

Safety and Public Memorials following Suicide

Perth Metropolitan Suicide Prevention Coordinators



Prepared by

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Safety and Public Memorials following Suicide



A well-considered memorial or funeral for a person lost to suicide can help people affected to grieve in a healthy way and commence their recovery from the loss. It can also have a positive impact on the way we understand and respond to suicide, by increasing awareness, reducing stigma and encouraging people to access support services if required.

A community that is more informed is also better equipped to recognise and respond to the signs of suicide, allowing people to assist those at risk of taking their own life to seek pathways for recovery.

A safe memorial is one that is:

- **respectful,**
- **assists those affected by a suicide grieve to their loss while using safe language; and**
- **shares safe activities and information about available supports.**

Whilst incredibly healing, memorials can also have the potential to increase distress among those who have experienced the recent loss or who may be vulnerable to suicidal thoughts. This document aims to assist people organising a memorial presentation, event or activity in a way that supports healing and prevents further harm.

Practical tips for a safe memorial activity

- Promote self-care for those planning and attending the memorial activity by encouraging people to 'check in' with one another in the days and weeks leading up to and following the event and to access support services if required.
- Consult with the bereaved to gain consent for the memorial activity and to confirm the spoken, written or other material can be shared.
- Consult with the community or hosts of the memorial to ensure any potential harm to people or property are managed.
- Ensure the memorial respectfully acknowledges and reflects the cultural and/or religious context of the bereaved and the person who has died.
- Use appropriate, safe and non-stigmatising language and ensure no information about the location or means of death is shared.
- Ensure all those wishing to take a formal role in the activity are prepared with safety information prior to the event.
- Provide information to attendees about relevant help and support services making sure to address the needs of diverse communities.
- Focus on the positive experiences and attributes of the deceased, while acknowledging the difficult times in their life.
- Acknowledge the complex feelings of loss and grief people are sharing and the different impacts for different groups present.



Things to consider when planning a memorial



Safe language around suicide

Using appropriate language when talking about suicide reduces stigma, and the chance of offending or further upsetting those present. The tables below provide some suggestions.

Table 1: Appropriate language for talking about suicide

Do say	Don't say	Why?
'took their own life', 'died by suicide' or 'ended their own life'	'successful suicide'	To avoid presenting suicide as a desired outcome.
'died by suicide' or 'ended their own life'	'committed' or 'commit suicide'	To avoid association between suicide and 'crime' or 'sin'.
'higher rates of suicide' or 'concerning rates of suicide'	'suicide epidemic'	To avoid sensationalism and inaccuracy.

Based on *Everymind*, 2014, 13.

Also see: <https://mindframe.org.au/suicide/communicating-about-suicide> 

Safe presentation of a suicide loss

The timing and content of a memorial activity requires careful consideration. The primary questions are: is it going to be safe for those attending? Is it going to be safe for those presenting?

- Select the content of messages and tributes carefully and use recommended language in Table 1.
- Agree with friends and family on roles and gestures that reflect the suggestions outlined in Table 2 and are relevant to those present and honour the person who has passed away.
- Avoid providing an open platform where anyone present is invited to speak, as speakers experiencing great emotion may inadvertently say something that increases the distress of attendees. As an alternative, memorial attendees can be invited to submit written tributes in advance and a selection of these can be read out.
- Ensure the message of self-care is promoted throughout planning and delivery and that people know it is ok not to attend and/or safe to leave if the activity is upsetting or triggering in any way.
- Provide information about helplines and other support services and/or place relevant material (e.g. service brochures) for attendees/visitors to take, making sure to address the needs of diverse communities.
- Avoid any reference to, or speculation about, the suspected method, place or specific reasons for this loss. Evidence has shown that this is likely to increase distress and has potential to inadvertently encourage 'copying' behaviour by those vulnerable.
- If holding a public memorial service which is large or particularly high profile, arrange for counsellors or trained peer support workers to be on hand for distressed people requiring immediate support.



Table 2: Suggestions for safety

Things to avoid	Things to try instead
Avoid disclosing details of the suicide, such as the location or means of death, as this can increase distress and may inadvertently encourage 'copying' behaviour by vulnerable people.	Discuss with family and friends what to share and how best to represent the person and their relationships. Focus on the whole life of the deceased sharing positive accomplishments and qualities.
Avoid language that glamourises or romanticises the suicide, or describes it as a desirable outcome, e.g. calling the suicide a "noble" or "brave" act. Avoid language that stigmatises the causes of suicide. Avoid suggesting the person who has died is 'at peace' or 'no longer in pain' as this may suggest suicide as a desirable outcome.	Acknowledge that the reasons for suicide are complex and highly personal. If appropriate, make it known that efforts had been made to seek/ provide support and that support is available to those present (see p 5-7).
Do not 'catastrophise' the pain being felt by the loved ones of the deceased.	Encourage those present to support one another or to volunteer their time to services providing help for others. Consider including messages, information, music, stories or poetry that promote hope and recovery.

Based on CASA, 2011, 1-2; Hughson, 2016, 2-3; Lowe et al. 2019, 7; SPRC, 2004, 9.

