

Grief: How young people might respond to a suicide



Grief is the normal and expected response to the loss of a family member, friend or someone else who is close to us. Grief is experienced in different ways by different people and can last for months, if not years.

A young person's reaction to a suicide may be different to an adult's, and will be shaped by factors such as their developmental stage, their family situation and their relationship with the person who has died.

When death occurs as a result of a suicide, it can be particularly difficult for a young person to cope with. Suicide occurs unexpectedly, leaving us little time to prepare. It can have an impact not only on an individual, but also on their support network (such as friends and teachers) and community.

Suicide can bring up many questions for young people. They may wonder why a person has decided to take their life or if there was something they could have done to prevent it. These questions can lead to feelings of guilt or remorse. Suicide can also cause young people to question how a loved one could have left them, leaving them with feelings of rejection, anger or resentment towards the person who has died.

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There is no standard way in which young people will respond to a suicide, but there are a range of normal grief-related reactions which they may experience. These include:

- Shock and disbelief that the person has died;
- Longing for the person – wishing they were around to touch or be comforted by;
- Feelings of anger or resentment – for being abandoned, for the unfairness of the loss or towards those seen as responsible for the loss;
- Feeling sad that the person has gone;
- Guilt – that they were unable to help the person or that they were in some way responsible for the death;
- Anxiety – about the future and how things will be without that person in their life;
- Preoccupation with thoughts of the person who has died;
- Difficulty concentrating; and
- Changes to sleep patterns and appetite.

Some young people may appear to be unaffected and getting on with their lives. This may cause them guilt. Some may choose to express their grief through rituals or creative expression (such as art or music), rather than talking about it. Others may act out in more challenging ways, like drinking, drug use or other risk-taking behaviours. Most young people will be resilient and carry on with their lives while moving through the grieving process.

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Supporting a young person who is grieving following a suicide

While many young people will manage their grief well, there are a range of things you can do to provide additional help and support:

- Acknowledge the young person's loss and the need for taking time to grieve;
- Allow time to discuss what has happened and how the young person is dealing with the loss – the stigma around suicide can prevent people from talking about it and leave those affected feeling isolated;
- Avoid concealing the nature of the death – finding out the truth later or from an outsider can lead to further distress;

- Provide information about expected grief reactions and normalise their experience;
- Encourage continued participation in enjoyable activities (such as sports or hobbies) and contact with supportive friends;
- Support the gathering of stories and memories of the loved one in ways that appeal to the young person – writing, photos, talking, blogs, memorials, and journals; and
- Help the young person to anticipate times that may be particularly difficult (such as birthdays or anniversaries of the death) and develop a plan for managing that period.

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

Supporting a young person to seek help

It is not unusual for young people to go through ups and downs while they deal with the death of a loved one. Generally, people find that things get easier as time goes on and will experience more good times and fewer difficult times. If a young person's grief is persistent and severe however, it can interfere with their functioning and have a significant impact on their development.

Getting help early can lessen the impact of mental health problems on their life and improve their chances of recovering fully.

Young people can often be reluctant to seek professional help, so finding someone they trust and feel comfortable with is important. If they've had a positive experience with a GP or counsellor in the past, you might encourage them to contact that person again. You could also help them get in contact with their local **headspace** centre or mental health service.

Other fact sheets that may be of interest:
Identifying risk factors and warning signs for suicide and How to talk about suicide with young people.

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
South Australia Department of Education and Children's Services, Catholic Education South Australia and Association of Independent Schools. (2010). *Suicide Postvention Guidelines: a framework to assist staff in supporting their school communities in responding to suspected, attempted or completed suicide*, South Australia: Government of South Australia, Department of Education and Children's Services.

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