

**CONVERSATIONS
MATTER**
resources for discussing suicide

Conversations Matter when communities are affected by suicide

NSW GOVERNMENT Health | hunter institute of mental health | Mental Health Commission of New South Wales | conversationsmatter.com.au

A suicide has occurred in our community: What should we know, what can we say?

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- When a suicide occurs, questions come up about who to tell and what to say.
- Research suggests that when a specific death is talked about in public settings, there is a chance that people can be negatively affected.
- While the death should not be kept a secret, some consideration should be given to how it is talked about.

This resource may talk about 'postvention'. This is a term given to interventions and supports that are offered after a suicide has occurred.

✓ **Tip 1:**

Be prepared and understand the potential risks

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- The term ‘suicide contagion’ is sometimes used to explain when a person’s knowledge of a suicide increases the likelihood of them viewing suicide as an option.
- It may be related to relieving unbearable pain following the death of another person, come from a desire to be recognised or exposure to a ‘suggested’ method.

Some settings that appear to be more at risk of further suicides occurring following one death.

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There are some forms of communication that may need extra consideration.

- Media reporting of suicide deaths has been associated with further suicides or attempted suicides.
- There is concern that the speed and reach of social media can make it difficult to control the way in which a suicide is talked about.

In Aboriginal communities, there are indicators that hearing ‘word of mouth’ about a death can increase the chances of suicidal behaviour in others who are affected.

A graphic with a purple speech bubble on a background of overlapping colored shapes (red, orange, green, blue).

✓ **Tip 2:**

Decide who to tell and how to tell them

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- People who may already be vulnerable may be adversely impacted if the conversation is not handled sensitively.
- Before discussing a suicide, ensure that those directly affected by the death have already been notified.
- Where possible it is better to conduct the conversations either one-on-one or in a small group.

People will respond to information differently and express grief in various ways, depending on their age, culture, gender and other factors.

✓ **Tip 3:**

Plan how the news of a death will be told to others

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- It is best to avoid making assumptions or announcements before a suspected suicide has been discussed with someone close to the person or a reliable source.
- It is generally best to have the discussion as soon as possible, but first think about who can make the decision about telling others.

It is not appropriate to inform others about a death without considering the family wishes and any vulnerabilities in the people you are telling.

- Informing people of a death early will help to manage any rumours or misinformation.
- Having people talking about reasons for the death based on 'half-truths' or speculation can be unhelpful.
- Informing people early will also enable you to identify people who may have been affected and need support.

Given the speed of modern communication information about the death may spread quickly via text, email, social media etc.

- You may want to group people according to their connection to the person.
- If needing to tell a group of people in a workplace or educational setting, give staff some key talking points they can use so a consistent message is given.
- It is best if information comes from a consistent spokesperson with a connection to the community.

Obtain the cooperation of friends and colleagues in not spreading unconfirmed information about the person who has died or explicit details of the death.



✓ **Tip 4:**

***Explain suicide with care
and sensitivity***

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- Using personal opinion or inaccurate information can be unhelpful to people who are grieving.
- Consider the individual circumstances of people who are part of the conversation –their age, their connection to the person, and whether you know anything about their wellbeing.

Ensure that the information you provide and the language you use is culturally appropriate. If you don't know, ask a local elder.

✓ **Tip 5:**

Avoid simplistic explanations about suicide

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- People will often want answers about why a suicide has occurred which can lead to blaming a certain person or event. Try not to reinforce these views.
- Find a balance between ensuring that suicide is not being kept secret and ensuring that the way it is talked about does not present suicide as a way of dealing with problems.

x Avoid describing suicide as ***“common”***.

X Avoid suggesting the person is in a ***“better place”*** or ***“free from pain”***

✓ **Tip 6:**

Consider the language used

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It is most important to consider the words you use when talking to groups of people.

- Certain ways of talking about suicide can alienate members of the community or contribute to suicide being presented as an option for dealing with problems.
- Avoid judgemental phrases or language which sensationalises suicide.

X Avoid terms like:

“Committed suicide”

“Successful suicide”

“Suicide epidemic”

