



WODONGA SENIOR SECONDARY COLLEGE

Every Student, Every Opportunity, Success for All

Monday, 3 May 2021

Dear Parent/Caregiver

I am writing to you with some sad news about a member of our school community.

One of our Year 11 students died by suicide over the weekend. Our thoughts and heartfelt sympathy are with the student's family and friends.

All students who were at school today have been notified of this tragic loss to our school community.

The most important protective factor for your children following this news is for your young people to be able to have open discussions about suicide, mental health, and to be able to communicate their own support needs. We encourage you all to have open conversations with your young person about positive ways of seeking help if they are feeling low or hopeless.

Today and over the coming weeks, you may be concerned about the reactions of your child to this news. Many students will wish to talk with their parents, so I have attached some general information which may assist you in those conversations. I also encourage you to let your child know that you are aware of this incident and that you will listen to their concerns at any time they wish to share them. Staying connected and engaged with your child is one of the best ways to support them (when talking about the issue of death try to include discussion about positive ways of managing problems). Each individual deals with grief in different ways. Two important messages to promote are:

1. **All of us should seek help from others when we feel down or vulnerable.**
2. **Young people should tell an adult if they are worried about a friend or themselves expressing suicidal thoughts.**

Unexpected deaths may trigger these feelings amongst students and staff, as well as their parents, family and friends.

Wodonga Senior Secondary College will be concentrating on supporting our students and staff over the next months. This means, among other things, returning the school to normal routines as soon as possible and recognising that students can be affected by this event for many months to come. **If your child is already using the services of a mental health professional, you should ensure this information is passed on to that professional.** A list of helpful websites and services is included in the attachments to this letter.

Please feel free to contact the school on (02) 6043 7500 for further information or if you have any concerns about your child. Contacting the school is an important way of ensuring you receive consistent and accurate information and for us to be aware of all parent concerns.

Yours Sincerely

Vern Hilditch
Executive Principal
Wodonga Senior Secondary College

When talking with your children remember...

Each child's or adolescent's response will be unique and a wide range of reactions are possible.

Their reaction will be influenced by their personality, their past relationship with the deceased or injured person, what is happening in their life now and their ability to adjust to change. Your child, whatever age, needs to find safe ways to express their feelings. They may feel confusion, anger, aggression, withdrawal, fear, guilt, denial, blame, betrayal, abandonment, hurt and sadness. Parental understanding, reassurance and attention are very important at this time. Be guided by your child's need to talk but make it clear to them that you will be available whenever they need you.

Children and adolescents who have experienced other concerns or losses in their lives may find it harder to cope.

Children and adolescents who have experienced loss (e.g. separation/divorce of parents, death of a relative or pet, moving house/school) may find it harder to cope. They may become upset and need to express their feelings about these other concerns, even though they may have appeared to be coping before the event. If your child is already using the services of a psychologist or psychiatrist for wellbeing concerns, you should ensure they are made aware of this event.

Children and adolescents may have many questions. They may want to know exactly what happened.

The school will have provided your child with consistent information about the incident. Details about the way an untimely death occurred is not provided to students as this information is generally considered to be potentially harmful to students' wellbeing. As parents, it is important to steer discussion towards the positive "help seeking" actions people can take, such as talking to a trusted adult (e.g. parent, counsellor, teacher, relative or friend), or using the agencies or websites listed in the next attachment.

"Tell an adult if you are worried about a friend."

This is an important message to share with your child in any discussion about how they are coping with what has happened. Children and adolescents sometimes share their feelings about death with friends: in conversations, letters, e-mails, text messages, on the internet, etc. If young people are aware of friends who they fear may hurt themselves they should tell an adult immediately. Nothing is more important than protecting a life.

Monitor the Internet and mobile communication tools.

Following an untimely death, students will be texting news about the death (both accurate and rumoured), calling for impromptu gatherings (both safe and unsafe), creating online memorials (both moving and risky), and posting messages (both appropriate and hostile) about the deceased. This happens quickly and often to large numbers of people. You can proactively monitor, moderate and influence what and how information is shared between students.

Be aware that you or your child may be affected by possible media responses to the event.

You may decide to protect against certain coverage or watch television news coverage together so that you can discuss any reactions or concerns and ensure your child feels supported. Hopefully, media reporting of specific details around untimely deaths will not occur. However, if it does, be aware that it can contribute to young people's vulnerability.

