

Considerations for engaging lived experience speakers in schools



After a suicide in a school community, a speaker with a lived experience of suicide (known as a lived experience of suicide) may make contact with the school or be suggested to school leadership as a resource to talk to students.

A lived experience speaker is someone who has had suicidal thoughts, has attempted suicide, cared for someone who has attempted suicide, been bereaved by suicide, or been impacted by suicide in another way.

Lived experience speakers or staff in your school leadership team may feel they have valuable messages to share with the school community. They may be associated with a sporting group/team and students may identify with them – thus they may be considered a powerful and engaging person to convey help-seeking messages to your student body. Their goals may include:

- Improving the community's understanding of suicide
- Correcting myths and stereotypes about suicide
- Reducing fear, shame and stigma
- Encouraging people to seek support if they are experiencing suicidal thoughts or if they are concerned about someone.

There can be value in having a lived experience speaker present at your school – however there are also important considerations to think through when deciding whether this will be beneficial for your school community at this time. It is strongly recommended that your leadership and wellbeing teams have an internal discussion to assess your school community's readiness to be exposed to discussions about suicide.

The information in this resource outlines important things to consider to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the school community.

It is intended to assist the leadership team to think through this issue and may not take into account the specific circumstances relating to your school community. Contact your **headspace** School Support Consultant if you wish to talk through this information further.

Preparation and support

There is no standard way in which young people will respond to a suicide. Their needs and the way they grieve may vary greatly. Reactions may occur weeks, months or even years after the event. It is thus hard to predict how students will respond to the speaker, even if it is a long time after a death by suicide or even if there has been no suicide at the school. Stressors in the young person's life outside school may make them vulnerable at the time the speaker presents. The school may or may not be aware of these stressors.

Prior to the presentation, **DO**:

- ✓ Communicate with students and their families about the content of the presentation (including opt out information).
- ✓ Request parental consent for their young person's attendance.

- ✓ Plan for the situation where a parent refuses consent for their young person to attend.
- ✓ Communicate with staff about their role (including opt out information).
- ✓ Select days when school wellbeing staff will be present, if they are not full-time. They should attend the presentation.
- ✓ Communicate with school wellbeing staff, including plans to manage distressed students at the time of the presentation, and following it.
- ✓ Plan for an increase in demand on school wellbeing staff/resources following the presentation. Consider where additional resources might come from if demand exceeds your school's wellbeing staff availability. Discuss this with school wellbeing staff.
- ✓ Communicate information about support services, both inside and outside the school, to students and parents.
- ✓ Identify vulnerable students and staff and how to support them.
- ✓ Plan follow up support for vulnerable students and staff as required.
- ✓ Communicate with external service providers about the presentation, and the possible increase in referrals and requests for support to their service that it may trigger.

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Opting out

Some students or staff may not want to attend a lived experience speaker's presentation, for various reasons.

Some may want to attend but find that they become distressed during the presentation.

Do:

- ✓ Give both staff and students the option to attend the presentation or not.
- ✓ Identify any vulnerable students and have conversations with them and their parents prior to the event, regarding their attendance.
- ✓ Consider:
 - How will information about opting out be conveyed to students and staff?
 - Where will students go/what will they do if they opt out? What supports will be available?
 - How will students leave the presentation if they feel distressed during it? How will this be communicated to students prior to the presentation?
- ✓ Ensure that students understand how they can leave the presentation if they find it distressing. Consider how this will be managed e.g. seating placement, especially for those identified as vulnerable.
- ✓ Identify a key staff support person to check in with anyone leaving the room. Consider how it will be managed if several students leave at once. Plan for how these students will be followed up over the coming days.

Timing

- ✓ DO have an internal discussion to assess school community's readiness to be exposed to discussions about suicide.
- ✓ DO choose a time of day that allows for students to be monitored after the presentation (e.g. early in the day, and not immediately prior to a break).
- ✓ DO choose a time when supports will be available for students after the presentation (e.g. when wellbeing staff are present).
- ✓ DO choose a date early in the term so that any distressed students or staff can be followed up appropriately throughout the term.
- ✗ DON'T book a lived experience speaker in the immediate aftermath of a death in the school community.
- ✗ DON'T book a lived experience speaker at times when students and staff may be vulnerable or distressed e.g. near the anniversary of a death, while the school community is grieving another loss.
- ✗ DON'T book a lived experience speaker immediately prior to students leaving school for the day, as they may be going home to limited or no support.
- ✗ DON'T book a speaker just prior to holidays – student reactions cannot be monitored over the holidays and supports outside the home may be limited.

The speaker

- ✓ DO communicate with the speaker and find out details about the content of the presentation.
- ✓ DO ensure the speaker's message is consistent with the school's messaging. i.e. ensure that the presentation:
 - Uses clear and accurate information about suicide, mental illness, coping strategies and help-seeking
 - Encourages help-seeking
 - Conveys the complexity of suicide
 - Normalises grief responses
- ✗ DON'T engage a speaker whose presentation:
 - Discusses methods (this may increase risk in vulnerable staff and students)
 - Allocates blame
 - Provides simplistic explanations regarding motivations for suicide/ attempts
 - Contains content which they are not willing to disclose to leadership prior
 - Contains content which glamourises suicide or harmful coping strategies

Size and makeup of the group

- ✓ DO have the speaker present to small groups only
- ✓ DO ensure that there are adequate staff available to monitor students
- ✓ DO ensure the information to be presented is appropriate for the developmental stages of all those attending
- ✗ DON'T engage presenters to speak to large groups. Large assemblies limit the ability of staff to monitor students, identify who may be distressed and provide appropriate support. Large assemblies also limit the ability of students to leave the space if they are feeling triggered.

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.