

# Considerations for Same Sex Attracted Young People



**Suicide is a difficult topic for many people, however for young people who identify as being part of a marginalised group such as same sex attracted (SSA), there are additional considerations to be aware of.**

Same sex attracted is a term used to describe those who experience feelings of attraction for others of their own gender. This includes people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or who do not identify with these labels but experience these feelings at some time. Australian research has shown that between 7 and 11 per cent of young people are attracted to others of their own sex or are unsure of their sexual attraction<sup>i,ii</sup>. This means, in a school of 1000 students between 70 and 110 young people may experience feelings of same sex attraction, however, they may not be known or visible as SSA.

**If a suicide affects your school community, it is important to think about how you will include SSA young people in your response.**

Vast diversity exists within and between SSA communities, influenced by age, ethnicity, geographical location, socio-economic status, etc. It is important to take this diversity into consideration when dealing with the issue of suicide. Not all young SSA people will face the same issues, however there are some commonalities.

Research shows that members of SSA communities are more likely to experience thoughts of suicide, suicide attempts and self-harm than their non SSA peers<sup>iii</sup>. It is difficult to ascertain accurate suicide mortality rates for this population, but it is estimated that SSA young people may be under-represented in suicide figures as a number of suicides and suicide attempts occur in young people who are still coming to terms with their sexuality<sup>iv,v</sup>, or who have not yet expressed their sexual orientation to family and friends. Some research suggests SSA young people are six times more likely to attempt suicide than their peers<sup>v</sup>. Furthermore, due to the higher rates of suicide in SSA populations, SSA people are disproportionately affected by the suicide of friends and community figures within their SSA community. These lived experiences can heighten the risk of suicide for SSA young people.

The increased suicide risk among SSA youth is not a consequence of their sexual identity. Rather, it is attributable to their negative social experiences associated with their sexual attraction. This includes homophobia, bullying and heterosexism, which contribute to isolation, poor social and emotional wellbeing, low levels of social support, and high levels of stigma<sup>vi</sup>. Challenging homophobia and discrimination in your school can contribute to reducing the risk of suicide for SSA young people.

If a suicide affects your school community, it is important to think about how you will include SSA young people in your response, especially if the person who died is a part of the SSA community. It may be difficult to discern whether this person is part of the SSA community. Many suicides and suicide attempts occur whilst young people are still coming to terms with their sexuality, nonetheless, it is important to consider the needs of SSA young people.

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The need for safe and public discussions about suicide is essential. The following recommendations can give some guidance on how to ensure SSA young people are included in these discussions.

Do	Don't
<p><b>Create a supportive environment for SSA young people.</b> Research shows that school can be a significantly less safe place for SSA young people than it is for their peers. Be positive about sexual diversity and celebrate the differences of the young people in the school. Think about how to include positive discussions about diverse sexuality across the curriculum and particularly in health or wellbeing subjects.</p>	<p><b>Do not highlight the fact that SSA young people are at increased risk of suicide.</b> Rather public discussions should emphasise the fact that minority groups in general may experience additional stressors and may find engaging with supportive services more challenging, and that tackling discrimination reduces suicide.</p>
<p><b>Emphasize individual and collective responsibility to support the wellbeing of SSA young people.</b> Everyone, including students, teachers and families has the responsibility to promote a culture that welcomes, accepts and supports SSA young people for who they are.</p>	<p><b>Do not ignore homophobia in schools.</b> Sexuality or gender identity does not cause feelings of despair, hopelessness and isolation, rather experiences of prejudice and discrimination do.</p>
<p><b>Encourage and facilitate help seeking.</b> There are a number of organisations, such as headspace that provide positive support and care for SSA young people who need some assistance in dealing with life events. Provide resources for students who are SSA in the library or other open spaces so they can connect with support and peers outside of school.</p>	

The following organisations and websites can provide additional resources for SSA young people:

- headspace** – [headspace.org.au](http://headspace.org.au)
- LGBTI Health Alliance** – [lgbthealth.org.au](http://lgbthealth.org.au)
- MindOut** – [lgbthealth.org.au/mindout](http://lgbthealth.org.au/mindout)
- Minus18** – [minus18.org.au](http://minus18.org.au)
- Rainbow Network** – [rainbownetwork.net.au](http://rainbownetwork.net.au)
- Safe Schools Coalition Victoria** – [safeschoolscoalitionvictoria.org.au](http://safeschoolscoalitionvictoria.org.au)
- Suicide Prevention Australia** – [suicidepreventionaust.org](http://suicidepreventionaust.org)
- Queensland Association for Healthy Communities** – [qahc.org.au](http://qahc.org.au)

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

For more information on suicide or support and assistance visit [headspace.org.au/schoolsupport](http://headspace.org.au/schoolsupport) or [headspace.org.au](http://headspace.org.au)

i Lindsay, J., Smith, A., and Rosenthal, D. (1997) *Secondary Students, HIV/AIDS and Sexual Health, 1997*. Centre for the Study of Sexually Transmissible Diseases, Monograph Series No. 3. Faculty of Health Sciences, La Trobe University: Melbourne.

ii Smith, A., Aguis, P., Dyson, S., Mitchell, A., and Pitts, M. (2003) *Secondary Students and Sexual Health: Results of the 3rd National Survey of Australian Secondary Students, HIV/AIDS and Sexual Health*. Melbourne: Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society, La Trobe University.

iii Pitts, M., Smith, A., Mitchell, A., & Patel, S. (2006) *Private Lives: A report on the wellbeing of GLBTI Australians*. Melbourne: Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society, La Trobe University.

iv Hillier, L., & Walsh, J. (1999) Abused, silenced and ignored: creating more supportive environments for same sex attracted young people. *Youth Suicide Prevention Bulletin*, No. 3, 23-27.

v Dyson, S., Mitchell, A., Smith, A., Dowsett, G., Pitts, M., & Hillier, L. (2003). Don't ask, don't tell. Report of the same-sex attracted youth suicide data collection project. Melbourne, Australia: Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society.

vi Bagley, C., & Tremblay, P. (1997) *Suicidal Behaviours in Homosexual and Bisexual Males*. *Journal of Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention*, 18(1), 24-34.