

Grief after suicide: How school staff may be impacted



Exposure to suicide can be a traumatic experience.

The suicide of a student or colleague can have a profound emotional effect within the workplace.

Staff may experience shock, disbelief, confusion and a deep sadness. Some people may struggle with guilt and have unanswered questions about what happened and what they could have done to help.

While grief is the normal and expected response to loss, grief relating to suicide can be particularly complex. This is in response to the suddenness and shock experienced, the perceptions of preventability and the difficulty in comprehending why the deceased ended their life. Cultural issues, such as stigma, can also complicate the grieving process.

Professionals such as teaching staff are often expected to lead, coordinate, support and carry on in times of stress or crisis. They may inadvertently put their own needs aside while they try to support the school community – or feel that this is necessary or expected in their role. However, if you are grieving it is important that you take time to care for yourself before trying to support others.

The following information is intended to assist you in understanding grief reactions in others and how to best support them. However, there is no expectation that you support others if you are managing your own grief or do not feel comfortable in this role.

Common grief-related responses when someone dies by suicide

There are a range of normal grief-related reactions which staff may experience. These include:

- Shock, disbelief or numbness
- Guilt or feelings of failure that the death was not prevented
- Anxiety, nightmares or intrusive thoughts

- Preoccupation with thoughts of the person who has died; trying to make sense of the death and understand why it happened
- Withdrawal from others
- Irritability or anger
- Difficulty concentrating
- Changes to sleep patterns, appetite, energy and enjoyment of activities.

Grief is experienced in different ways by different people and can last for months, if not years.

There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Grief is a very personal process and differs between individuals. Some staff may appear to be unaffected. Most people will carry on with their lives while moving through the grieving process.

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Remember that to support a grieving person you need to maintain your own well-being.

See **headspace School Support fact sheet *Self-care for school staff for tips on looking after yourself following a suicide.***

Tips for supporting colleagues following a suicide

Staff may be grappling with strong emotions. They may be overwhelmed by intense feelings of grief, including during working hours.

To provide additional support to colleagues, you can:

- Acknowledge the loss and the need for taking time to grieve
- Provide information about expected grief reactions and normalise individual experiences
- Allow time to discuss what has happened, sometimes over and over again
- Offer practical support
- Check-in with colleagues, encourage inclusion in professional activities, keep in contact with those affected
- Encourage continued participation in enjoyable activities (such as sports or hobbies) and contact with supportive friends – the support of friends and family can make a real difference to a bereaved person's capacity to manage the experience

- Provide a safe, non-judgemental and supportive environment
- Consider cultural differences – differences in cultural background can affect how people respond to suicide as well as how they feel about sharing information and seeking help
- Look out for signs that a colleague is not coping and encourage self-care as per the **fact sheet *Self-care for school staff.***

When to seek help

It is normal when grieving to:

- Experience intense emotional pain
- Want to avoid the pain of grieving
- Experience delayed grief responses which emerge weeks or even months after the death.

There is no standard timeline for grieving.

You should seek professional help if:

- You or a colleague are experiencing overwhelming, severe and persistent grief symptoms
- You or a colleague are experiencing suicidal thoughts
- Your normal coping strategies are not helping and this is exacerbating your distress.

Where to go for help

- **Lifeline 13 11 14** – 24 hour telephone counselling service including crisis support www.lifeline.org.au
- **Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467** – 24 hour crisis counselling service for people at risk of suicide, carers and those bereaved by suicide www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au
- Your GP
- A psychologist or counsellor (your GP can refer you)
- Your Employee Assistance Program

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
<http://headsup.org.au/supporting-others-in-the-workplace/supporting-a-colleague/supporting-a-colleague-affected-by-suicide>
<http://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/suicide-prevention/supporting-someone-bereaved-by-suicide>
 Jesuit Support After Suicide. <http://www.supportaftersuicide.org.au/understanding-suicide-and-grief/suicide-and-grief#grief>
 Lifeline. www.lifeline.org.au/%2FArticleDocuments%2F578%2FWhat%2520is%2520Suicide%2520Bereavement.pdf.
 SANE. http://www.sane.org/images/stories/information/factsheets/fs32_bereavement.pdf.