

# Controversial issues:

## the way people die

These activities are intended for use in classrooms which have already established trusting relationships between students and students, and students and teachers.

- Always make allowance for students to 'opt out' if they feel too uncomfortable.
- Allow for sufficient time at the end to debrief.
- Remember that teachers need to look after themselves as well.

If students raise the issue of suicide in this lesson, teachers should be prepared to respond appropriately. Information about how to respond is provided in *Educating for Life*.

### SENIOR SECONDARY

Four key messages that students should have learnt before participating in these sessions:

- people react differently to loss experiences
- there are strategies which help people cope with their own and /or a friend's loss experiences
- everyone needs to be able to identify sources of help
- people from different cultural / ethnic / religious backgrounds may cope with loss in different ways.

**Lessons 7 to 10 should be taught before commencing 11 to 12.**

### Intention

In this session it is intended that students:

- explore the ethical dilemmas, beliefs and personal values that influence decisions about life and death.

### Resources

- The school's suicide policy (should be read before embarking on this lesson; also read *Educating for Life*)
- Optional — coloured dots / stars / pieces of paper for creating groups (you will need as many different colours or types as there are to be groups)

### How to

#### ACTIVITY 1: Defining euthanasia

1. Explain to students that the decisions people make about their lives and deaths create controversy in society. They also impact on the lives of others. To explore these issues euthanasia will be used as a case study.
2. Write the definitions of euthanasia on the board.
3. Voluntary euthanasia is where a patient makes a conscious decision that his / her life should end and asks for help to do this.

#### Teacher talk

Passive euthanasia is where a decision is made to forgo or cease treatment which is considered burdensome or unnecessarily prolonging life.

## ACTIVITY 2: Discussion

1. In small groups get the class to discuss the sample questions and report back.

### Sample questions

- Why might someone ask for help to take their own life?
  - Why might they think life is too much?
  - What is depression and why do people become depressed? What role could it play in voluntary euthanasia? (see *Understanding Mental Illness* unit)
  - Why might an ill person refuse treatment?
  - How might friends or relatives feel when someone has taken their life by euthanasia?
  - What are three things that could make a person who is contemplating euthanasia feel better? (Hints: talking to a counsellor / priest; having their medication reviewed for greater pain relief; moving to a palliative care ward)
  - Why does society find it difficult to talk about euthanasia? (focus on personal and community values)
2. Reinforce the message that a positive self-image can be a protective factor. Individually get students to complete the following sentence stems and then share any they feel comfortable doing so, with their group.
    - The things in my life that make me feel fully alive are \_\_\_\_
    - I could increase these positive experiences by \_\_\_\_
    - The things I do well are \_\_\_\_
    - Other people tell me I am good at \_\_\_\_
    - If I am feeling depressed, three things I could do are \_\_\_\_

#### Guest speakers

Invite a person from a palliative care unit to talk to the class

## A Mental Health Promotion strategy

Raise staff awareness of mental health problems for young people

# Responding

## to help seeking

### UPPER SECONDARY

Sessions 7 to 10 should be taught or reviewed before commencing this session.

Four key messages that students should have learnt before participating in these lessons:

- people react differently to loss experiences
- there are strategies which help people cope with their own and / or a friend's loss experiences
- everyone needs to be able to identify sources of help
- people from different cultural / ethnic / religious backgrounds may cope with loss in different ways.

### Intention

In this lesson it is intended that students:

- identify clues in an individual's behaviour that suggest a need for help
- identify the possible thoughts and feelings of someone who is feeling down
- devise strategies for helping a friend who is feeling down
- identify agencies and individuals that help young people with mental health problems.

### Resources

- *Teacher information sheet: Questions about suicide*
- *Overhead: A friend might need help when...*
- *Overhead: What can you do to help?*
- *Educating for Life: a guide for school-based responses to preventing self-harm and suicide*

This session is for use if a student raises the issue of how to support a depressed friend. The focus should be on help-seeking. Suicide may be raised. Refer to *Educating for Life: a guide for school-based responses to preventing self-harm and suicide* before teaching this session.

Teachers should be familiar with the school / system policy on suicide before teaching this lesson. This is an extension lesson.

Refer to the *Understanding Mental Illnesses* booklet.

# How to

## Teacher talk

Inform the class that today's session will focus on responding to someone who is down and may need help, and will focus on how to respond should someone you know appear to be at risk. Sometimes, particularly if someone is depressed, a loss or change in their life may make it difficult for them to cope. They may even have thoughts of suicide.

Suicide is always associated with mental health problems such as depression. These problems are treatable and can be resolved.

Remind students that as this can be a sensitive or worrying issue for some people, they may wish to talk with you after class about a concern or a worry about themselves or someone else. Remind them about who else is available to talk to should they wish to approach someone else instead.

Further information about depression can be found in the *Understanding Mental Illnesses* booklet.

A suicide attempt or completed suicide may be better understood as an attempt to end the pain rather than to end life.

