



Support after a Sudden Death

## AFTER A SUDDEN DEATH: Supporting a Grieving Colleague

### For teachers and school staff

A sudden and unexpected death of someone within a school community can have a significant and far-reaching impact. While staff are expected to continue to lead, teach, and organise students well, some may be experiencing their own shock and grief reactions. Support from workplace colleagues and friends can help strengthen their ability to cope and get through this difficult time.

**Your colleague's grief is a normal process helping them to gradually adjust to the loss.** A sudden death can have a significant impact on someone, even if they didn't know the person who has died very well, or at all. It may trigger difficult memories of previous personal loss.

Support people to take the time and space they need to grieve in their own way. Waves of grief can come at any time, including at work. For most, grief slowly eases up in its intensity. For a list of common grief reactions after a loss see <https://www.healthnavigator.org.nz/health-a-z/g/grief-loss/>

**Acknowledge their loss and grief.** Try not to minimise it or respond as if nothing has happened. Simple words or gestures of caring can help.

**You don't always need words.** Making eye contact, a reassuring smile or hug, or literally just sitting or standing together can be very supportive.

**Be respectful of cultural or religious differences.** These may affect a person's reactions to the loss, and to their willingness to talk about it or accept others' help.

**Listen carefully.** Let a colleague know you're available to listen. They may or may not want to talk. If they do, then listen more than talk. They might want to repeat their story or talk about the person who has died. If you listen patiently, with empathy and compassion, you will be helping them.

**Be non-judgmental.** Focus on the loss, not on how the person died or how your colleague is or isn't grieving. Avoid giving advice or using unhelpful clichés. Shut down any unhelpful gossip about the death.

**Ask if there's anything helpful you can do or offer something specific.** In a crisis time, distressed people may not be able to identify helpful tasks. Think practical. If they accept your offer, reliably follow through on it. Their needs may change, so be flexible.

**Don't encourage heavy drinking or drugs as a way of coping.** These can adversely affect the grief experience and cause further complicating issues.

**Offer grounded reassurance and hope.** Such as, "*I can see this is incredibly hard for you, but I know you will get through this tragic time,*" or "*You've got my support for as long as you need it.*" Remember that just being with them and available can also be reassuring.

**Continue to check in and connect over time. Spend relaxed time with them.** Encourage the person to be part of staff gatherings and social events. Be mindful of anniversaries or other special days that may be particularly hard for them in the future.

**If your colleague's struggling to cope or their reactions are intensifying, express your concerns to them.**

Encourage them to prioritise self-care and use available help and support. Remind them who your school's contact is for EAP counselling services. Mention they can also text or phone **1737** 24/7 for anonymous support. They can also access more support from their GP.

**If a colleague has negative thoughts of self-harm or suicide, take them seriously.** A sudden death can sometimes trigger suicidal thoughts in those who are vulnerable at that time. Talk with them. Listen carefully. Reassure them support is available. Assist them to find help as soon as possible.

If the risk appears immediate, call your local mental health crisis team, go with them to the nearest emergency department, or call **111**. Stay with them until they have support.

For more information, see <https://mentalhealth.org.nz/resources/resource/are-you-worried-someone-is-thinking-of-suicide>

**Care and support that's ongoing helps because grief doesn't have any set timetable.** Grief takes time.

**Look after yourself well.** It can be hard to witness a colleague's extreme distress. The sudden death may have raised some confronting questions and grief reactions for you also. To be in the best position to provide support, give your own self-care priority. See Back Up's "*Your own self-care after a traumatic death.*"

“ What happened blindsided me. I couldn't have got to work each day without one or two staff colleagues who were staunchly supportive and practical. They made the difference. ”

**Janice**

“ The whole school seemed to move in slow motion. Talking honestly with staff friends allowed us to support each other. We all did it differently, but we drew on each other's strength. ”

**Alan**

## If the sudden death is a suspected suicide

There can sometimes be uncertainty over the cause of a sudden death. The police must investigate and report every unexplained death or suspected suicide to the coroner, who will then hold a coronial inquiry. This typically means there can be a considerable time delay before a cause of death is confirmed and made public. This is why, if a death is a suspected suicide and speculation or gossip occurs, schools and staff must be cautious and wise about what is said.

The death of someone by a suspected suicide is also usually an especially painful, confronting, and difficult experience for those affected. The sense of trauma and grief that follows can be intense. Providing meaningful support is very important.

### Some things to keep in mind if you support a colleague after a suspected suicide:

- ▶ *Our Back Up team can provide support and information specific to suicide loss if needed.* Be in touch with us through your pastoral leader.
- ▶ *Never ask your colleague for more details about the death.* Avoid talking about the cause, method, location, or circumstances, or speculating about these. Unwise or thoughtless talk can significantly increase traumatic distress and potentially contribute to further suicides. Shut down any gossip.
- ▶ *If any details of the death are shared with you, keep them confidential* to be respectful of the deceased person and their whānau, and to help prevent further suicides. If distressing details are shared, you can ask the person to stop. (Shocked people can temporarily lose their usual filters.) Instead, talk together about who might be better placed for them to talk to, such as a counsellor or Victim Support.
- ▶ *Research is clear that both direct and indirect exposure to a suspected suicide death (or a suicide attempt) can influence the suicidal thoughts and behaviour of vulnerable others – even of those who may not have known the person who has died.* While the risk is

greatest in the first weeks and around anniversary times, be aware that vulnerability to suicide can continue for some considerable time after a suspected or confirmed suicide death has deeply affected someone. Check in with your grieving colleague regularly if you are concerned about their mental wellbeing.

- ▶ *Always, in every conversation about a suspected suicide, talk about how and where people can get good help* and support if they (or people they know) are ever thinking about taking their own lives.
- ▶ *If they are struggling, encourage them* to use free suicide counselling [www.aoketera.org.nz](http://www.aoketera.org.nz) or EAP support.
- ▶ *Watch your words.* Unwise words used about a suspected suicide death can carry prejudices and judgements which can cause further hurt and increase the burden of stigma, even inadvertently. Use words that are neutral, respectful, and helpful.
  - Say *'died of suicide'* or *'died by suicide'*, *'ended his/her life'* or *'took his/her own life'* as accurate, emotionally-neutral ways to explain a self-inflicted death.
  - Don't ever use *'committed suicide'* or *'completed suicide'* or *'successful suicide attempt.'* Suicide is not a crime, or an achievement.
  - Avoid judgmental phrases like *'he/she made their own choice/decision.'* Most often a suicidal person is psychologically overwhelmed, with judgment distorted by mental illness and/or drugs and alcohol. Without the rational ability to make a real *'choice'* or *'decision'*, they're responding tragically to compulsive or impulsive thoughts.



Support after a Sudden Death

**To contact your Back Up team:**

**Phone:** 03 375 7194 | **Email:** [back-up@pegasus.org.nz](mailto:back-up@pegasus.org.nz)