Some adolescents may show reactions weeks/months/a year after an event.

If you are concerned about your child's reactions – for example, if there are changes to their behaviour such as their socialising or school work patterns – it is important to speak to the Year Level Co-ordinator or Wellbeing staff at the school. This may result in referral to one of the agencies listed in the next attachment.

Be aware that school staff will also be affected.

While everyone will be working towards normalising school routines, some staff will be managing difficult emotions. Adult counselling support is provided to all our school staff through a process outside the school.

Respond to community concern with respect.

If speaking with other members in the community, try to reinforce that the approach is to respect the bereaved/affected family and to encourage help seeking actions in young people for their own wellbeing and when they have concerns about their friends.

Where can parents and young people get more information and help?

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) offer assessment and treatment depending on clinical need (crisis, single session, specific assessments, ongoing case management, targeted intensive outreach case management, community based, sub-acute and acute mental health care). CAMHS Albury Wodonga is accessed via the [Mental Health Triage Line on 1300 104 211](#).

ARAFEMI Carer Helpline provides free, confidential information, support and referral for family, carers and friends of people with a mental illness. **1300 550 265**, 9am to 5pm weekdays. www.arafemi.org.au

Area Mental Health Services (AMHS) triage provides mental health information, advice and referral. Each AMHS has a centralised triage number, www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services

Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement provides a range of education, counselling, research and clinical services for those working in and affected by experiences of grief and bereavement. **1800 642 066**
www.grief.org.au

Beyondblue provides information about the signs and symptoms of depression, available treatments, how to get help and links to other relevant services and support groups. **1300 22 4636**, 24 hours/7 days www.beyondblue.org.au

The Compassionate Friends Victoria Inc. offers friendship and understanding to families following the death of a son or daughter, brother or sister. **(03) 9888 4944; 1800 641 091**, 24 hours/7days
www.compassionatefriendsvictoria.org.au

Griefline provides confidential telephone counselling services to anyone in the community who may need support in order to express their feelings and experiences. **(03) 9935 7400**, 12noon to 3am/7 days www.griefline.org.au

Eheadspace offers online and telephone mental health support to young people aged 12 to 25 and their families or friends. Young people can register at www.eheadspace.org.au or call **1800 650 890**. Webchat and telephone support is available from 9am to 1am and e-mail is available 24 hours a day.

Kids Help Line 1800 55 1800 is a 24 hour telephone and online counselling service for young people from 5-25 years of age www.kidshelpline.com.au

Lifeline is a 24 hour telephone counselling service providing access to crisis support, suicide prevention and mental health support services. **13 11 14** www.lifeline.org.au

Mind Health Connect provides information on mental health care, finding relevant support and resources to meet your needs. www.mindhealthconnect.org.au

OCD and Anxiety helpline provides assistance to callers to understand and manage symptoms of anxiety disorders and depression, and referral to community and health services. **1300 269 438** or **(03) 9830 0533**, 10am to 4pm weekdays. www.arcvic.org.au/our-services/helpline

Parentline is a state-wide telephone counselling, information and referral for parents and carers with children from birth to eighteen years. **13 22 89**, 8am to midnight/7 days www.education.vic.gov.au/earlychildhood/parentline/

Reach Out! is a web-based service that encourages young people to help themselves through tough times. The aim of the service is to improve young people's mental health and wellbeing by providing support, information and referrals in a format designed for young people. <http://au.reachout.com>

SANE Australia provides information about mental illness treatments, symptoms, medications, where to go for support and help for carers. **1800 18 SANE (7263)**, 9am to 5pm weekdays. www.sane.org/helpline/helpline-online

Suicide Callback provides crisis counselling to people at risk of suicide, carers for someone who is suicidal and those bereaved by suicide. **1300 659 467**, 24 hours/7 days www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au/

SuicideLine VIC provides specialist telephone counselling and information to anyone affected by suicide. **1300 651 251**, 24 hours/7 days. www.suicideline.org.au

The Black Dog Institute is a not for profit organisation that offers specialist expertise in mood disorders (depression and bipolar disorder). <http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/>

Ybblue, the youth program of **beyondblue**, promotes the message that it's acceptable to talk about depression and encourages young people, their families and friends to look out for each other and to get help when it is needed. A set of youth fact sheets with information on a variety of topics, including how to recognise depression and how to talk about it, what services are available to help young people and how to help friends and family who may be going through a tough time can be downloaded from the site. www.youthbeyondblue.com

How to talk about suicide with young people



When a suicide occurs, it is a traumatic event for a school or community and the impact on young people can be significant. Suicide can elicit a range of emotional and behavioural responses.

