

Suicide contagion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people



Suicide within a school community can have a devastating impact on students, families and staff, and can also lead to suicide contagion. Suicide contagion refers to the process where one suicide or suicidal act within a school or community increases the chance that others will see this as an option to end their life.

Suicide contagion does not only happen when one other young person ends their life in response to a suicide. This can lead to a suicide cluster, where a number of connected suicides occur following an initial suicide. This is something that has been more prevalent in some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, particularly in more rural and remote places around Australia.

Why does suicide contagion occur?

There are many complexities in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kinship structures. Kinship is not just about relationships, it is a cultural way of life that directly influences everyday interactions. When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people experience the loss of a friend, peer, or someone from their community by suicide it has significant cultural consequences for them. Young people can relate to and identify with the actions of their peers. They may feel that if their peers ended their life by suicide then it is a viable option for them too. This thinking may be more likely in communities where suicide has been the way in which many have passed away.

The way people talk about suicide can also influence the risk of contagion. For some young people, particularly those who have experienced significant disadvantage, the perceived attention given to the person who has passed

away may make them feel that the tragic event is actually a positive outcome. This is not necessarily an intentional response; however, it is common for people to remember the positive things about someone who has recently died and to focus less on the difficulties experienced prior to their death. Friends and family may wear memorial shirts featuring pictures of the loved one or statements such as “you will always be remembered” or “Rest in Peace” may appear to be well meaning, however it has the potential to prompt suicidal thoughts and behaviour in vulnerable young people.

Avoiding discussion of suicide with young people does not help manage the risk of suicide contagion. Many people believe that talking to young people about suicide will put the idea into their minds, but if a suicide has occurred amongst their friends or peers, young people will already be talking about this occurrence. The stigma associated with mental illness for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people exacerbates the belief

that these discussions will increase risk for young people. Generationally, Elders have believed that talking about suicide will leave people more vulnerable to then use this as a means to end their own life. This belief has not fostered a culture that encourages open discussion about the suicide. However, in recent years, it has been viewed as more acceptable to talk about the loss of someone by suicide. Many communities are leading the way in advocating to reduce the stigma and belief that talking about suicide increases the risk of someone suiciding. Providing a safe place for young people to yarn about their feelings can actually reduce distress about the event and may decrease their risk.

Suicide contagion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people



headspace.org.au

Who is at risk of suicide contagion?

Young people can experience multiple factors in response to a suicide and at times they can all be interconnected. They can be grouped into three main categories; social connectedness, exposure and past experiences to suicide and, social and emotional wellbeing.

Social Connectedness	Exposure and past experiences	Social and Emotional Wellbeing concerns
Family or friends of the person who suicided.	Witnessed the suicide scene or seeing deceased person.	Stressful and emotional difficulties at home and in community.
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people if it was a person from their cultural background.	Have had previous experience of losing family or friends to suicide.	Being away from their home and family, feeling isolated and alone.
In smaller more isolated communities everyone can be impacted.	Generational trauma and complex grief experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.	Relationship difficulties and disconnection from culture.
Being able to relate to the same pressures and issues of the person who passed away.	Has previously tried to end their life by suicide.	Excessive alcohol and other drug use.

NOTE: A large proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been exposed to suicide deaths and this significantly increases their risk of suicide.

Reducing the risk of suicide contagion

There are a number of ways to reduce the risk of suicide contagion in a school or community, these include:

- Talking with the family or community leaders to identify the young people who are not coping well with the loss
- School staff identifying and monitoring young people at increased risk of suicide
- Providing access to support and treatment for people at risk of suicide. This could include initial one-on-one support for distressed students as well as linking them to ongoing treatment by social and emotional wellbeing clinicians, appropriate local service providers or Elders in their community
- Providing age and culturally appropriate information that guides a young person through their personal healing journey. This information needs to be clear, concise and delivered in a timely manner. This will reduce the circulation

of rumours regarding the circumstances surrounding the death and help them to understand their grief experience

- Ensuring that close friends and family are told of the death prior to letting the larger school group know. Where practical announcements should be made to small groups.

When you are worried about a young person

If you believe that a young person is at risk of suicide seek professional support from your local social and emotional wellbeing service or Emergency Department. Encourage the young person to stay with you while you arrange support, if they are unwilling, you should contact their family or Elders immediately. Remove any means of suicide available to them in the immediate area, such as medications or weapons.

There are many steps that can be taken to reduce the risk of suicide contagion

in your community. Talking to young people about what has happened, offering them support and care, and linking them in with the help they need are important first steps.

Other fact sheets that may be of interest:

Grief: How Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people might respond to suicide, Remembering a young person: Memorials and important events in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, Suicide in Schools: Information for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

For more information on suicide or support and assistance visit headspace.org.au/schoolsupport or headspace.org.au



headspace acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples of Australia and we pay our respects to their Elders past, present and future.

Acknowledgements

Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Care. (2014). *Submission to the Australian Human Rights Commission National Children's Commissioner's examination of intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviour in children*. Accessed at http://www.snaicc.org.au/_uploads/rsfil/03312.pdf.

Suicide Prevention Australia. (2011). *Northern Territory Inquiry into Youth Suicide Submission*. Accessed at www.suicidepreventionaust.org.

Fact sheets are for general information only. They are not intended to be and should not be relied on as a substitute for specific medical or health advice. While every effort is taken to ensure the information is accurate, headspace makes no representations and gives no warranties that this information is correct, current, complete, reliable or suitable for any purpose. We disclaim all responsibility and liability for any direct or indirect loss, damage, cost or expense whatsoever in the use of or reliance upon this information.