

Student Material: Case Study Four: Susie

- Aim** To challenge student teachers to consider a whole school response to suicidal behaviour in the school community.
- Contents** This material is structured around five [Questions](#) relating to a scenario about Susie, a school student who has attempted suicide. Under each question there are several suggested activities to aid you in exploring the issue, which you might do alone or in a group. Your lecturer may ask you to complete certain activities as part of your assessment, or in preparation for a tutorial discussion. A list of suggested [Resources](#) is provided, and you should also refer to *Risk and Resilience: A Teacher's Guide to Mental Health*, which is part of this package and is available on CD-ROM or the Internet.
- Scenario:** Susie is a student in the school at which you teach. The school community is distressed to hear that she recently attempted to end her own life, by taking an overdose of Panadol. Fortunately, Susie's attempt was unsuccessful, but it did draw the attention of family and friends to her need for help and support. Susie's mother and Susie's friend Marianne took her to hospital for treatment.
- Note: This scenario is available on video and CD-ROM**
- Susie has taken some time away from school to sort out a few personal problems that had been getting her down. She had recently broken up with her boyfriend Paul, and had also been worrying a lot about her weight and body shape. Susie has now received some professional counselling and support and is feeling much more positive - but she is anxious about returning to school.
- Unfortunately, the situation has become a topic of gossip around the school. A note from Susie to Marianne has now been discussed by a number of school students, who are blaming the situation on Susie's ex-boyfriend Paul, and his new girlfriend. Even though Susie is feeling much better, she is worried about how those in the school community will react to her. Susie's mother is also concerned and came up to the school to talk with staff about the issue.

This case study can be explored using the following five questions.

Your lecturer or tutor may ask you to complete selected questions or activities, or to read some of this material in preparation for a tutorial discussion. You can go straight to a particular question by clicking on the hyperlink on the left.

The activities suggested are not in any particular order, they are designed to stand alone, so you can move in and out of each question as you wish. Because of this flexibility you may notice some overlap and similarities between activities and themes. However, care has been taken to include a variety of activities, with reflective tasks, written exercises and role plays.

Case Study Questions:

- Question 1:** A few people have wondered whether there was any way they could have known what Susie was planning to do. Are there particular signs or risk factors which may be associated with suicidal behaviour?
- Question 2:** How can a teacher best respond to suicidal thoughts or behaviour in a school student like Susie?
- Question 3:** Susie may have been feeling down about a few things before her suicide attempt. Are mental health problems such as depression linked to suicidal behaviour in school students?
- Question 4:** What social or cultural factors could influence the behaviour of a school student like Susie?
- Question 5:** How can the school support students like Susie, and school staff, in preventing and responding to suicidal behaviour?

Suggested Resources for Case Study Four

Your lecturer may ask you to do certain activities in this case study, or you might like to work through them yourself or with others.

You will find these resources useful for the case study, or to help you prepare for tutorials or research assignments.

Australian Drug Foundation [website]. www.adf.org.au

Child and Youth Health, South Australia. *Suicide* [Fact Sheet]. Internet: www.cyh.sa.gov.au and go to Youth Health, then Healthy Mind.

Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care (1995). *Ways Forward - National Consultancy Report on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health*. Internet: www.mentalhealth.gov.au and go to Publications & Resources

Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care (1997). *Youth Suicide in Australia: A background monograph, 2nd Edition*. Internet: Go to Publications and Resources at www.mentalhealth.gov.au.

Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care (2000). *Life: Learnings about Suicide*. Part of the National Framework LIFE: Living is for Everyone. Internet: www.mentalhealth.gov.au, go to Publications and Resources, Suicide Prevention Documents.

Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care. (2000). *MindMatters: A Mental Health Promotion Resource for Secondary Schools* [kit]. Internet: www.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters

Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care (2000). *Promotion, prevention and early intervention for mental health: A monograph*. Internet: Go to Publications and Resources at www.mentalhealth.gov.au.

Commonwealth Government of Australia. *Health Insite* [web site]. Note - this site presents facts and web links about a range of mental health topics. Internet: www.healthinsite.gov.au

Suggested Resources for Case Study Four (continued)

Your lecturer may ask you to do certain activities in this case study, or you might like to work through them yourself or with others.

You will find these resources useful for the case study, or to help you prepare for tutorials or research assignments.

