

Preventing the social transmission of suicidal behaviors

Information for media and organisations who influence communities

The social transmission of suicidal behaviors (also called contagion) occurs directly (via contact or friendship) or indirectly (via word of mouth or media). Though uncommon, suicide clusters can result.

Clusters involve multiple suicides which occur closer in time or place than would normally be expected. Not all involve social links between cluster members, and they are more likely in communities (place-based, interest-based, circumstance-based, or virtual) where a number of underlying risk factors are already present. These factors can include things like exposure to sudden, multiple and unexpected accidental deaths (such as car accidents), sudden increases in unemployment, or being in an isolated, remote and/or sparsely populated place. Indirectly transmitted clusters can occur from the broadcast or publishing of actual or fictional suicides.

Media and other organisations who interact with and influence communities can play a key role in both preventing and responding to suicide clusters.

Prevention is aided by:

- Ensuring all communication and interactions about suicide comply with national media and community guidelines*
- Ensuring that all events or memorials which relate to suicide are carefully considered, and (where possible) expert advice from a reputable organisation or professional experienced in suicide prevention should inform planning. In some settings, such as schools, public memorials may be discouraged.

Rapid responses are aided by adding the following activities to prevention focused efforts:

- Monitoring of social media sites (controlled by your organisation) for concerning posts. Proactive responses should dispel myths or misinformation; respectfully discourage speculation about the death and/or the sharing of other experiences of suicidality online; provide information on supports; and encourage self-care and help seeking. You can also hide posts (if the platform allows it) and report unsafe content to the relevant social media suicide prevention help centre (if available). Assistance for safe and effective social media use can be found within the ChatSafe Guide.
- Limiting the promotion of public or online memorials. Care needs to be taken around fundraising linked to a suicide death (particularly for a young person).
- Avoiding language or activity that sensationalises or creates an increase in heightened emotion and/or anxiety within the community.
- Adopting the same principles and guidelines for communicating and commemorating accidental deaths of young people as those that are in place for suicide. This is due to the highly impressionable nature of young people and the potential for unintended consequences.

Australian Mindframe Guidelines:

Media and communication professionals have an important role to play in influencing social attitudes to suicide, and potentially the actions of vulnerable people. Research has demonstrated that the way suicide is communicated is significant, with some styles of reporting linked to increased rates of actual suicide. www.mindframe.org.au/suicide

Communities Matter: Provides a summary of issues to consider when talking broadly about suicide and suicide prevention in group and community settings and in online communications. Includes core principles for discussing suicide with Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse communities. www.conversationsmatter.com.au

Chatsafe: Helps communities who have experienced the suicide of a young person to provide information and support via social media. Includes tips for using social media as a postvention tool. Helps young people communicate safely about suicide on social media. Also provides practical assistance to parents, educators, and those who provide support to young people engaging in online activities.

When holding events or memorials after a suicide death, it is important to think about possible unintended impacts. This includes thinking carefully about the use of images, stories and ceremonies, and the ways in which they may influence those that may participate. Useful resources:

Beyond Blue 'In Memoriam': This is a space for family and friends to honor a loved one who has died. Beyond Blue monitors the pages to ensure concerning content is addressed.

www.beyondblue.org.au/get-involved/make-a-donation/in-memoriam

headspace schools: Provides advice on safe and respectful memorials.

www.headspace.org.au/assets/School-Support/Remembering-a-young-person-memorials-and-important-events.pdf

Chatsafe Guide for Online Memorials: Advice for setting up a page or group to remember someone who has died.

www.orygen.org.au/chatsafe/remembering#modal-4

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

Public Health England – *Identifying and responding to suicide clusters – A practice resource*, page 38, 2019, www.gov.uk/government/publications/suicide-prevention-identifying-and-responding-to-suicide-clusters

Orygen, #chatsafe: *A young person's guide for communicating safely online about suicide*, 2020, www.orygen.org.au/Training/Resources/Self-harm-and-suicide-prevention/Guidelines/chatsafe-A-young-person-s-guide-for-communicatin