

# When someone you know dies by suicide

Grief is a natural response experienced when we lose someone close to us. Grieving is a normal part of life, and most of us will experience grief at some point. Grief responses can begin as soon as we become aware of a loss, and usually continue over the course of the first year.

While grief is an expected response to loss, grief relating to suicide can be particularly complex due to the suddenness and shock experienced, the perceptions of preventability, and the difficulty in comprehending why the deceased person chose to end their life. Cultural issues, such as stigma, can also complicate the process.

In response to suicide, people may experience shock, disbelief, confusion, and a deep sadness. Some people may struggle with guilt and have unanswered questions about what happened, and what they could have done to help.

## Common responses to another person's suicide

People respond to suicide in a range of ways. For some of us, it is a deeply traumatic experience.

People can experience a range of normal, grief related reactions to another's suicide, including:

- Shock, disbelief or feeling 'numb'
- Guilt or feelings of failure that the death was not prevented
- Anxiety, nightmares, or intrusive thoughts
- Withdrawal from others
- Irritability or anger
- Difficulty concentrating
- Changes to sleep patterns, appetite, energy, and enjoyment of activities
- Preoccupation with thoughts of the person who has died; trying to make sense of the death and understand why it happened

When grieving, it is normal to experience intense emotional pain, or want to avoid the pain of grieving. It is also normal to experience delayed grief responses, which can emerge weeks or even months after the death

Grief is experienced in different ways by different people, and can last for months, if not years. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, and there is no standard timeline for grieving.

Grief is a very personal process and differs between individuals. Some people may appear to be unaffected. Most people will carry on with their lives while moving through the grieving process.

## How to support those around you

Your peers may be grappling with strong emotions. They may be overwhelmed by intense feelings of grief, including during working hours.

To support others, you first need to support yourself.

To provide support to your peers, you can:

- Acknowledge the loss, and the need for taking time to grieve
- Provide information about expected grief reactions and normalise individual experiences
- Offer practical support
- Check-in with colleagues, encourage inclusion in professional activities, and keep in contact with those affected
- Provide a safe, non-judgmental and supportive environment
- Allow time to discuss what has happened, sometimes repeatedly
- Encourage continued participation in enjoyable activities (such as sports or hobbies) and contact with supportive friends – the support of friends and family can make a real difference to a bereaved person's capacity to manage the experience
- Consider cultural differences – cultural background can affect how people respond to suicide as well as how they feel about sharing information and seeking help
- Look out for signs that a colleague is not coping and encourage self-care

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## When to consider accessing your own support

You should seek professional support if:

- Your experience of grief is overwhelming, severe and persistent
- You are experiencing suicidal or self-harming thoughts
- Your normal coping strategies are not helping and this is exacerbating your distress

### Community services

- Emergency Services (Police, Fire and Ambulance for life-threatening or urgent support) – Phone 000
- Acute Care Team (24 hour urgent, acute and crisis support based at hospital – Phone 1300 64 22 55
- Lifeline (24 hour telephone counselling service) – Phone 13 11 14, Web [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)
- Suicide Call Back Service (24 hour crisis counselling service for people at risk of suicide, as well as carers and those bereaved by suicide) – Phone 1300 659, Web [www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au](http://www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au)
- BeyondBlue (24 hour telephone counselling service) – Phone 1300 224 636, Web [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)
- Your local doctor or GP, hospital, or emergency ward
- A community-based psychologist or counsellor (your GP can refer you)

### JCU services

- JCU Student Equity and Wellbeing (Monday to Friday, 9am-4pm) – Phone (07) 4781 4711
- JCU After Hours Student Assistance Line – Phone 1800 754 185
- JCU Security (24 hours):  
Townsville Phone (07) 478 15555 or 1800 675 559 / Cairns Phone (07) 423 21293

### Student Equity and Wellbeing

James Cook University

Web <https://www.jcu.edu.au/student-equity-and-wellbeing>

Email [studentwellbeing@jcu.edu.au](mailto:studentwellbeing@jcu.edu.au)

Phone Townsville (07) 478 14711 or Cairns (07) 423 21150

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