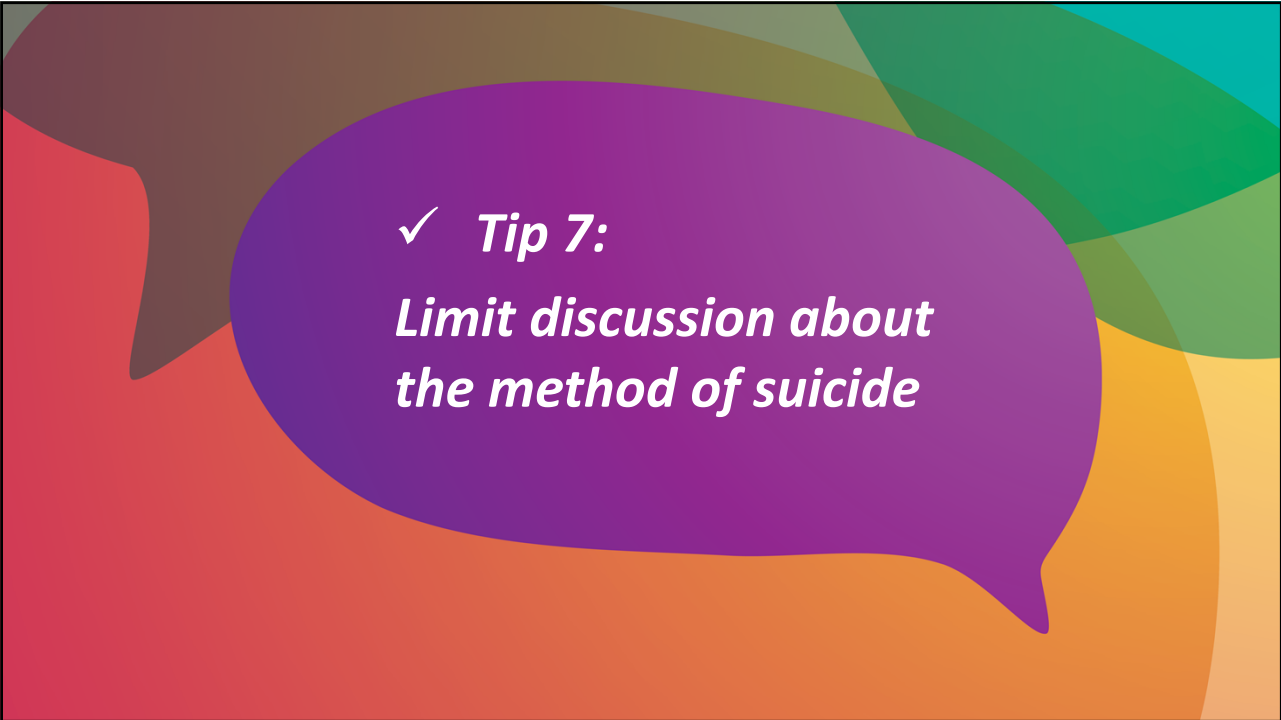
✓ Use terms like:

“Died by suicide”

“Took their own life”

“Concerning rates”

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✓ **Tip 7:**
***Limit discussion about
the method of suicide***

- Talking in graphic detail about the method of suicide can increase the risk of copying behaviour.
- Conversations that include details about the method or location of a suicide death should be avoided.
- If someone asks about the method, respond by telling them you would prefer not to go into detail and why.

Media have codes that suggest the method and location of suicide should be reported in general terms only.

It is generally agreed that the same rules should apply for community conversations.

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✓ **Tip 8:**
***Monitor and respond to
conversations online***

- Public posts that can be seen by lots of people are not ideal.
- People who are vulnerable can be adversely affected by hearing about the details of another person's death.
- Conversations online should be monitored and content and comments moderated.

While online may not be the ideal place for conversations, it does provide an opportunity to engage with people and provide accurate information and links to support.

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Tips for managing online discussions

MONITOR social media pages of the person who died in consultation with the family in case there is any inappropriate comments posted.

RESPOND to or delete any inappropriate posts on social media about the person who died and contact others who may be at risk.

PROMOTE useful information and links through social media.

CONNECT with support services to get further support and advice.

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✓ **Tip 9:**
***Memorials should be
considered carefully***

- Memorials can be a chance for people to mourn as a group and seek support.
- Public memorials for someone who has died by suicide (online or in the community) should be carefully planned and monitored to ensure the messaging does not inadvertently glamourise suicide.

Discuss where the memorial will occur, the types of information provided, how information is managed and how people who are upset will be supported.

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✓ **Tip 10:**
***Think about messages for
community forums***

- Collaborate with community leaders and services that have specific expertise in grief, loss and suicide bereavement.
- Avoid focussing on the specific suicide event as much as possible.
- Ensure that any messages presented do not increase feelings of guilt and distress in those directly affected.


Be aware that discussion about the fact that suicide is largely preventable can increase feelings of guilt and blame in those affected if not handled sensitively.

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Tips for community forums:

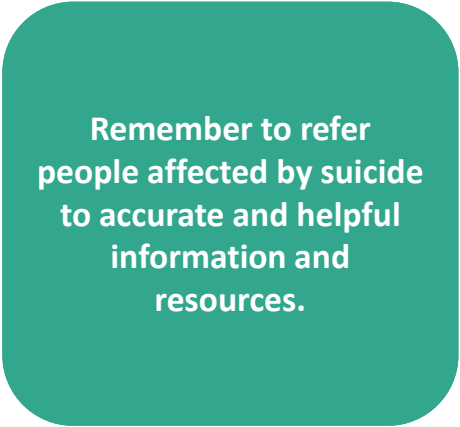
- ✓ Collaborate with a specialist service.
- ✓ Ensure the content and speakers are appropriate.
- ✓ Select a well-known and respected facilitator.
- ✓ Ensure it is culturally safe and inclusive.
- ✓ Choose a neutral venue where people will feel comfortable and safe.
- ✓ Determine whether media will be invited and plan messages.
- ✓ Ensure counsellors or other support people are present.

