

Responding to a death that can't be referred to as a suicide



Schools sometimes feel unable to refer to a student death as a suicide.

This may be because the school is uncertain about police and coronial processes, and are concerned about using the word 'suicide' before a coroner's investigation has confirmed a death as a suicide. Other times the family does not wish for their loved one's death to be referred to as a suicide. There are many reasons why families may make this decision. For example, they may feel worried about the stigma associated with suicide, or feel guilty, ashamed or fearful of blame. They may also have religious or cultural reasons for this decision, or may not believe or accept that the death was a suicide.

It is important to respect coronial processes and the wishes of the family while also responding effectively to the needs of the school community. The information below will assist you with a response to a suspected death by suicide in these situations.

These cases are inherently complex and schools are encouraged to seek advice and support from their local **headspace** School Support team.

The importance of language and the word 'suicide'

The way a death is reported and the language a school chooses to describe this is influenced by a number of factors such as police and legal processes, the school's duty of care to students and the bereaved family's wishes. A school's choice of language can influence whether a suicide is glamourised or stigmatised. It can also affect the grief and help-seeking behaviour of those who are adversely affected.

Research shows that vulnerable students and school communities are best supported by the use of clear and accurate information about

suicide, mental illness, coping strategies and help-seeking. While every suicide is unique and should be responded to as such, wherever possible, School Support encourage the use of phrases such as 'suspected suicide' or 'possible suicide' when referring to a suicide. This helps to avoid stigma, glamour, myths and rumours. It also promotes help-seeking for those affected or otherwise vulnerable.

Alternatively, schools could refer to a death as a 'sudden death' or 'unexpected death where:

- the cause of death is genuinely not clear
- the school has not been able to make contact with the family, or
- the family don't want the death to be referred to as a suicide.

Useful resources for managing these situations include headspace fact sheets *Grief* and *If your friend is not okay*.

Confirming with the family about how to refer to the death

It is important to ascertain as soon as possible whether a death can be referred to as a suicide and to seek permission from the family to refer to the death as such.

If the family ask for advice, discuss the damaging effect of misinformation and the importance of being able to talk to students about suicide and its causes, which can help keep students safe. If the family does not want the death to be referred to as a suicide, this needs to be respected.

Referring to a death as a suicide without the family's consent can have an adverse effect on the grief of the bereaved and others affected. It also poses a possible litigation risk for the school.

See the headspace School Support fact sheet *Tips for contacting the bereaved family following a suicide* for further information.

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Discussing suicide as a general topic

School communities can find it uncomfortable to talk about suicide at all without permission. But discussing suicide as a general topic is okay and does not breach confidentiality. While schools need to avoid confirming whether a particular student died by suicide, School Support recommend that schools allow for appropriate conversations about suicide as a general topic, particularly if there is speculation among students about suicide.

Things to consider when responding to a death that can't be referred to as a suicide

- Carefully consider confidentiality and who is informed that the death was a suicide. This may be the leadership/Emergency Response Team only.
- Update the school community as more information becomes available, if appropriate to do so (e.g. if the family decides to refer to the death as a suicide after initially refusing to do so).
- Ensure that staff know they can always get advice before proceeding with a particular course of action (e.g. by consulting with their governing body or School Support).
- Ensure that staff understand the limitations of this complex situation and that they can bring difficult experiences and/or questions back to the leadership team or wellbeing group

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

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References

Cox GR, Bailey E, Jorm AF, Reavley NJ, Templer K, Parker A, Rickwood D, Bhar S, Robinson J. (2016) Development of suicide postvention guidelines for secondary schools: A Delphi study. *BMC Public Health*, 16(1): 180.

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Examples of ways to communicate with the school community when a death cannot be referred to as a suicide

After a suicide, it is important for the school community to communicate information clearly and consistently, to help support vulnerable students. Below are some examples of how you might respond to groups or individuals.

Group communications (when students are talking about a death as a suicide)

'We have heard students wondering about whether (student's name) died by suicide.

His/her family have chosen to keep how s/he died private and the school will be respecting their wishes regarding this. We ask you to respect their wishes, too. But given the subject has come up, there is some important information about suicide that we would like to discuss.'

This opens the door to discuss mental illness, grief reactions and help-seeking. These conversations help to reduce stigma and encourage students to talk with an appropriate person to seek support for themselves or a peer, while still respecting the family's decision to not refer to the death as a suicide.

Individual communications (when a student or parent asks if a student died by suicide)

It is not uncommon for someone to want to know personal information about another person that is not appropriate to be shared. The response you give will depend on your assessment of the information required in the circumstances.

- It might be sufficient to simply respond that the person died suddenly or unexpectedly. Or you might gently contain questioning by informing them that the family have chosen to keep how the student died private and the school will be respecting their wishes regarding this.
- Sometimes a more detailed response may be required, especially if the person is distressed and seeking answers. In these cases, you could talk about suicide in general and move the conversation away from the details and instead focus on how the student is feeling or coping.

For example:

'I understand that you want to make sense of how (student's name) died, and it is normal to want to know and understand, but the family have chosen to keep how s/he died private and the school will be respecting their wishes regarding this. It's okay to be upset at the moment and I want to help you as best I can. It would be a good idea to go and see the school counsellor and to get some support from them.'

Wellbeing staff can then support the student's responses and feelings to suspecting or believing that the person died by suicide, in a safe and confidential space. It is important to note that wellbeing staff can discuss the student's feelings, beliefs and responses without breaching confidentiality.

See **headspace School Support fact sheets *Tips for teachers following a suicide, How to talk about suicide with young people, and Grief: How young people might respond to a suicide for further information.***

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