

Child and Youth Mental Health Information Series

Supporting Children and Young People After Suicide

What is the Issue?

When suicide occurs, most people describe feeling a range of emotions from shock and disbelief to anger and extreme sadness. Many parents and carers feel unsure of how young people will cope and what they should be told. Children and young people express their feelings differently to adults. They grieve in “bits and pieces”, and don't maintain the same emotional intensity for long periods like adults can. They need time to make sense of the loss and the changes and may appear at times as though they are unaffected and everything is okay.

An important part of the grief process is knowing how the person died. Not knowing this information can interfere with a child's grieving and long-term adjustment. Young people have also said that it is important to be reassured that they are not responsible for the person's suicide. They might like to access the additional fact-sheet in this series, titled *Coping after suicide – Information for young people*.

How do I explain suicide?

Children may seem too young to understand what has happened. However, they are very sensitive to change and pick up that something is happening that they don't know about. They may make up fantasy stories to fill up the gaps in their knowledge about death, or may overhear or be told stories by their friends or neighbours. It is therefore important to explain things in a way they understand and that you are comfortable with. Often children and young people say that death and suicide is confusing, so it is important to check what they have understood.

It may be helpful to explain death as when the body stops working. It is not helpful to say that a person has gone away or is sleeping. This can be confusing and sometimes frightening for a child, as they may resist going to sleep themselves. One way of defining suicide is to describe it as “when someone makes their body stop working”.

Parents may be concerned that a young person could copy suicidal behaviour, particularly if they appear sad or worried. Encouraging young people to talk about their feelings or worries can be helpful, as can helping them develop their own positive ways to solve problems.

There is no right or wrong way to grieve but if you are worried about how a young person is coping, it may be useful to speak to a grief counsellor or health professional. It is important to keep talking to children and young people about how they are feeling, even six months and more after the event, as ongoing distress is a normal part of the grief process. Hugs, reassurance and a consistent routine

are also good supports for children and young people. You might also like to refer to the fact sheet in this series on *Grief and loss*.

The Viewing and Funeral

The viewing and the funeral are important opportunities to remember the person who has died, express grief and to say good-bye. Young people can be involved in many ways by drawing pictures, writing letters or poems, playing a special song, or taking a special item to the funeral to place on the coffin.

There is no right age for taking a child to funerals – some people feel it's important for young people of all ages to be included. Parents or carers ultimately need to make the decision that they feel is best for the young person. Listed below are some ways of supporting children or young people to attend:

- Before the viewing and/or funeral it is important to let young people know what to expect: where things will be, who will be there, and what they might do. This includes the fact that they and others might cry as this may be frightening, especially for young children who may be used to seeing adults as strong and capable. You might include alerting them to any grieving rituals from a cultural background other than their own.
- It can be useful to have a separate viewing for parents, young people and immediate family.
- Have a support person for the child or young person at the viewing or funeral, ideally someone whom they are close to and feels safe with.
- Children may be noisy at funerals. It may be useful to tell them it's a bit like being in the library when you have to behave quietly. It may be necessary to have a support person take the young person outside for a break, and/or have a room set up at a wake where they can play or watch a video.
- Other families have suggested these ideas to help support young people. Make a record of the funeral, such as via photographs, audiotape or videotaping. This is particularly useful when young people are very young and ask questions as they get older. You might also like to make hand and foot prints of the person who died.

It is generally helpful to let teachers and school principals know what has happened and make arrangements for the young person to see the guidance officer, chaplain or school nurse. Teachers can also watch out for any changes in behaviour or signs of not coping.

How to get help

The Brisbane North Youth Service Provider Directory has details of many services, and can be accessed at www.health.qld.gov.au/rch/professionals/BNYSPD.pdf or you could also consider one of the following.

Services

Standby Response Service (North Brisbane)

24 hour crisis response service for those in the Brisbane North area who have been bereaved by suicide, including access to support programs and resources. Phone 0438 150 180 or (07) 3624 2400.

Suicide Call Back Service: Free nation-wide telephone support service for those displaying suicidal behaviour, carers of those at risk and those bereaved by suicide. Phone: 1300 659 467.

Community Action for the Prevention of Suicide: Not-for-profit association that aims to provide a practical non-clinical support service to coordinate care, attention and support for people at risk of suicide, those who are concerned for someone at risk, and the children of someone at risk. Phone (07) 3870 8359 or see www.caps.org.au.

Alcohol and Drug Information Service

Free confidential counselling and information service 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Phone 1800 177 833.

Association of Relatives and Friends of the Mentally Ill

Support and information for significant other/s of those affected by mental illness. Call their head office on (07) 3254 1881 or see www.arafmi.qld.gov.au for local support groups.

Child and Youth Mental Health Service (CYMHS)

CYMHS offers more specialised assessment and to those children and young people under 18 years who display signs of serious and/or complex mental health problems. Those over the age of 18 years may be seen by an adult mental health service. For your local clinic, look under Health in the White Pages telephone directory or try the Health Information Service (see below).

Indigenous Youth Health Service

Provides assistance on all health issues relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth. Phone (07) 3393 0055 during business hours.

Kids Help Line

Free national telephone counselling for children and young people 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Phone 1800 55 1800.

Lifeline

Free counselling and support, available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Phone 13 11 14.

Parentline

Counselling and support for parents, available 8am – 10pm, seven days a week. Phone 1300 30 1300.

Queensland Transcultural Mental Health Service

Provides mental health assistance and information to people from culturally diverse backgrounds. Phone (07) 3167 8333 during business hours.

SANE Australia

National charity aimed at enhancing mental health through campaigning, education and research. Phone 1800 187 263.

Young Carer's Program: Free counselling and support for young people (up to 25 years) in a care giving role. Phone 1800 242 636 or see www.carersqld.asn.au.

Books and other Resources

Coping with Grief. Mal and Di McKissock. Available from ABC Bookstores.

It was Suicide! The questions it raises for those left behind. Available from Lifeline, QLD. Phone 13 11 14.

Websites

www.beyondblue.org.au: National, independent, not for profit organisation working to address issues associated with depression, anxiety and related substance disorders.

www.copmi.net.au: Information and resources for children, young people, families and service providers assisting families affected by parental mental illness.

www.counsellingonline.org.au: Counselling via text-interaction for information and support for those seeking help with their own drug use or use by a friend or family member.

www.headspace.org.au: Website for the National Youth Mental Health Foundation, which aims to support Australian young people with mental health and related problems.

www.health.qld.gov.au/mhcarer: Queensland Health website for information and support for those caring for someone with a mental illness.

www.kidshelp.com.au: Kids Help Line online counseling available for young people.

www.livingisforeveryone: Australian government suicide prevention strategy website.

www.opendoors.net.au: Up-to-date information and resources for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young people, including direct email links to workers.

www.reachout.com.au: Interactive forum for young people to access support and assistance.

www.somazone.com.au: Information for young people about health and well-being issues.

www.suicidepreventionstudies.org: Provides information and resources to help young people with suicidal and self-harm behaviours, and the people who care for them.

This fact-sheet was updated in April 2009 by the Child and Youth Mental Health Service of the Royal Children's Hospital, Children's Health Service District, Brisbane, to raise awareness and provide information to families, young people and community members. This and others fact sheets in the series can be downloaded from:

www.health.qld.gov.au/rch/families/cymhs.asp

Acknowledgments:

The content of this fact sheet was adapted with permission from *The Information and Support Pack for Those Bereaved by Suicide and Other Sudden Deaths*, produced by the Ministerial Council for Suicide Prevention Western Australia, 2003.

Disclaimer

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