### Questions about suicide

Use the *Teacher information sheet: Questions about suicide* to guide your responses should students ask questions about how best to respond if a friend reveals an intention to suicide or self-harm.

## ACTIVITY 1: A friend in need

1. Ask the class to identify what they think might be some of the warning signs that someone is feeling down.
2. When would you get worried about a friend? Conduct a brainstorm.
3. Compare the brainstorm with the *Overhead: A friend might need help when...*
4. Explain that these situations do not always mean someone is dealing with a personal problem or encountering tough times. Sometimes we have to back our instincts about when others need help or support as a lot of people believe they should try to cope on their own, or feel a sense of shame or shyness about talking about their own worries. Other people do not know that they may be experiencing depression. Up to 24 percent of young people can experience depression by the time they are 18-years-old. Young people may not know that help is available.

Link here with *MindMatters* booklet *Understanding Mental Illnesses* section on depression.

See *SchoolMatters* and *Educating For Life: a guide for school-based responses to preventing self-harm and suicide*.

## ACTIVITY 2: What can you do to help?

1. Look at *What can you do to help* handout / overhead.
2. Use the 'What If?' questions below to examine what a friend could do. Choose scenarios relevant to your class for discussion.
  - What if a friend has been staying at your house a lot lately and says they would like to drop out of school and run away?
  - What if a friend who was injured in a car accident six months ago has become very quiet and withdrawn. He cannot participate in sport and stays at home alone in his room a great deal?
  - What if you suspect a friend is depressed and may think of hurting themselves, but have never talked about it? Should you bring up the topic or tell them you are worried about them?
  - What if a boyfriend or girlfriend says they will kill themselves if you break up with them?
  - What if a friend tells you that they want to kill themselves and asks you not to tell anyone?
  - What if someone in your group is smoking marijuana on weeknights as well as on the weekend? Others in the group are making jokes about this person turning into a space cadet. He seems pretty down to you.
  - What if a friend tells you that they are thinking of ending it soon? Should you give it until the next day to see if they feel better or should you tell someone?
3. Use the following principles in your discussion as appropriate:
  - if you are worried, tell an appropriate adult
  - if you're not sure what to do, ask for advice from an experienced adult (for example, a counsellor)
  - don't take on the job of being the counsellor — get help
  - take all threats and warnings or hints to self-harm seriously and pass them on
  - if you suspect your friend is really down, do ask them about how they are feeling

- if they don't want to talk about it, pass on your concern to someone who could intervene
- don't make a promise to keep suicidal thoughts or plans a secret
- if you have made a promise, understand it is important to break it if someone's life may be at risk
- suicide is not a good choice, anyone contemplating it should get a chance to be helped to find a better solution
- alcohol and drug use can be associated with an attempt; if someone is affected by drugs / alcohol and feeling down, they may make a decision which affects their safety — be aware you may need to call for help
- most people who suicide send hints for help beforehand
- suicide or a suicide attempt is almost always associated with mental health problems, such as depression, which are treatable and can be resolved.

#### Getting help

You may wish to use session 4 from Coping in *Enhancing Resilience 2* as a help-seeking activity.

Remember to tell the school counsellor or welfare staff that a discussion about suicide has occurred in the class.

### ACTIVITY 3: Getting help

1. Students do a mapping exercise of people and services available to help in their school, local community, city and / or region.

(Remind students that they may need to know how to look for help for someone else at some time in the next few years, after they have left the school.)

2. Conclude the lesson by acknowledging that what has been discussed today is a sensitive issue. Tell the class that if anyone is feeling upset, disturbed or anxious as a result of what was talked about, or if they have noticed that any of their friends seem disturbed, they should talk to you before leaving the room, or to a trusted adult.

## A Mental Health Promotion strategy

Increase staff awareness of school's suicide prevention guidelines



# A friend might need help when...

- they have experienced a relationship break up or recent loss
- they have a change of lifestyle
- they are reporting feeling continually depressed or anxious
- the standard of their school work is deteriorating
- they express feelings of helplessness and hopelessness
- they talk about suicide
- there are changes in their sleep patterns
- they have withdrawn from family and friends
- they are staying away from school, work or other usual activities
- they complain a lot of headaches, nausea or unexplained fatigue
- there appears to be a loss of self-esteem
- they feel they can't cope anymore with life's challenges.

(from Glassock, G. & Rowling L. (1992) *Learning to grieve – Life Skills for Coping with Losses* Newtown, Millennium Books, pg 108)

# What can you do to help?



- don't avoid talking about it
- take their discussion about feeling down seriously
- pass on your concerns to an adult who can help
- let friends know where they can get support
- offer to accompany them to access support
- show the person they have choices besides self-harm, even though none of them may seem ideal at that time.

(from Glassock, G. & Rowling L. (1992) *Learning to Grieve – Life Skills for Coping with Losses* Newtown, Millennium Books, pg 108)



# Questions about suicide

## Teacher information sheet

Suicide is the second leading cause of death amongst youth and young adults. Each year more than 500 people between the ages of 15 and 24 die as a result of suicide. Only accidents claim more lives.

