

#chatsafe for educators

how teachers can support safe online communication about suicide



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What is #chatsafe?

Many countries, including Australia, have developed media guidelines for safe reporting of suicide. These guidelines target media professionals and have been largely focused on traditional forms of news and print media, rather than the internet and 'social media'. However, we know that young people increasingly use social media platforms to discuss suicide in a number of ways. Strategies focused on involvement of professionals and on traditional forms of media are therefore less likely to be helpful for young people.

To address this, we created the #chatsafe guidelines (1). The #chatsafe guidelines are the world's first set of evidence-informed tools and tips designed to directly support young people to communicate safely about suicide on social media. They were developed in partnership with young people, media and suicide prevention professionals and are supported by a [social media campaign](#) which was created in partnership with young people from across Australia (2).

The guidelines include the following sections:

- 1) Before you post anything about suicide;
- 2) Sharing your own thoughts, feelings or experience with suicidal behavior;
- 3) Communicating about someone you know who is affected by suicidal thoughts, feelings or behaviors;
- 4) Responding to someone who may be suicidal; and
- 5) Memorial websites, pages and closed groups.

You can download a copy of the [#chatsafe guidelines](#), or visit the [#chatsafe website](#) (www.orygen.org.au/chatsafe/). The #chatsafe guidelines can also be found in the [online well-being section of Facebook's Safety Centre](#).

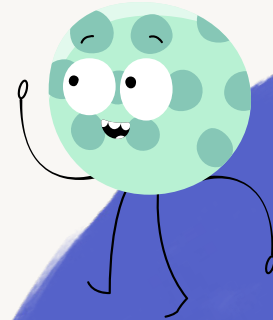


#chatsafe for educators

Teachers are often trusted adults in the lives of young people and the topic of suicide might be raised in a classroom setting in a number of different ways. For instance, students might come to you to talk about their own (or someone else's) suicide-related thoughts, feelings, or behavior. Alternatively, you might become aware of students having conversations online or seeing content about suicide on social media. The topic of suicide can also be present in school texts, movies, or in the media if a prominent figure dies by suicide.

We have created #chatsafe for educators to help educators better equip the young people they have contact with to talk safely on social media about suicide. This resource will provide information on how you can model safe language when talking about suicide, empower young people to safely engage with suicide-related content on social media, and equip young people to make decisions about the way they engage with this content. This resource also provides direct links to social media content that has been designed by young people, which you may wish to share or discuss with your students. Also included are some downloadable resources, and a list of youth-friendly support services.

Information in this resource is not intended to replace any individual school, college, or university policy or advice provided by the Department of Education (or other relevant regulatory body). Information in this resource can also be adapted depending on the age of the student body. #chatsafe content has been developed with those aged 16 - 25 years, and we encourage a consideration of the ages/year levels of the students you are working with when discussing #chatsafe content.



Throughout this resource you will find direct links to the #chatsafe website and #chatsafe Instagram page. We have also included youth-friendly animation videos that speak to the topics presented in this resource. You may want to share these with your students or use these videos as conversation starters.

Young people find social media a good way to seek and provide help and support

Young people are spending an increasing amount of time on social media and we know that they often see platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat (and others) as a safe place to talk about their thoughts, feelings, and ideas. Because of this, some young people may turn to social media to communicate about suicide-related thoughts and behaviors, including self-harm. It is the goal of #chatsafe to keep these communications safe, helpful, and appropriate. We aim to empower young people with the tools they need to have these conversations safely, and we see social media as an important context to provide help and support.

Young people have told us that social media:

- allows them to build a sense of community and social connection;
- provides an accessible and appropriate way to seek help and find information; and
- is a platform for them to discuss their feelings in a non-stigmatized way.

That being said, we also know that exposure to suicide-related material online can also pose a risk to young people, and that is especially the case if information is shared in an unsafe or unhelpful way. For instance, certain types of content (e.g. graphic information or images) may cause distress or lead to imitative suicidal behavior. However, research has shown a reduction in suicide rates when information about suicide in mainstream media is shared responsibly and sensitively. For this reason, the #chatsafe guidelines were created to help young people have these conversations safely online and encourages them to share information responsibly and sensitively.

What does [safe communication](#) look like?

Safe communication is key to #chatsafe. Safe communication includes things like the language students use, the type of information students share online, and the support students can provide to each other. It's helpful for the trusted adults in a young person's life to a) be able to differentiate between safe and unsafe communication, and b) model safe communication – both online and offline.



Language matters

#chatsafe encourages the use of [helpful and safe language when discussing suicide online](#).

Helpful language:

- Try to say the person “died by suicide” (instead of “commit suicide” – see examples of unhelpful language below).
- Indicate that suicide is complex and that many factors contribute to a person ending their life.
- Include messages of hope and recovery.
- Tell others who might be thinking about suicide where and how they could get help.
- Include information on factors that protect against suicide (e.g. engaging in meaningful activities and building and maintaining connections and relationships).
- Indicate that suicide is preventable, help is available, treatment can be successful, and recovery is possible.
- Encourage young people to talk about what they are feeling – that might be to a friend, a trusted adult, or a professional.