Disability Resources Office, James Cook University (1998). Critical Incident Response, in *Working and Studying with a Psychiatric Disability* [Manual]. Internet: <http://www.library.jcu.edu.au/disability>

Groundwater-Smith, Cusworth and Dobbins (1988). *Teaching Challenges and Dilemmas*. Sydney: Harcourt Brace. Pages 196-210

Hunter, E. et al (1999). *An Analysis of Suicide in Indigenous Communities of North Queensland: The Historical, Cultural and Symbolic Landscape*. Internet: Go to Publications & Resources at www.mentalhealth.gov.au

Hunter Institute of Mental Health (2001). Response Ability Website - Mental Health and Suicide related reference materials, at www.responseability.org

Hunter Institute of Mental Health (2001). *Risk and Resilience: A Teacher's Guide to Mental Health*, on the Response Ability CD-ROM resources. and on the Internet at www.responseability.org

Rahamin, Dupont and DuBeau (1996). Considerations in working with adolescents who are gay, lesbian or bisexual. In Bullock, Gable and Ridky (Eds) *Understanding Individual Differences*.

Steingart, S.K. *School Psychology Online* [web site]. Baltimore, U.S. Internet: www.schoolpsychology.net

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Question 1:

A few people have wondered whether there was any way they could have known what Susie was planning to do. Are there particular signs or risk factors which may be associated with suicidal behaviour?

Learning Goals

By analysing this question, you will gain an understanding of:

- definitions of suicide and suicidal behaviour (Activity [One](#))
- myths and misconceptions about suicide (Activities [Two](#) and [Three](#))
- possible links between mental health problems and suicide or self harm (Activities [Three](#) and [Four](#)) (see also Question 3)
- warning signs and risk factors for suicidal behaviour (Activity [Five](#))

Question One Activity One:

Defining Suicidal Behaviour

Following the recent events at the school, you have been asked by the principal to consider a number of resources and develop a general definition of 'suicidal behaviour', that could be understood by school students, teachers and parents. This definition will be used in the regular school newsletter that will be sent home, discussing the school's plans for suicide prevention. You will find it helpful in preparing a definition of suicide to read the Mindmatters resource *Educating for Life* (www.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters) and to explore suicide-related reference materials on the Response Ability website (www.responseability.org).

In a group, or as a piece of written work, discuss the differences if any between the following: suicide, self-harm, para-suicide, attempted suicide, suicidal thoughts, risk taking behaviour, completed suicide, suicidal ideation. In your opinion, which of these constitute suicidal behaviour? Would you classify Susie's actions as suicidal behaviour?

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Question One Activity Two

Understanding Youth Suicide

Read the statements below and determine which of these are myths and which are true. Check your answers against the Mindmatters resource *Educating for Life* (www.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters). You could also look at suicide fact sheets on various health information sites, such as the fact sheet on the Child and Youth Health site from South Australia (www.cyh.sa.gov.au), and reference materials on the Response Ability website (www.responseability.org). Were you surprised to find any statements were myths when you thought them to be facts? If so, how do you think you may have formed these ideas about suicide?

Activity Two: Some common statements about youth suicide: True or False?

- Young people who talk about suicide are not serious about attempting it.
- If an adolescent wants to commit suicide there is nothing anyone can do to help.
- Suicide is higher in males than females.
- A young person coming out of a depressive episode in which suicide has been a concern is less likely than others are to attempt or complete suicide.
- If someone tells me in confidence that they are thinking about suicide, I am bound to keep this confidence.
- Many people who attempt or commit suicide have recently been to see a doctor.
- The rate of admission to hospital for 'attempted suicide' is higher for girls than boys so girls must not be as serious about dying.
- Suicide attempts and completions reflect a weakness or character flaw.
- The methods used for suicide in males are more lethal than females.
- Talking openly about suicide will increase the chance that an adolescent will make a suicide attempt.
- Adolescents living in rural areas are more likely to commit suicide.
- When an adolescent appears suicidal, it is best to leave the problem to professionals.
- The tendency to commit suicide is inherited.
- Not all cases of 'attempted suicide' are reported.

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**Question One
Activity Three**

**To walk in
someone else's
shoes**

It is often hard to understand that someone could consider intentionally ending their own life. Fortunately, while research suggests that *thinking* about suicide may be reasonably common, most people don't attempt it.

Imagine that Susie had submitted this poem in class before her attempt ... would you have been concerned?

The Strong One

You were the strong one,
You kept to your beliefs.
You searched for someone,
Who was out of reach.
But you gave up your search
It was because of me,
My beloved best friend,
So now I weep.

You were the strong one,
Through lies and cruel deceit.
You stood straight and tall,
And always took the heat.
You were my pillar of strength,
But the pillars have crumbled.
They no longer hold my weight
So now I fumble.

I fumble through the dark,
No hope of light, of sight.
You ruined my life by saving it,
In dying you destroyed my light.
So I sit here now, gun to my head.
I have lost my hope, my will so ...
So I choose to die instead.

Society often reacts with horror and judgemental attitudes when suicidal behaviour is discussed. Do you think this attitude makes it harder for people to reach out for help? Read the poem again and consider how it might feel to be so lost or hopeless that suicide appears to be a way of solving your problems. Make a list of situations, attitudes or emotions which might lead to feelings like this. You might like to view some fact sheets designed for young people such as the Child and Youth Health sheets from South Australia, available on the Internet at (www.cyh.sa.gov.au).