Safe memorial activities

There are various activities that can safely be undertaken as a memorial for the deceased, including:

- Personal expressions created and given to the family and friends of the deceased person to keep privately. These may include letters, poems, recollections captured on video, commemorative scrapbooks, artworks or photographs.
- Permanent memorials are contentious as they can inadvertently create a focus for the distress of other people with thoughts of suicide or become a location for self-harming or suicidal behaviours and for this reason are best avoided.
- Making a donation or volunteering time to a local charity or peer support service.
- Collecting funds to support the family and cover funeral and other costs.
- Sharing information about programs or events that promote resilience, mental health and suicide prevention.
- Donating to or participating in local services and events with a mental health and wellbeing focus.
- Purchasing books for the local library addressing topics around coping with loss or dealing with depression and other mental health problems.

Note: Balloon releases - where attendees each release a helium-filled balloon - are discouraged, as the balloons eventually fall and create litter that is harmful to wildlife and the environment.

If planning on dedicating a community memorial to lives lost by suicide, consider the various and diverse people who may visit the memorial including children and young people, and ensure there are clear messages about help seeking. A memorial which includes information about support services can prevent harm and raise community awareness.

The WA Department of Education have a policy about memorials after a death by suicide which can be found in the 'References'.

Also see: <https://mindframe.org.au/suicide/communicating-about-suicide> 



Social media memorials

People are increasingly using social media websites to memorialise loved ones. Social media includes Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat and more.

Advantages include the unrestricted accessibility of such sites as there are no time limits or interruptions to the person grieving. However, inappropriate language or images used in posts can cause distress to people viewing them, so need to be managed as much as possible.

Table 3: Suggestions for social media memorials

Things to avoid	Things to try instead
Avoid disclosing details of the method or location of the death, or posting images, photos, videos or animations depicting a method of suicide or self-harm. These increase distress and may inadvertently encourage 'copying' behaviour by those vulnerable.	Follow the suggestions for appropriate language and presentation provided in Table 1, including avoiding giving the impression that the suicide was a positive outcome.
Avoid posting or sharing images of the person who has died by suicide looking dishevelled, threatening or using body language indicating distress (such as clutching their head). Such images can upset others and reinforce negative stereotypes around suicide.	Share information about support services available and encourage people feeling upset to seek help.
Avoid suggesting the person who has died is 'at peace' or 'no longer in pain' as this may suggest suicide as a desirable outcome.	Include messages of hope and recovery such as posting links to videos or poetry with relevant content.

Sources: *headspace, 2015; Huber, 2020; Robinson et al., 2018.*

Allocate a moderator(s) for any social media memorial, considering who has the time, resources, knowledge and support networks to undertake this often emotive and difficult task.

Schools and other organisations working with young people are encouraged to take a proactive response to social media memorials for suicide, especially if it was a young person who died. These resources provide further useful information for young people and schools on this topic and can be located and downloaded for free online here:

<https://headspace.org.au/assets/School-Support/Managing-social-media-following-a-suicide.pdf> 

Also see 'References'.

Alcohol

Give consideration to the availability of alcohol at memorial events and activities. Excessive alcohol consumption may increase feelings of distress and hopelessness.

Promote and encourage safe levels of alcohol consumption. Consider how to reduce any risk of alcohol related harm, including planning and supporting the safe return home of people attending.



Additional Resources



Counselling, support services and information

ARBOR

(Active Response Bereavement Outreach)

Suicide bereavement support for adults.

1300 11 44 46

CYPRESS

(Children & Young People Responsive Suicide Support)

Suicide bereavement support for children and young people.

1300 11 44 46

Mates Standby

(Support for construction workers and families affected by suicide in WA)

0409 996 260 (AH 1300 642 111)

Suicide Call Back Service

(Online and telephone counselling for anyone who is feeling suicidal, worried about someone else or who has lost someone to suicide)

1300 659 467

Griefline

Free, confidential telephone counselling for individuals and families experiencing loss and grief

1300 845 745

Thirilli National Indigenous Postvention Service

Supports individuals, families and communities affected by suicide

1800 805 801

Lifeline

Support for anyone experiencing a personal crisis.

Available by phone, text or online chat via their website

13 11 14

QLife

Anonymous, LGBTIQ+ peer support and referral for people wanting to talk about a range of issues

1800 184 527

Beyond Blue

Online and telephone support for anyone feeling anxious or depressed

1300 22 4636

Youth Focus

Counselling for young people and adults

08 6266 4333

headspace

Counselling for young people aged 16–25

1800 650 890

MensLine Australia

Supporting men and boys

1300 789 978

Kids Helpline

Supporting men and boys

1800 551 800



References



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Find out more



Neami National

Neami National is a specialist mental health organisation with over 30 years' experience delivering a broad range of psychosocial recovery and clinical services across Western Australia, Victoria, Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia. Neami's WA services include:

- Suicide Prevention Services
- Community-Based Mental Health Support
- Recovery Oriented Clinical Mental Health Services
- Specialist Community Supports
- Housing/ Homelessness Supports.





We acknowledge Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities as the Traditional Custodians of the land we work on and pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging. We recognise that their sovereignty was never ceded.



We are committed to cultivating inclusive environments for staff, consumers and carers and celebrate, value and include people of all backgrounds, genders, sexualities, cultures, bodies and abilities.





www.neaminational.org.au

Providing mental health, homelessness and suicide prevention support
and working to strengthen local communities.

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