Unhelpful language:

- Don't use words that describe suicide as criminal or sinful (e.g. say *died by suicide* rather than *committed suicide*). This may suggest to someone that what they are feeling is wrong or unacceptable or make someone worry that they'll be judged if they ask for help.
- Don't say that suicide is a 'solution' to problems, life stressors or mental health difficulties.
- Don't use words that glamorize, romanticize, or make suicide seem appealing.
- Don't use words that trivialize or make suicide seem less complex than it is.
- Don't blame one event or imply that the suicide was the result of a single cause, such as bullying or social media use.
- Don't use judgmental phrases which reinforce myths, stigma, stereotypes or suggest nothing can be done about suicide.
- Don't provide detailed information about the actual suicide or suicide attempt.
- Do not provide information about suicide methods or the location of the suicide. Don't acknowledge if there have been a number of suicide acts at a particular location or 'hot spot'.

While conversations about suicide cannot, or should not, be stopped, it is important that stories of hope, recovery, and help-seeking are at the forefront of these discussions. By encouraging students to talk about their feelings with someone they trust, focusing on suicide being complex and preventable, and always reiterating that help is always available, we are providing young people with the tools to have these discussions about suicide safely.

Sharing information

[The #chatsafe guidelines encourage young people to take some time to think about the information they might post online and why they want to share that information before they share it.](#) Reflecting on how their post could affect other people and whether or not there is a different way to communicate that would be safer or more helpful are also good reminders. If a young person is going to share suicide-related information online, it's important to remind them:

- Posts can go viral and they might not be able to control who sees or shares their post.
- If the post is inaccurate, stigmatizing or unsafe, it could have a negative impact.
- The internet is permanent: "once posted, always posted" and other users could take screenshots or show others.
- When posting online, it's important to monitor posts regularly for unsafe or harmful comments by others.

Students may post about their own experience with current or previous suicidal thoughts, feelings or behavior. If talking to a young person about their own social media posts, the following questions may be helpful:

- How will sharing your experience make you feel? For example, if you think it could be distressing, you could ask a sibling, trusted adult or friend to review your post before you share it.
- What do you hope to achieve by sharing your experience? Do you want to raise awareness or are you looking for support? Are there more effective ways of achieving those things?
- Do you think you would benefit from seeking help about your current or previous experience with suicidal thoughts, feelings or behavior? What resources, people or friends are available to you?
- Who will see your post? For example, are you posting on a professional mental health site, an anonymous platform or a public platform?
- How might your post affect your friends, family and peers?
- Will people who have read your post know how to help themselves or their loved ones after reading about your experience? If not, it could be helpful to provide some suggestions about what helped you.



**"Before you post,
Pause and Reflect"**

Providing support

It's always good practice to include the phone numbers or links to appropriate help services, such as helplines, local suicide prevention services, or local emergency services. There are also suicide prevention resources available through different social media platforms.

This [downloadable resource](#) provides a list of social media services and national phone and online support services. It can be helpful to display this in an area that is easily accessible to students.

How can students check in on someone they're worried about?

If students are concerned about someone because of something they shared online, the #chatsafe guidelines encourage them to talk to the person directly, either on or offline. The guidelines also suggest that it would be helpful for them to inform a trusted adult (e.g. a teacher) or friend and, if available, seek professional advice.

If you know that your students are worried about someone, and they are having these conversations online, here's some things to remind them:



"Has a friend posted something that's made you worry about them? If you think they're at risk, there's a few things you can do to help"

Before you check in on a friend

Reaching out to others online can be an important source of affirmation, connection and support for many. Always take any content that suggests a person may be thinking about suicide seriously, but make sure you set boundaries about the type of support you are able to offer and when you are able to offer it.

Before reaching out, the #chatsafe guidelines encourage young people to check in on themselves first:

- How am I feeling?
- Am I able to provide support to this person?
- Do I know where to seek support or where to find more comprehensive support if its needed?
- Will this make me unsafe or upset?

If content is concerning or a young person does not feel comfortable responding, that's okay. It's important that young people recognize the limits of the support they can provide and understand that it is not their responsibility to reach out on their own. This can feel like a big responsibility for a young person, especially if a friend or peer is messaging them privately or asking them to keep it a secret. If they need support, young people should:

- Inform a trusted adult or friend.
- Seek professional advice.
- Report suicidal content to the relevant platform (e.g., [Facebook Safety Centre](#)).

It's okay to ask someone if they are thinking about suicide

When a young person decides to respond to someone that they are worried about, we encourage them to contact that person in private and let them know that they are worried about them, and that they care about them. The person at risk may then explain their thoughts, feelings, or experiences.

At that point, it is okay to ask someone directly: "are you thinking of suicide?". Research has shown that there is no evidence that asking about suicide increases the likelihood of a person engaging in suicidal behavior. It is important that the question is asked directly and clearly.

