

Grief: How young people with developmental disabilities might respond to a suicide



Developmental disabilities are a group of conditions that can impair a person’s physical, cognitive, behavioural and language abilities. Developmental disabilities include Autism Spectrum Disorders, intellectual disability and cerebral palsy. Developmental disabilities have a lifelong impact on an individual’s functioning.

See **headspace** School Support’s fact sheet: *Grief: How young people might respond to suicide* for general information and recommendations about supporting a young person who is grieving following a suicide. The following information provides additional and specific considerations for supporting a young person with a developmental disability.

Grief responses common to young people with developmental disabilities

Grief is the normal, natural and expected response to any sort of loss and change that is significant to a person.

Young people with developmental disabilities are vulnerable to experiencing grief. However, life experiences and personal characteristics associated with the developmental disability can have an effect on how a young person grieves and shows their grief.

Grief responses differ from person to person, however there are some responses that can characterise grief in young people with developmental disabilities (see table below).

Some individuals with complex cognitive and/or communication needs, may have difficulties in verbalising their grief and may express grief in non-verbal ways. Young people with developmental disabilities may manifest grief in unusual ways, while for others their grief may not be apparent at all. It is important to consider changes in their usual behaviours as well as new behaviours or responses.

Behavioural responses	Physical responses	Cognitive responses	Emotional responses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> challenging behaviour changes in sleeping patterns changes in eating patterns changes in energy or activity levels unhelpful coping strategies e.g. repetitive behaviours such as hand flapping, or head banging aggressive behaviours developmentally regressive behaviours e.g. bed wetting, thumb sucking an increase in existing behaviours 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> nausea headaches aches and pains other physical symptoms not explained by a medical condition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> impaired memory change in attention, e.g. increased fixation, or more easily distracted impaired information processing impaired judgement 	<p>Emotional responses vary and can occur for days, weeks, months or longer. Common emotional responses include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> anger sadness confusion jealousy anxiety and fear e.g. that they will also die or that their needs may not be met without the deceased regret guilt

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Individuals with developmental disabilities may not understand their emotions. They may also display unexpected emotional responses e.g. inappropriate giggling.

Some individuals with developmental disabilities may be unable to display their emotions with typical facial expressions e.g. blunted facial expressions may mask strong emotions.

Strategies to support individuals with developmental disabilities experiencing grief after a suicide

Help the young person to understand a death by suicide

Difficulties with abstract thinking, poor problem-solving, and impaired short-term memory can make it difficult for individuals with developmental disabilities to cope with abstract concepts such as 'suicide', 'death' or 'dying.' Their response to a death by suicide will depend on factors such as their age, developmental stage, personality, connection to the deceased, intellectual development and previous experiences of death.

Strategies to aid understanding include the following:

- Inform the person openly and honestly that a suicide has occurred. This should be done by someone close to the person and by using clear language or, where necessary, non-verbal means of communication. Use words such as die, dead and death in your explanations. Consult with parents, carers and case managers to determine the most appropriate way to inform and support the person.
- Provide young people with simple facts about the death. Assure them that death is not a punishment or a result of anyone else's thoughts, wishes or behaviours. Inform/remind young people that death is not contagious. Allow young people to ask questions and use those to guide the conversation.
- Answer questions directly and calmly. This is important in helping to destigmatise suicide and to allow the young person to explore their response. Only answer what the young person seeks to know at the time – unnecessary details may be traumatising for some young people. Be consistent in your answers. Seek specialist support about how to answer questions if you are uncertain about how to respond appropriately.
- Offer opportunities at various times for the young person to ask questions and to clarify their understanding.

Provide reassurance and support

- Be available and patient.
- Provide care, comfort and practical support.
- Reassure the young person that it is ok to have a range of feelings and it is ok to cry.
- Address fears and anxieties.
- Avoid making major decisions or unnecessary changes in their lives.
- Remember that acting out behaviours could be expressions of grief.
- Keep in mind that young people may prefer drawing, music or playing a game to talking.
- Maintain routine and encourage engagement in activities they usually find enjoyable or comforting.
- Ensure those supporting the young person are aware of what has occurred, are giving the same messages to the young person and have strategies to be able to support them appropriately.
- If a young person's grief is persistent and severe it can have a significant impact on their functioning. Supporting timely access to specialist grief counselling may reduce the impact and aid recovery. See:
 - Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement: www.grief.org.au/
 - Support after Suicide: www.supportaftersuicide.org.au
 - StandBy: www.unitedsynergies.com.au/program/standby-response-service/

For more information on suicide or support and assistance visit headspace.org.au/schoolsupport or headspace.org.au

Please refer to the **headspace** School Support *Suicide Postvention Toolkit – A Guide for Secondary Schools* for further guidance.