sexual activity, use of cars / motorbikes in unsafe ways), withdrawal from friends and family, sudden loss of interest / poor performance at school, engaging in 'attention-seeking' behaviours.
- Adults - acutely distressed / agitated, in shock, withdrawn, depressed, unable to attend to usual responsibilities, hyperactivity, sensitised to own mortality, any range of bereavement and traumatic responses.

Responding to Suicide Bereavement

Children's Concepts of Death

Children say things directly, simply and clearly. Their stage of development influences their understanding of death. There are three concepts that are important for children to grasp:

- Death is irreversible and final; it is not 'a trip'
- Death brings about non-functionality - life and body functions stop, the person is not asleep
- Death is inevitable - everyone will die some time

Most children understand these concepts by the age of 7 years. Children who are bereaved before the age of 7 are likely to come to a partial understanding of them earlier.

Some of the specific needs of bereaved children and young people are as follows:

Ways of supporting a bereaved child or young person

- Don't put a time limit on the process of grieving. Be available some time down the track
- Sit quietly with the young person and listen while he/she talks, cries or is silent
- Make opportunities to share memories or look at photos of the person who has died
- Acknowledge and believe the young person's pain and distress whatever the loss - large or small
- Reassure the person that grief is a normal response to loss and there is no wrong or right way to grieve
- Don't panic in the absence or presence of strong emotional responses
- Provide a safe space; have a regular routine
- Be consistent, honest and reassuring
- Give honest, adequate and appropriate information
- Include and involve the child in appropriate decision-making and in what is happening
- Acknowledge feelings and give support when the child is overwhelmed by feelings
- Provide opportunities to remember, create a memory box and make a memory book, draw, paint, make a collage, write stories, poems, collect photos
- Be aware of the effect of special occasions and assist in preparation for them. E.g. Mother's Day, Father's Day, Christmas, Easter, holidays
- Be aware of your own grief and/or feeling of helplessness
- Provide information about grief - books, web sites

Within the school community

A death can affect a school community at various levels. Those affected directly or indirectly may include an individual student's, teachers, other school staff, a class or student community and families. The experience of the death and associated grief will affect people in different ways.

Death by suicide will affect each individual and community differently. Some people may appear obviously affected while others may not. Regardless of those directly affected, the suicide death of a student, teacher or family member will have an impact on the community as a whole.

A suicide death may lead to shock, confusion, disbelief and anger, to name only some common responses. A suicide death often is often a stigmatised death and can lead to a lack of appropriate support for those affected.

It is also important to be aware that the effect of bereavement can go well beyond the initial crisis period. For those most affected, grief can be a long-term process. It can also have a cumulative effect as the impact ripples through a school community, sometimes unseen. In these circumstances, it can be important to find an appropriate way to commemorate the death.

Students, staff and families within the school community will each have unique responses, which will vary according to such factors as age, level of understanding, the person's character and their relationship to the person who has died, as well as previous experiences of grief and bereavement.

Sometimes school communities are concerned that talking openly about a suicide death may lead to further suicides. However, the opposite is true. Open and honest accounts of suicide death and the provision of information and support are imperative to a school community.

Ideas for responding to suicide bereavement in the classroom

The following are some creative ways of assisting staff and students in responding to suicide bereavement. These activities may be done individually or in a group or classroom setting:

- Write a letter to the bereaved person and/or family or make a card and add a message
- Students and staff may make a memory book about the person who has died include photos, poems, sketches, qualities, sayings, stories
- Students may create images that express something of their grief experience - art materials e.g. clay, paints, drawing, collage
- Students may make a CD of songs that are meaningful
- Deliver and/or provide a formal grief program; e.g. 'Seasons for Growth'.

Information and Support for Students

Supporting students after a suicide may include the following:

- Supporting a class
Talk with the class about grief

Provide students with adequate and accurate information about the death in consultation with the bereaved family. Clear and honest information is important to reduce gossip and uncertainty.
- Listen and allow time
Listen to each student's particular experience and concern and give them time to talk about what has happened and how they feel.
- Provide written information
Students may benefit from reading information about grief in private. Written information can take time to absorb and students may need time alone to deal with their feelings.
- Provide flexible support
People grieve in their own time and in their own way, so providing flexible non-judgemental support is important. Allowing the students to have some quiet time and a quiet space is also important.
- Acknowledgement for those directly bereaved
A number of creative expressions of sympathy and memorialisation are

available to students and may be facilitated and coordinated by school staff. These include making and sending cards, pictures, photos and writing letters. If the students knew the person who died they may create a memory journal to be given to the family.

- When the student returns to school
In addition to the above a bereaved student returning to school after a suicide death may have specific needs. The following ideas may assist school staff:
- Communicating with the bereaved student
Talk to and or visit the bereaved student before they return to school. This will provide an opportunity for the student to express how they are feeling about returning to school and what support they may specifically need.
- Referral to local supports
Referral to counselling and support services may be of benefit to the bereaved student and family.

¹ Kalischuk, R. G., and Hayes, V. E. (2004). Grieving, mourning, and healing following youth suicide: A focus on health and well-being in families. *Omega*, 48, 45-67.