

Seasons for Life

Change and loss are part of life. The grief we experience is a natural response but may be overwhelming. While we usually adapt over time, there will be easy and difficult days along the path towards resilience. Loss following a suicide event in the community can be particularly challenging for young people. Understanding grief reactions and strengthening social-emotional skills can make a tremendous positive difference.



Suicide Loss

What do young people experience?

Suicide loss is a profound experience for young people. Reactions can include shock, anxiety, fear, anger, shame, rejection and sometimes relief. The intensity of these feelings and reactions can be quite overwhelming and can last much longer than young people expect. This can leave them feeling alone, misunderstood and wondering why they aren't coping.

For young people with other mental health difficulties or losses in their lives, a suicide in the school community can be an additional stressor. These students need to be identified for additional attention and support. However, large-scale research evidence shows that suicide loss does not put all students at risk of suicide.¹ Rather, the experience may improve students' attitudes towards seeking help and support. Therefore, loss events of this nature offer key learning opportunities to build relevant social and emotional skills that will support students' coping and resilience skills for the present and the future.

What educational support do young people need?

Research evidence² shows suicide-bereaved young people value educational approaches that:

- Help them understand and manage their grief;
- Upskill them with strategies to manage difficult emotions and improve coping;
- Create safe spaces led by an empathic support person;
- Connect them with other young people who understand their experiences and can offer mutual support;
- Offer a range of creative, non-verbal approaches;
- Support their sense of agency and independence.



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The Seasons for Growth Program

For over 25 years the Seasons for Growth program has been educating young people about change, loss and grief. Young people join the program with a wide range of loss experiences such as:

- bereavement (including suicide loss);
- parental separation and divorce;
- natural disaster;
- moving schools;
- parental incarceration;
- out-of-home care.

The program has a safe, structured approach, facilitated by skilled adults known as 'Companions'. Each session has specific learning outcomes. Through creative activities young people are guided to:

Learn about the grief process

Strengthen emotional literacy

Build coping skills

Make good choices

Set goals

Identify support networks

The small group experience elevates the learning and has a powerful normalising effect.³ The scaffolded group space helps them to understand that change and loss are part of life and that they are not alone. Together they share health-promoting ideas about what helps on difficult days and build the confidence to ask questions and reach out. This helps them identify positive things they can do and people they can talk to.

What about the risk of social transmission (suicide contagion)?

The Seasons for Growth groups do not focus on the suicide, death or any other specific event.

Instead, the skilled facilitators keep the focus on developing the knowledge and skills to help young people adapt to the change, loss and grief they inevitably encounter throughout their lives.

Throughout this structured, educational, small group approach, young people typically experience:

Relief:

- This emotional turmoil has a name – grief
- Grief is a process – it is painful but it won't last forever
- I'm not the only one with these experiences

Hope and Empowerment:

- I can identify my emotions
- I know who I can talk to
- There are things I can do to care for myself

Get in touch

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¹ Gould, M.S. et al. (2018). Exposure to suicide in high schools: Impact on serious suicidal ideation/behavior, depression, maladaptive coping strategies and attitudes toward help-seeking. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 15(3), 455-472.

² Andriessen, K. et al. (2022). "Finding a safe space": A qualitative study of what makes help helpful for adolescents bereaved by suicide. *Death Studies*, 46(10), 2456-2466.

³ Frydenberg, E., Muller, D., & Ivens, C. (2006). The experience of loss: Coping and the Seasons for Growth program. *The Australian Educational and Development Psychologist*, 23(1), 45-67.