

Funerals and memorials

Suicide Response Resources

School responsibilities

School leaders or the Emergency Response Team need to ensure all communication with the bereaved family is respectful and compassionate. This includes ensuring planning for the funeral and any memorials reflects the wishes of the family, while offering the school community an opportunity to express grief in a safe way.

Before the funeral

Funerals are important events

They help bereaved young people to acknowledge the death, remember the life and say goodbye to the person they loved or cared about.

In most cases, the funeral will be organised by the family of the deceased young person. Maintaining contact with the family helps you to clarify and be respectful of their wishes regarding attendance by the school community. Although staff, friends and other young people may want to attend, the family may wish for a small, private funeral for family members only. The staff member liaising with the family should listen to their wishes and communicate this to the school community.

If the family welcomes the school community to attend the funeral, young people should – in

most cases – be allowed to decide if they want to attend. If they're not allowed to attend, they may feel they didn't get closure or a chance to say goodbye.

It's best to allow young people to make an informed decision by explaining what a funeral service is, why they're held and what they can expect to happen. This is especially important if they have never attended a funeral, wake or memorial service. Let them know that it's OK not to attend, too.

Families should take the lead role in the preparing and supporting their young person to attend the funeral service. Ideally, school staff should not be responsible for monitoring students at the funeral.

School involvement in the funeral

The school may be aware of young people attending without family support, so it's important to consider the role of staff and which staff members may attend. It will be helpful for one or more appropriate staff members to attend with the purpose of supervising and supporting young people. Some staff may be attending for themselves and managing their own grief. In this situation, they should not be expected to support others.

Young people who attend or play a role in the proceedings may require extra support after the funeral. Consider how this will be provided if they return to school immediately after the service.

Your school may appear to be an obvious location for a funeral or memorial service because of the connection to your learning community and your ability to accommodate a large crowd. It's advised that such services are not held on school grounds. This enables the school to focus on maintaining its regular schedule and routine. Using a room in the school may also connect that space to the death, making it difficult for young people to return there for regular classes or activities.

Preparing young people for the funeral

What happens at a funeral depends on a whole range of factors, such as culture and religion. Find out about the type of service being held so that you can explain what to expect to young people. Research traditions, rituals and etiquette appropriate to the family's culture to ensure you can provide informed support.

If it's the first funeral a young person has attended, help them prepare in terms of what to wear, what they can expect to happen and how to express condolences to relatives of the deceased.

With younger children, it's helpful to describe the funeral process step-by-step – what they'll see, how other people might react and how they might feel. This can help to allay their anxieties about the event.

Let young people know if an open casket is a possibility so that they're prepared to see their friend's body.

Be clear, direct and honest in explanations – additional surprises and unfamiliar situations can complicate the grieving process.

It's important to convey that crying or not crying are both OK.

Transport and attendance

School staff should know in advance which young people are attending the funeral so that they can monitor their wellbeing and offer support.

If the funeral is during school hours, young people need family permission to leave the school grounds.

Ideally, families should transport their young person to the funeral and remain with them as the primary support during the funeral. This provides the parent with opportunities to observe their young person's behaviour and emotional response. It will also identify any potential need for further support. This is particularly the case for younger members of the school community who may find aspects of the funeral confusing or upsetting and need a parent nearby for comfort.

The regular school schedule should remain intact to maintain normality for the school community. Any staff absences due to attendance at the funeral should be covered in the normal manner.

School staff should be aware of the movements of young people after the funeral. Ideally, families will either return them to school (consider having additional support available) or take them home and stay with them to provide support.

Attending the funeral can help young people and staff to process the death and grief associated with the bereavement. Young people may also wish to remember and commemorate their friend and peer through memorials and other events.

Streaming of online funerals

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become common practice for funerals to be streamed online for people who are unable to attend in person. It can be difficult for schools to know how to navigate this space. Schools can often feel pressure to have the funeral live-streamed on school grounds.

It is not the responsibility of school staff to stream an online funeral or monitor students wishing to view the funeral online. A streamed funeral should be treated in the same manner as if a student was attending a funeral in person. Families need to support their young person in viewing the funeral online.

Memorials

A memorial could be an event commemorating the young person's life or an object that reminds the school community of them.

Students may want to create a memorial for the young person. For example, they may leave flowers, cards and poems in a place closely associated with the young person (such as their locker or classroom seat). They may do the same thing 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 for some people or be seen by vulnerable students as validating the suicide.

It's important that memorials don't inadvertently glamorise, vilify or stigmatise the deceased young person or their death – or cause distress to others.

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

- Including friends and family in planning a memorial. This is a good way to make sure those closest to the deceased young person are not caused any further distress.
- Setting some limits about the type of memorial. For example, discourage young people from wearing t-shirts or badges with images or tributes to the deceased young person as these may distress others.

- 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.
- An appropriate location. They should be in an area that can be avoided by those who don't wish to participate, for example, 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, especially if the suicide occurred in a classroom, and how to best address this at your school.
- Avoiding permanent memorials such as a tree, artwork or a remembrance garden that may serve as a constant reminder of suicide for vulnerable young people.
- Responding to inappropriate memorials. Sensitively explain the purpose of a memorial site or activity to young people and the rationale for permitting certain kinds of memorials and not others. Help them understand the risk of social transmission of suicidal thoughts and behaviours, which is also known as suicide contagion.

Setting limits may lead to expressions of disappointment or frustration

In this case it's important to work with young people, and consult with family members, to consider helpful ways to commemorate the deceased person in a safe way, such as:

- organising a fundraiser and donating the funds to a mental health organisation
- organising a book where members of the school community can share memories or write condolences and supportive messages for the family
- volunteering in the community or offering community service in honour of the deceased young person
- creating a poster display where friends and other young people can write messages. The posters can then be offered to the family.
- online memorials on social networking sites, blogs or at a dedicated website.

Treat the death as you would any other. This ensures that suicide is not glamorised in any way. It sends a message to young people that any death is tragic, painful and worthy of acknowledgement.

For more information about online tributes and safety please refer to the Be You Suicide Response Fact Sheet 'Media and social media'.

Anniversaries and important events

The anniversary of a young 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 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. Giving friends and family opportunities to mark these dates in meaningful ways can help the grieving process.

Check in on any vulnerable young people or staff, giving them an opportunity to explore what they may be thinking or feeling around this time. Remind them of the ways they can seek support.

You can support young people by:

- Letting them know it's normal to experience grief and sadness again at significant times. Remind them that things will get easier over time.

- Suggesting activities that make the young person feel good and reminding them of the times they shared with the young person.
- Encouraging them to contact supportive family members or friends rather than spending their days alone.
- Reminding them that there is no 'right' way to mark an anniversary. Help them find a way of coping that they feel comfortable with.
- Helping them connect with counsellors or other support services if they're feeling overwhelmed or unable to cope in the lead-up to the anniversary or event.

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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