

Boarding schools: What to do after a suicide

Suicide Response Resources

Suicide can be a traumatic event for any learning community, but the effects can be particularly significant at boarding schools where students live, learn and socialise together.

Effective communication is key after a suicide.

At boarding school, you can foster a safe response to death by suicide by addressing five key areas:

- telling all staff what's happened straight away
- caring for students' mental health
- remembering students' backgrounds
- avoiding memorialising on school grounds
- providing staff training.

Tell all staff what's happened straight away

Sensitively notify all staff of the death as soon as possible.

Don't forget staff who are not on school grounds – they need to know what's happening before they arrive for their next class or overnight shift.

Arrange a staff meeting if you can and, if not, send an email. It may be more appropriate to arrange one-on-one meetings with staff who knew the child or young person particularly well.

After you've shared the news, establish communication pathways that enable teachers and boarding staff on different schedules to talk to each other. Staff need to be able to communicate effectively about at-risk young people, early warning signs for mental health problems and risk management plans.

Care for young peoples' mental health

Because boarding school students live at school and away from home, they face different challenges to children and young people who attend day schools.

These include:

- limited access to time out away from the school setting and their peers
- an inability to seek face-to-face and physical support and comfort from their family and local community
- a reduced connection to community and cultural identity
- a strong reliance on peers, which often leads to close bonds between young people. This has implications for the risk of suicide contagion, also known as social transmission of suicidal thoughts and behaviours. This is a particular concern if the deceased young person was a boarding student.

You can address these challenges and promote self-care and positive mental health for young people by:

- working with young people and communities to maintain connections to family, community and cultural identity
- encouraging mental health care strategies like keeping up with hobbies, exercising, eating well and developing regular sleeping habits
- providing education about study-work-life balance, resilience and coping strategies
- promoting awareness about the relationship between suicide and mental illness, risk factors, help-seeking strategies and where to seek help.

Understand student communities and culture

Boarding school students come from lots of different communities and cultures and it's important to be aware of their needs.

You may know boarding students well because they live on campus and you see them outside of the classroom a lot more than at a day school – which means you're well placed to provide support and notice when something isn't right.

After a suicide think about:

- family and community factors that may increase young peoples' vulnerability, such as exposure to family conflict, death or suicide in their local community
- challenges faced by boarding students after a traumatic event, such as separation from their family
- staff to student ratio and the impact this may have on young people seeking support after hours
- the cultural and religious identity of students. For example, an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander young person may need to return to their community after a death.

Memorials

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

Students may want to create a memorial for the deceased. For example, they may leave flowers, cards and poems in a place closely associated with the deceased person (such as their locker or classroom seat). They may do the same at the site where the young person died.

Memorials can give friends, families and communities the opportunity to mourn together and provides a space for grief to be directed. But memorial sites or activities can be distressing to others or be seen by vulnerable young people to glamorise after suicide.

To help the school maintain a safe education environment while also being compassionate and respectful to those wanting to memorialise consider:

- Timelines for the memorial (a few days or until after the funeral). After this time, the memorial objects can be offered to the family (ensure messages or objects given are appropriate).
- Appropriate location. They should be in an area that can be avoided by those who don't wish to participate (not in places like the school entrance). If not, enlist key young people to help move items in a respectful way to a designated memorial site.

- Future use of the room and how to best address this at your school if the suicide occurred in a young person's room.
- Response to inappropriate memorials. Sensitively explain to young people the purpose of a memorial site or activity and the rationale for permitting certain kinds of memorials and not others. Help them understand the risk of social transmission of suicidal and thoughts and behaviours.

Review staff training needs

When the school has begun to return to a normal routine, it's important for the school to review the impact and the school's response to the suicide. This provides an opportunity to determine what improvements may be required to support the community in the future. School leaders and wellbeing staff, with input from other educators, are responsible for the critical incident review.

One key consideration in this review is the development, or improvement of staff training in the recognition and response to a suicide.

There are three key principles:

- Ensure teaching and boarding staff are up-to-date with identifying risk, mental health first aid and referral pathways for at-risk young people.
- Allocate relevant staff members, such as wellbeing staff, to gain proficiency in risk assessment and risk management planning.
- During induction, train each staff member on their role in a crisis, and offer refresher sessions each year. Offer additional support and training if staff don't yet feel comfortable identifying and managing suicide risk.

Other resources

Be You has a range of resources to help you manage issues related to suicide. Please see:

- ✓ Managing language and consent about using the word 'suicide'
- ✓ Media and social media

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