In a group or as a piece of written work, discuss the following question: How can we encourage a more compassionate response in society to those who have attempted or committed suicide?

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Question One Activity Four:

Mental Health and adolescent suicide

What is the relationship, if any, between mental health problems and suicidal behaviour? Is it possible that Susie's attempt to take her own life has been prompted by mental health problems?

You will find the *Educating for Life* module of the MindMatters materials helpful (www.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters) and also some of the suicide-related documents by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care (publications & resources at www.mentalhealth.gov.au).

List some aspects of mental health (such as thoughts, feelings, behaviours, or mental illnesses) which might be related to suicidal thinking. Compare your list to one prepared by another student teacher or group and then discuss this statement: "Anybody could be a candidate for suicidal behaviour". Do you agree or disagree?

Question One Activity Five

Warning Signs and Risk Factors

Are there recognisable warning signs or risk factors for suicidal behaviour? What is the difference between a warning sign and a risk factor? Make a list of possible warning signs and risk factors, and also any protective factors which you come across. Add to your information by comparing your lists with another student teacher or group, or in a class discussion. From your list, what signs or factors might be most obvious to: a classroom teacher? a peer? a family member? Were any of these signs or factors evident in Susie's situation?

Useful resources will include: *Educating for Life* from the MindMatters materials (www.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters); *Life: Learnings about Suicide* by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care (www.mentalhealth.gov.au); suicide fact sheets on the internet, such as the SA Child and Youth Health site (www.cyh.sa.gov.au).

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Question 2: How can a teacher best respond to suicidal thoughts or behaviour in a school student like Susie?

Learning Goals **By completing this question, you will gain an understanding of:**

- what barriers might prevent a troubled school student from seeking help (Activity [One](#))
- the most appropriate teacher response to suicidal thoughts or behaviour in a school student (Activity [Two](#) and [Three](#))
- how to respond to the topic of youth suicide in the classroom (Activity [Four](#))
- the role of the teacher in supporting a student's return to school following suicidal behaviour or self-harm (Activity [Five](#))

Question Two Activity One

Barriers to Seeking Help

Imagine that a friend of Susie's had come to you before Susie had attempted suicide, to tell you that Susie had talked about taking her own life. Susie's friend encouraged her to talk to a teacher, but Susie didn't want to.

List some of the things which might have prevented Susie from coming forward to discuss her thoughts and feelings.

For each item, consider whether there is anything that schools and teachers can do to overcome these barriers. If you need some ideas to get you started, refer to the *Enhancing Resilience* modules of the MindMatters kit (www.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters).

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Question Two Activity Two

Do's and Don'ts of a teacher's response

How should a teacher respond to a school student who is considering suicidal behaviour? Consider the following statements, and classify them into things you should do or not do. After you have done this, choose two items from each column and describe or discuss why this recommendation is important and what it might mean in practical terms if you were faced with a suicidal school student.

You might find it helpful to refer to the *Educating for Life* section of the MindMatters materials (www.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters) and also to the section about the Critical Incident Response, in the James Cook University manual about *Working and Studying with a Psychiatric Disability* (on the Internet at <http://www.library.jcu.edu.au/disability>). While this document is aimed at educators and students at university, many of the principles are also applicable to the school setting.

Classify the following statements into DO or DON'T :

- ignore the situation
- act shocked or embarrassed
- listen, show empathy and be calm
- be supportive and caring
- take the situation seriously, assessing the degree of distress
- leave them alone
- determine the risk, ask about previous attempts
- say everything will be all right
- ask about the suicide plan
- challenge the person to go ahead
- identify other supports
- panic
- use guilt to dissuade them
- offer realistic hope and inform them of resources in the school and community
- remove the means if possible
- agree with their helpless situation
- minimise the situation
- swear to secrecy
- stay with the suicidal person if the risk is high
- take action, telling others, getting them help

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Question Two Activity Three

Teacher Intervention

Prepare and act out two short role-plays, to explore how you might respond to a school student who may be considering suicide. You might like to refer to *Risk and Resilience: A Teacher's Guide to Mental Health* (www.responseability.org) and perhaps the James Cook University manual about *Working and Studying with a Psychiatric Disability* (<http://www.library.jcu.edu.au/disability>). While this is aimed at educators and students in the university sector, many of the principles are also applicable to the school setting. The reading by Groundwater-Smith *et al* may also give you some suggestions about your communication style.

1. Imagine Susie's friend had come to you beforehand, to tell you that Susie was talking about suicide. Develop a role-play in which you speak with Susie to encourage her to seek help
2. Imagine that Susie herself had come to you and said she had been having thoughts about taking her own life. She begs you not to tell anyone. Develop a role-play showing how you would respond to Susie.