**Question:**

*Is the best way to help a person who says they don't want to live to assure them that things will get better and to be patient?*

**No.** Giving false assurances will not help, and may make the person feel more guilty and worthless. You cannot assure that things will get better although you can let the person know that often things do, and that you believe in their ability to get through their difficult time. It is much better to listen to what the person has to say and find out why they feel so bad.

**Question:**

*If a person tells you that he or she wants to kill themselves and tells you not to tell anyone, should you keep this information to yourself so you can show the person you can be trusted and that they have a friend in you?*

**No.** You may have to betray a confidence to save a life. Even if you promised not to tell, it is important that you do. This is too big a responsibility to carry alone. Besides, most people who tell others are really asking for help. Even if you know it will infuriate the person, you must tell a responsible person as quickly as possible. If the person you tell doesn't take you seriously, and you feel it is serious, tell someone else. Even if you're embarrassed because nothing happened, you did not do wrong by telling. A person who says they want to kill themselves needs help.

**Question:**

*Is it true that only a few people who talk about suicide or make plans for suicide actually attempt it?*

**No.** Most of the young people who have attempted or have committed suicide have given verbal clues of their intentions. According to research, adolescents almost always tell of their plans to kill themselves. Sometimes, they do so in direct ways, 'I can't take any more, I'm going to kill myself', and sometimes they give indirect or hidden messages such as, 'They'll be sorry when I've gone', or 'I won't be a problem

to you much longer'. These people need professional help.

**Question:**

*Are helplessness and hopelessness the two strongest indicators that a person may be or become suicidal?*

**Yes.** Helplessness and hopelessness leave a person with no energy for the present or hope for the future. These two symptoms often mean the person is at high risk and needs attention and support.

**Question:**

*If you thought there was an immediate suicide danger, should you leave the person and go for help straight away?*

**No.** Do not leave a person alone who you think is in immediate danger of killing themselves. Stay with the person or find someone else to stay with them until the crisis passes or until help arrives. If you can't get help in another way, you may have to call the hospital emergency room, crisis hotline, or even the police.

**Question:**

*Is one of the best responses to someone saying 'I can't take any more, I think I'm going to kill myself' to stay calm and ask the person to tell you why they feel that way?*

**Yes.** Stay calm and communicate this calmness as best you can. Don't argue or try to prove that the person is acting irrationally or isn't thinking straight. This will only aggravate the situation. Listen and sympathise with the person. Encourage the person to talk with you.

**Question:**

*Once someone decides they want to kill themselves is there really any way to stop them?*

**Yes.** Many suicides have been prevented. Most adolescents who think about suicide or have tried it admit later that they didn't want to die – they just didn't want to hurt. Assume the person wants to live even if for the moment the desire is a 'still, small voice'.

**Question:**

*Should suicide attempts of any kind always be considered a cry of pain or can people just be trying to get attention?*

**Yes.** Consider them to be a cry of pain.

# Resource list

## **Selected Bibliography**

(See also *MindMatters* annotated bibliography webpage:  
[www.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters.](http://www.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters.))

Glassock, G. & Rowling L. (1992)  
*Learning to grieve — Life skills for coping with losses* Newtown, Millenium Books  
(text with lessons for junior and senior secondary students)

McKissock, M. & McKissock, D. (1993)  
*Coping with grief* Sydney Australian Broadcasting Comission (concise account of grief reactions)

Nelson-Feaver, P. (1993)  
*Funeral service secondary school teaching kit* Victoria, Australian Funeral Directors  
(text with lessons for secondary students)

Raphael, B. (1985)  
*Anatomy of Bereavement: A handbook for the caring professions*  
(text for teachers)

Stevenson, R.G. & Stevenson, E.P. (1996)  
*Teaching about death: A comprehensive resource for educators and parents*  
Philadelphia: Charles Press  
(text for teachers)

Worden, W. (1991)  
*Grief counselling and therapy*  
2nd ed. New York: Springer  
(text on bereavement counselling)

Yang, W. & Pip, C. (1990)  
*Bodywork: Confessions from the funeral trade* Sydney, Hale and Iremonger  
(teacher background information on the funeral trade)

## **Resources Groups**

Film Australia  
PO Box 46  
Lindfield NSW 2070  
Tel: 02 9413 8770  
(for video 'Bolt from the Blue')

Rose Education Pty Ltd  
7 Bonnie Field Close  
Catherine Field NSW 2171  
Tel: 02 9606 6853  
(resources and training on suicide)

Seasons for Growth International Office.  
PO Box 1023  
North Sydney 2059  
Tel: 02 8912 4844  
(grief support program)

Video Education Australasia  
111A Mitchell St  
Bendigo 3550  
Tel: 1800 034282  
(for video 'Inside your Feelings: Children dealing with loss and grief')