These will be unique for each individual and will depend on factors such as past experiences, level of support, personality type and how close a student was to the deceased person.

Talking to young people about suicide can feel daunting. Many people fear it will cause increased distress or even lead to the development of suicidal thoughts or suicide 'contagion' (see **headspace** fact sheet on *Suicide Contagion*).

However, talking about suicide in a calm and straightforward way, as well as providing information and support, is actually very important in helping young people to manage their feelings and make sense of what has happened.

It's important to be thoughtful and sensitive when you talk to young people about suicide. The aim is to limit the harmful impact of the death and to promote positive coping strategies and good mental health. Below are some important factors to keep in mind.

1. Give accurate information about why people suicide

Suicide is a complex behaviour caused by a range of factors and is rarely the result of a single event or problem. Many people who suicide had been experiencing mental health difficulties such as depression at the time of their death. This illness can make people feel hopeless and impact on their ability to think clearly and rationally. Providing information on the link between mental illness and suicide can encourage people to seek help for themselves or others, which will decrease the risk of suicide.

2. Avoid blame

Young people often want answers about why a suicide has occurred, and this can lead to them blaming the death on a particular event or person. Explain that suicide is not simple and is often the result of a range of contributing factors. This can reduce the likelihood that blaming or scapegoating will occur.

3. Don't focus on the method of suicide

Avoid talking graphically or in detail about how the person died. Detailed descriptions of the death can be overwhelming and distressing, and can increase the risk of imitation by vulnerable young people. Keep the focus on how to manage the emotions brought up by the person's death, and away from details of how someone has died.

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4. Address feelings such as anger and responsibility

Provide reassurance that a range of responses following a suicide are normal. Young people may feel angry towards the person who died or feel that they could have prevented the death in some way. Such feelings can lead to increased confusion and distress. Reassure them that they are not to blame and that feeling angry doesn't mean they didn't care about the person. Normalising these feelings and allowing young people to talk through their emotional responses can help in the grieving process.

5. Encourage help-seeking

If a young person finds themselves or a friend feeling overwhelmed, unable to cope or developing thoughts of suicide, encourage them to seek help. Let them know what their support options are. This will allow them to choose a person they feel comfortable with and increase the likelihood that they will seek help. Options for support could be a parent or trusted adult, such as a teacher, school counsellor or family doctor.

6. Ask about suicidal thoughts

If you are worried that a young person might be at risk of suicide, it's important to talk to them directly about your concerns in a calm and non-judgemental manner. It can feel uncomfortable asking someone directly about suicidal thoughts or plans, but it's necessary in order to check whether a person is at risk and how imminent that risk is. Asking questions directly can also be a huge relief for a young person struggling with thoughts of suicide. It gives them permission to speak openly about how they are feeling and the opportunity to gain support.

Other fact sheets that may be of interest: *Identifying risk factors and warning signs for suicide, Managing social media following a suicide, Mythbuster: suicidal ideation "Asking young people about suicidal thoughts or behaviours will only put ideas in their heads"*

If you believe that a young person is at risk of suicide, you should seek professional support from your local mental health service or emergency department and keep the young person safe until help arrives.

Remove any means of suicide available to them in the immediate vicinity, such as medications or weapons. Stay with him or her (or arrange for supervision) until they can be seen and assessed.

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

Please refer to the **headspace** School Support *Suicide Postvention Toolkit – A Guide for Secondary Schools* for further guidance.

Acknowledgements

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and Suicide Prevention Resource Centre. (2011). *After a Suicide: A ToolKit for Schools*, Newton, MA: Education Development Centre, Inc.
 Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. (2011). *LIFE Fact Sheets*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, accessed at www.livingisforeveryone.com.au
 South Australia Department of Education and Children's Services, Catholic Education South Australia and Association of Independent Schools. (2010). *Suicide Postvention Guidelines: a framework to assist staff in supporting their school communities in responding to suspected, attempted or completed suicide*. South Australia: Government of South Australia, Department of Education and Children's Services.

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.