- "Are you thinking of suicide?"
- "Do you feel suicidal?"
- "Are you thinking of ending your life?"

There is no perfect or right thing to say to someone in these situations and it is better to show support and offer to help than to make no attempt at all.

Then what should you do?

When someone is at **immediate risk** of suicide or in the process of making a suicide attempt:

- Encourage the person at risk to call 911.
- Contact the person's family or someone in their social network who may be able to check on them.
- If you cannot reach the person, or anyone in their family or social network, call 911. They will ask you your name and contact details, information about the person you are calling about, what they have said that indicates that they are at risk, the date and time of their post/message, the person's current location (if you know).

If the person is **not at immediate risk** of suicide:

- Reassure the person that that support is available and that they should seek professional help.
- Ask them if they would like to talk, or what you could do to help.
- Ask them if they know where to get help, or if they would like the contact information for some local support services.
- Respect that they may not want to talk to you but encourage them to talk to someone.

Talking safely online about someone who has died by suicide

When remembering someone who has died by suicide, it can be hard to know what to say or how to talk about the situation safely. Here are some things to remember:

These conversations are happening.

- Students will be having these conversations and they will want to speak about it with their friends and trusted adults.

These conversations can be safe.

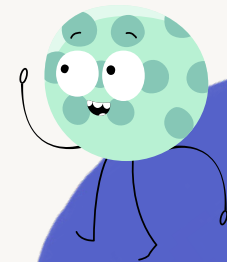
- There are helpful ways to facilitate these conversations: model safe language, encourage young people to talk about what they are feeling, and remind them that support is always available.
- Grief is complex and can be experienced in many different ways. While some young people might want to talk about the suicide, other young people might not feel equipped to have those conversations. For this reason, #chatsafe always encourages the use of content warnings when sharing content that is related to suicidal thoughts, feelings, or behavior. This gives other users a 'heads up' and lets them be in control of the information that they see online. #chatsafe has provided some example content warnings that students [can download and use](#).

These conversations can be helpful.

- Remind students that if they are talking online about someone who has died by suicide, there are ways they can create a safe space where they could share positive stories and memories. This can be a helpful way for students to share their feelings and encourage positive conversations.

These conversations can be an important way to monitor students' well-being and prevent further suicides.

- It's important that conversations and posts online are always monitored for unsafe messages, and that support services are provided.
- Although social media can provide an opportunity for students to talk about their feelings, it is important that this is done in a safe way because social media also has the potential to cause harm. For example, misinformation and rumours can spread rapidly online, and content which sensationalizes suicide or portrays suicide in either a positive or stigmatizing way can lead to adverse outcomes, and in some instances, further suicidal behavior in vulnerable individuals. There are postvention steps your school and community can take to ensure that the conversations and information shared on social media are appropriate and helpful. The [#chatsafe guide for communities](#) and [Suicide Prevention Resource Centre toolkit for schools](#) are helpful resources for schools who have lost a young person to suicide and provide important information for keeping other students safe.



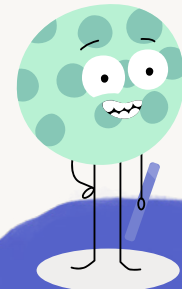
"Remembering someone who has died by suicide does not have to be a dark time"

Self-care and taking control of the content you engage with

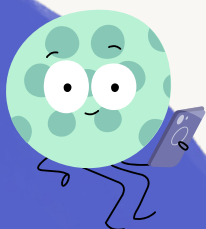
#chatsafe advocates for practicing self-care and always checking in on your own well-being. This could include things such as taking a break from social media, taking part in other activities or taking control of social media newsfeeds (by blocking, hiding, or reporting unsafe content).

When things are feeling too much, remind students that they should practice self-care and that it's okay to step away.

The top 10 tips from the #chatsafe guidelines [can be downloaded as a poster](#).



"When things are feeling too much, remember to practice self-care"



"It's good to know your options online, and you can take control of your newsfeed"

Extra resources

Downloadable resources

- Poster: [How young people can safely communicate online about suicide: Top 10 tips](#)
- [Poster: Support services](#)
- [#chatsafe content warning templates](#)
- [Coping with self-harm resource for parents and carers](#)
- [#chatsafe guidelines](#)
- [#chatsafe: A guide for communities](#)

Online

- [#chatsafe website](#)
- [#chatsafe educator training module on Orygen site](#)

Other support services available to educators

- [Suicide Prevention Resource Centre Toolkit for Schools](#)

References

Robinson, J., Hill, N., Thorn, P., Teh, Z., Battersby, R., & Reavley, N., #chatsafe: A young person's guide for communicating safely online about suicide. Melbourne: Orygen, The National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health, 2018

Thorn P, Hill NT, Lamblin M, et al. Developing a Suicide Prevention Social Media Campaign With Young People (The #Chatsafe Project): Co-Design Approach. JMIR Ment Health. 2020;7(5):e17520. Published 2020 May 11. doi:10.2196/17520

