

A guide for communities

Using social media following the suicide of a young person and to help prevent suicide clusters



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Background

When used in a planned and strategic way, social media can play an important role in responding to the suicide of a young person and helping to prevent suicide clusters. For example, it can be used to very quickly share support and helpline information to large numbers of individuals in the community who may be affected by the suicide. However, social media also has the potential to cause harm. For example, misinformation and rumours can spread rapidly online, and content which sensationalises suicide or portrays suicide in either a positive or stigmatising way can lead to adverse outcomes, and in some instances, further suicidal behaviour in vulnerable individuals.

For these reasons, many frameworks for the response and prevention of suicide clusters recommend that communities monitor social media following a suicide death. However, details regarding what content to monitor, how to respond to someone who may be at risk, and how to promote safe conversations about suicide is limited.

To address this gap, Orygen has developed the following guidance for communities, policy-makers, and both service providers and commissioners. The guidance is based on the #chatsafe guidelines – the first evidence-informed guidelines in the world designed to help young people talk safely on social media about suicide.

General communication with stakeholders following the suicide of a young person or during a suspected suicide cluster

Social media and online communication can be used to notify stakeholders in the community that a suicide has occurred, or that a suspected suicide cluster may be underway. This can be an opportunity to provide stakeholders with:

1. accurate information, thereby helping to reduce the spread of rumours
2. additional resources that might help them assist others.

Although limited evidence exists, the following may be useful when coordinating a response with stakeholders following a suicide:

- **Identify** and build relationships with key stakeholders in your community who have contact with young people who may be affected by a suicide; for example schools, community health services, sporting clubs etc.
- **Maintain** a list of email contact details so that you can easily reach them and disseminate information following a suicide. If sports clubs or other community groups are involved, include a list of the relevant social media pages.
- **Prepare** a social media communication template so that you can reach multiple stakeholders quickly, which includes (but is not limited to):
 - a link to the [#chatsafe website](#);
 - information on local crisis services, including those that are available after hours; and
 - links to resources or training materials that may be helpful for parents and other gatekeepers in the community (e.g. Orygen's [Coping with Self-harm](#) booklet for parents, or evidence-based [gatekeeper training](#) programs).

How social media can be used

The following section summarises what the evidence says, and examples of how social media can be used to facilitate safe communication about suicide by both individuals and communities.

What we know

News about a suicide in the community can spread rapidly via word of mouth, text message, and social media. This can cause heightened fear, anxiety, and distress among individuals in the community.

Suicide is rare, but affects many people, including those who did not necessarily know the deceased. As a result, people may become more aware of, or interested in suicide during the period immediately following a suicide.

How you can use social media to help

- Share information via social media about help-seeking resources and services available in the community to support those who may be affected by the suicide, or at risk of suicide. [An example is available here.](#)
- Include the details of [national services](#) such as Lifeline and eheadspace as well as contact information for local services that are available in your community.
- Following an unexpected or traumatic event, it is common for people to talk about what happened. Social media can be used to share information about [positive and non-stigmatising language](#) to use following a suicide, and to encourage others to communicate safely about suicide.
- Remind people not to 'like' or 'share' content that can be harmful. Discourage others from sharing content that includes [images of the deceased person looking distressed](#), as well as information on the location and methods of a suicide or suicide attempt. [Examples of harmful content can be found here.](#)
- Provide information on how to respond to content that might be harmful; for example by reporting the content to the [safety team](#) on the relevant social media platform.
- Information that dispels myths and provides information on the warning signs and risk factors for suicide can help to prevent further suicide deaths. Indicate that suicide is the result of multiple and complex risk factors, and encourage people to avoid attributing the suicide to a single cause. [An example is available here.](#)

What we know

Even people who are close to the deceased may only find out about the suicide of their friend or loved one on social media, which can be distressing.

People may be experiencing complex feelings of grief that can be exacerbated by posts shared online.

When a suicide has occurred, young people are likely to use social media to connect with others and to talk about the death.