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A graphic featuring a purple speech bubble with a white checkmark icon, set against a background of overlapping colorful shapes in shades of red, orange, green, and blue.

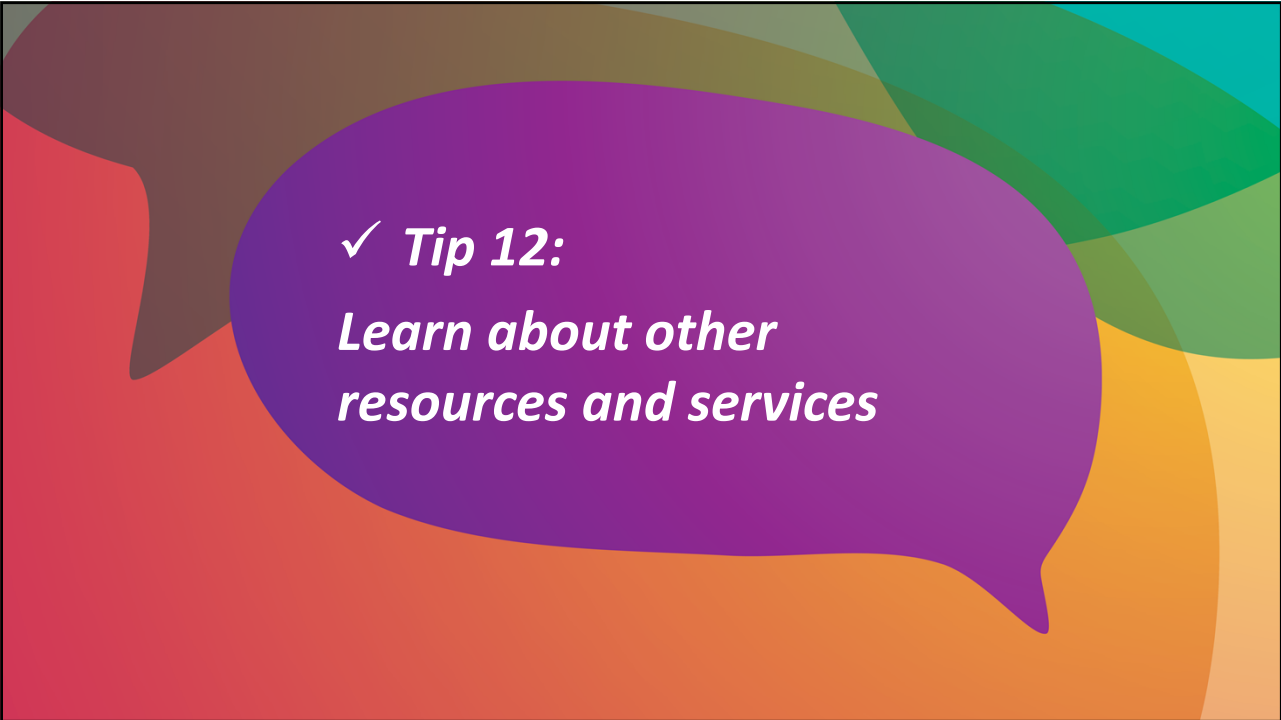
✓ **Tip 11:**
Encourage people to seek help

- Sometimes specialist bereavement services will be available to communities affected by suicide.
- Talking to a doctor, other health professional, school or college counsellor, Employee Assistance Program or a telephone or online counselling service can be a good start.

A teal rounded rectangular box containing white text.

Remember to refer people affected by suicide to accurate and helpful information and resources.

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A graphic with a purple speech bubble containing the text 'Tip 12: Learn about other resources and services'. The background consists of overlapping colorful shapes in shades of red, orange, green, and blue.

✓ **Tip 12:**
***Learn about other
resources and services***

A graphic with two white speech bubbles containing lists of tips. The background is a dark blue and purple abstract design. The left bubble is titled 'Things to remember' and the right bubble contains a list of seven tips.

Things to remember

- ✓ Be prepared and understand the potential risks
- ✓ Decide who to tell and how to tell them
- ✓ Plan how the news of a death will be told to others
- ✓ Explain suicide with care and sensitivity
- ✓ Avoid simplistic explanations about suicide

- ✓ Consider the language used
- ✓ Limit discussion about the method of suicide
- ✓ Monitor and respond to conversations online
- ✓ Memorials should be considered carefully
- ✓ Think about messages for community forums
- ✓ Encourage people to seek help
- ✓ Learn about other resources

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