

Remembering a young person: Memorials and important events



Those affected by a suicide often want to have some kind of memorial for the person who has died.

A memorial could be an event commemorating the person's life or an object which reminds others of the person who has died.

It gives friends, families and communities the chance to mourn together, share their grief and demonstrate the significance of their loss. When it's 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.

While it's beneficial for young people to grieve in this way, it's important they memorialise the deceased person in a respectful way. They should address the needs of family and friends and avoid glamourising the person or the way that they died. Glamourising suicide can increase the risk of suicide 'contagion' (see **headspace** School Support fact sheet on *Suicide Contagion*) amongst other vulnerable young people.

How to avoid glamourising or stigmatising suicide

Stopping memorials is **not** the way to avoid glamourising a suicide. If you prohibit a memorial, you may stigmatise the family and friends of the person who has died, which can lead to anger and further distress for those affected.

Treat the death as you would any other.

This is a better way of ensuring suicide is not glamourised in any way. It also sends a message to young people that any death is tragic, painful and worthy of acknowledgement. Discussing the connection between suicide and mental health problems can also help to limit glamourisation and reduce the risk of suicide contagion. It will also help you discuss strategies aimed at preventing suicide.

Safe and respectful memorials

There are many ways to create a respectful and meaningful memorial. Including friends and family in the planning of a memorial is a good way of making sure that those closest to the deceased person are not caused any further distress.

Formal services such as funerals will probably be organised by the family. It's important that friends, fellow students and school staff have the opportunity to attend if they want to. Services can be extremely upsetting for young people, so encourage parents to attend with their children and have counsellors available after the service. This ensures that those attending feel supported and have an opportunity to talk about their feelings.

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Spontaneous memorials

After a suicide, it's 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's important that such sites don't inadvertently glamourise 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.

Planning for important events

The anniversary of a person's death and events such as their birthday or school graduation are often difficult times for friends and family. These dates serve as reminders that the person they were close to is no longer with them. Even for those coping well, events like these can bring up old feelings of grief, sadness and loss. They may also experience feelings of anxiety – about not being able to cope or about having to deal with these emotions again. Anniversaries and important events can also be a time of increased risk for vulnerable young people and may trigger suicidal thoughts or behaviours.

Planning for such events can help minimise the distress felt by young people. Giving friends and family opportunities to mark these dates in meaningful ways can help the grieving process.

You can support young people in coping with anniversaries and important events in a number of ways:

- Let them know it's normal to re-experience grief and sadness at significant times, and tell them things will get easier over time;
- Suggest activities which make the young person feel good and which remind them of the good times they shared with the person they have lost;
- Encourage them to contact supportive family members or friends rather than spending their days alone;
- Remind them that there is no 'right' way to mark an anniversary, and help them find a way of coping which they feel comfortable with; and
- Help them connect with counsellors or other support services if they are feeling overwhelmed or unable to cope in the lead-up to the event.

Organised memorials to mark an anniversary or important event can help provide a focus and acknowledge the event's significance. Ideally, these should be arranged with small groups of close friends and family, and always with the permission of parents. Having counsellors or teachers available to provide support following the memorial is a good way to manage any distress experienced by those attending.

Other fact sheets that may be of interest:

Managing social media following a suicide and How to talk about suicide with young people

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

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

Acknowledgements

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and Suicide Prevention Resource Centre. (2011). *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*, Newton, MA: Education Development Centre, Inc. Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. (2011). *LIFE Fact Sheets*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, accessed at www.livingisforeveryone.com.au

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