How you can use social media to help

- Post reminders to the community to think before they post information online, particularly if they are unsure whether the information is true and accurate. [Additional tips are available here.](#)
- Encourage people to pause and reflect before they share a post ([see & share this animation](#)) and remind them that [others who are grieving](#) may also be affected by posts they see online.

- Remind people that they can decide whether or not they want to engage with content about suicide by using "[trigger warnings](#)" or "content warnings."
- Provide people with reminders to take care of themselves. [For example, consider sharing the following resource.](#)

- As in any other death, it is important for young people to have the opportunity to talk about a friend or loved one they have lost to suicide. Some [tips to help young people have these conversations safely can be found here](#). This includes language that aims to reduce stigma and the potential for copy-cat behaviour.

What we know

How you can use social media to help

News of a suicide may lead others to share online their own experiences with suicidal thoughts, feelings or behaviour.

- Remind people about the permanency of the internet (see – [once posted, always posted](#)), that [posts can go viral](#), and may have unintended consequences. It may also be helpful for people to [monitor their post](#) if it includes information about suicide.
- Provide tips for people on [how to safely share their own experiences](#), reminding them that they do not have to share their whole story if they do not wish to.

The news of a suicide may increase risk among some vulnerable individuals in the community.

- Provide information on [how to respond to someone who you think may be at risk of suicide](#). This may involve asking them directly if they are feeling suicidal or actually helping them to call for help if they are at immediate risk. [See here for an example of how to respond](#).

Following a suicide death in the community, individuals may want to pay tribute to the deceased through online memorials.

- [Online memorials](#), such as sharing photos and tribute pages, are a common way to express grief. However, there is a lack of evidence regarding ways to do this safely. On the one hand, memorialising a person who has died by suicide is a normal part of grief and can be helpful, but content that glorifies or sensationalises the suicide can incur additional risks.
- Remind people that it is ok to [take a break](#) from social media, especially if they feel upset by online memorials. It can also be helpful to remind people of some of the [self-care tips](#) that are available.
- Online memorials should be [monitored regularly](#) for indicators that an individual may be at risk, and for potentially harmful content.

Reaching young people on social media platforms - some practice-based learnings from the #chatsafe project

The practical tips below are based on the ways in which young people engaged with the #chatsafe campaign that may be useful for you when using social media for this purpose.

- Targeted advertising on social media can allow you to share information and support resources directly to young people who may be affected by the suicide of a friend or loved one.
- Instagram and Snapchat were the most effective social media platforms for reaching young people between the ages of 16-24 years. This was followed by Facebook.
- Select social media platforms that allow you to reach young people through targeted advertisements based on the deceased person's age, gender identity and language. If the person who has died by suicide was involved in community groups such as a football club or church, consider including the public Instagram or Facebook pages of these groups.
- Select a time of day that will maximise your reach. For example, if you want to reach school students, consider scheduling your communication during after-school hours.
- Young people were more likely to engage with short bite size pieces of content that lasted for no more than 6 seconds.
- Develop content that capitalises on the function of the specific social media platform. For example, consider using Instagram stories to reach young people. You can also include hyperlinks to additional resources in captions below posts on Facebook.
- Ensure that the content you share is mobile friendly as most young people access content on their phones.
- If you have developed audio-visual content, make sure the audio content can be switched on or off, and provide captions and always [include alt-text for visually impaired users](#).
- Include links to helplines or local clinical services.

Resources

For more information visit the [#chatsafe website](#)

You can also contact us via the [Orygen website](#) or at chatsafe@orygen.org.au

Other useful resources

[#chatsafe guidelines](#)

[Coping with self-harm information for parents and caregivers](#)

[Self-harm and suicide myth-busters](#)

Community frameworks for the response and prevention of suicide clusters:

[New Zealand \(2017\)](#)

[England \(2019\)](#)

Australia (2012): Centre for Health Policy Programs and Economics. Developing a community plan for preventing and responding to suicide clusters. Melbourne: Melbourne School of Population Health, The University of Melbourne, 2012.

