



Support after a Suicide

AFTER A SUICIDE:

Understanding and Supporting My Young Person

For Parents and Caregivers

The suicide or suspected suicide of someone your young person knows, even if they didn't know them well, is likely to be very distressing and unsettling for them. They're probably seeing others around them upset and grieving too. This information sheet provides helpful insights and tips to help you support them.

What to expect

Every young person's reactions will be different. Many things can influence their response, like their age and stage, their personality, how well they knew the person, their culture, their beliefs, what else is happening in their lives, and the kind of support they have.

Grief is a normal process that helps people adjust after a difficult loss. It's usually an up and down experience for a while. For example, young people can find themselves suddenly being hit by a wave of sadness at unexpected times. While grief can be intense for some, it won't be for others. Some might feel numb at first and then have reactions start later. Some can even appear unaffected but be churned up inside. Everyone does grief in their own way.

Your young person may also experience some traumatic stress if they've directly witnessed or indirectly been traumatised (frightened) by any aspect of the death or its aftermath. It is a normal reaction to what they've seen or heard if it was shocking, scary or terrible.

Grief and traumatic stress after a suicide can have a big effect on a young person's emotions, thoughts, body, spirit and behaviour. Here are examples of common reactions:

- **Common emotions include:** shock and numbness, distress, sadness, anxiety, frustration and anger, guilt, blaming, rejected/abandoned, embarrassment, shame, helplessness, overwhelmed, a low mood, and possibly increased suicidal thinking for vulnerable students.
- **Other common reactions include:** asking why, searching for reasons and meaning, asking big life questions, preoccupied by the death, can't concentrate, difficulty sleeping, appetite changes, more physical complaints such as headaches and stomach aches, changes in behaviour, separation anxiety, disruptive at school and/or home, more risk taking, social withdrawal, less interest in school work, or school avoidance.
- **Those experiencing traumatic stress can also experience:** numbness and a lack of reaction, replaying difficult memories on loop, unsettling flashbacks, wanting to keep talking about what happened or refusing to, avoiding bad memory triggers, heightened anxiety, panic attacks, always on alert, easily scared or startled, and more distrusting.

Some teens will want to talk about their thoughts, feelings and reactions – and others won't. Some may want to completely hide their distress. Your teen need understanding and support to deal with this loss in their own way.

Reactions will gradually ease up, but often last longer than most people expect. For a few, reactions can continue without easing up or they might even intensify. This lets you know that your young person probably needs some extra help to cope with what's happened.

It's normal for a young person to remember a sad suicide loss as they get older and move through different stages of their development. They might find memories come back and that they experience further grief reactions and have new questions, even year later. Each time they'll find your support reassuring.

They may forget what you said, but
they will never forget how you made them feel.

Maya Angelou

Important to know

When a young person has been directly or indirectly affected by a suicide (or a suicide attempt) it can potentially negatively influence their own thoughts if they are emotionally vulnerable and also facing tough times themselves. Your ongoing care and support are very important. Look out for changes in their mood or behaviour. If you're concerned, find some help for them. (See below)

Ways to support them

It helps young people to feel safe, loved and supported when they know their parents or caregivers genuinely care about them, and about what's happened.

- **Acknowledge what's happened.** Don't ignore or minimise their loss, even if they didn't know the person well. Let them know you love them and want to support them through this sad time.
- **If they do want to talk, listen well.** Listen more than you talk. They might have some challenging questions. If they don't want to talk, let them know that's okay. Remind them you're there if they'd like to talk another time. Encourage them to think about others they trust who they could talk to as well.
- **Your own words and attitudes will have an influence.** Try to protect your young person from hurtful judgements and misunderstandings some people might have about suicide and mental illness. Stigma makes grief harder.
- **We recommend using this free online NZ guide to help you talk with your young person about suicide.** See *Connecting Through Kōrero: Talking About Suicide with Taiohi/Young People* at www.mentalhealth.org.nz
- **Encourage them not to discuss details of the death with others,** including method, location and circumstances. Explain this is to keep others safe and respect the privacy of the person and their family, whānau and close friends. Don't share the details yourself. If your teen is using social media, urge them to be respectful and never to hurt or shame others with comments about the suicide.
- **Ask about their positive memories of the person's life.** Help them not to just focus on how the person died.
- **Reassure them their reactions are normal,** even if they don't feel like it. Talk about grief – what it is, and that it's different for everyone. Chat about the sorts of

reactions people can have. (See page one.) Let them know they won't always feel like they do now. It'll ease up, gradually.

- **Talk together about helpful ways to manage strong feelings, difficult thoughts and stress.** Explain why some choices wouldn't be helpful or safe for them, such as drinking, drugs or actions that might hurt others. Model managing emotions well yourself.
 - **Young people can often feel guilt after a suicide. Let them know they're not responsible for the death.** Explain a suicide happens because of a mix of things, not just a single reason.
 - **Care for their everyday needs well. Support them to keep up routines** as continuing normal activities helps.
 - **Let them know having a laugh and enjoying things are still okay.** They help release stress and tension.
 - **Understand if they want to spend more time with their friends for support.**
 - **Check in with them regularly.** Spend some time with them. How are they doing? Let them know asking for help is okay. In fact, it's a smart choice when we're struggling with things. It can be what makes the difference.
 - **Got concerns?** Deal with issues honestly when they come up. Don't let them build up. Reach out for extra help and support when it's needed. (See below)
 - **Support them into the months and years ahead.** Realise they probably won't forget this loss and its importance to them as they move forward. Be especially supportive when it's an anniversary time or a special day.
- ## Getting them some extra help
- Contact your school's pastoral care staff to talk about your concerns. Ask them about help options.
 - Encourage your young person to talk with a counsellor, youth worker or other support worker about the things they're finding hard right now.
 - Help them visit a doctor or school nurse, to check on their wellbeing.
 - For free advice and support for your teen, or yourself, free phone or call **1737** (available 24/7) or Youthline **0800 376 633**, text **234**.
 - In an emergency crisis call **111**.