In a group discussion, talk about how the situation made you feel (whether you were playing the teacher or Susie) and how you chose the teacher's response.

Question Two Activity Four

Curriculum decisions and the classroom teacher

A few weeks after Susie attempted suicide, you set a written assignment in which school students are asked to explore a social issue of their own choice. You are concerned although not surprised to find that several students have selected the topic of youth suicide.

Describe how you would respond to the following issues, and give your reasons. You could use several resources, but you will find particularly helpful information in *Educating for Life* from MindMatters (www.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters).

- Is there any danger associated with incorporating suicide within the school curriculum?
- Would you allow school students to proceed with this topic area?
- Would your decision be any different if there had not been a recent suicide attempt in the school?
- How should you respond to the school students? What exactly would you say?
- Would you respond differently if only one or two school students chose the topic, rather than several students?

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Question Two Activity Five

It's now some time after Susie's attempted suicide; she has taken some time off and has been receiving help and counselling.

Returning to School

Your school counsellor has just told you that Susie will be returning to school in one week. What can you do as her classroom teacher to:

- help Susie to cope with the return to class
- help Susie's peers to understand her behaviour and support her in her return to school
- help Susie's parents with Susie's reintroduction to school

You may find the material in the *Educating for Life* module of MindMatters helpful (www.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters).

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Question 3:

Susie may have been feeling down about a few things before her suicide attempt. Are mental health problems such as depression linked to suicidal behaviour in school students?

- Learning Goals** **By completing this question, you will gain an understanding of:**
- possible links between mental health and suicidal behaviour (Activities [One](#) and [Two](#))
 - possible links between grief or depression and suicidal behaviour (Activity [Three](#))
 - possible links between anxiety and suicidal behaviour (Activity [Four](#))
 - possible links between substance use and suicidal behaviour (Activity [Four](#))
 - possible links between psychosis or schizophrenia and suicidal behaviour (Activity [Five](#))

Question Three Activity One

Defining a mental health problem

Think about the terms "mental health", "mental health problem" and "mental illness". Write a list of all the words or ideas, positive or negative, that you associate with these terms. This is a good brainstorm to do in a group, if possible. Compare these to a list that has been prepared by another class member or group and note any significant differences.

Now read some more formal definitions from some of the recommended resources. You might consider looking in the *Understanding Mental Illnesses* module of MindMatters (www.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters) and on some of the websites listed in the resource section. The resource *Risk and Resilience: A Teacher's Guide to Mental Health* will also be helpful (www.responseability.org).

Review your earlier list: can you identify any common misconceptions about mental health? Is there a difference between a 'mental health problem' and a 'mental illness'? Do you think Susie may have had a mental health problem or illness leading up to her suicide attempt?

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Question Three Activity Two

Understanding mental health and suicidal behaviour

A school student in Susie's class has asked you about Susie's suicide attempt. She has asked what might have caused Susie's decision and "Did she have a breakdown?" You don't know how to answer this school student and have to tell them that you'll get back to them. You decide to do some research about this issue so that you can provide an informed response to the school student.

By consulting some of the recommended resources, see if you can answer the following questions:

- Is there any link between mental health problems and suicide?
- If so, are there particular mental health problems or illnesses which might increase the risk of suicidal behaviour?
- What do you understand by the term 'nervous breakdown'?
- Do young people sometimes attempt suicide or self harming behaviour when there has been no evidence of mental health problems?

Having explored these issues, write a brief synopsis of what you might say to this student.

Question Three Activity Three

The impact of Depression or Grief

A number of teachers have commented that Susie appeared depressed over a number of weeks before her attempted suicide. Another teacher stated that she was probably just a bit sad and would 'get over it'. Consider the possibility of links between depression and adolescent suicide. Prepare a mind map of the behaviours and attitudes you associate with people who are depressed. Now prepare a similar mind map of the behaviours and attitudes you might expect from someone who was considering suicide. Are there any similarities between your mind maps? Any differences? What does this tell you?

In a playground conversation with a friend of Susie's you are reminded about the death last year of Susie's sister. Do you think a difficult life event like this, which involves bereavement and grieving, might increase the risk of depression or suicide? You may find it helpful to consult the Mindmatters materials *Educating for Life* and *Understanding Mental Illnesses* (www.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters). You might also consider risk and protective factors in the document *Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health* (available at www.mentalhealth.gov.au).

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Question Three Activity Four

The impact of Anxiety or Substance use

Many mental health problems, including depression or suicidal behaviour, are closely interrelated with other problems. Susie has always been a very anxious school student, somewhat 'highly strung' and inclined to worry excessively about things. You also learn later that Susie was using alcohol quite heavily on some occasions before her attempted suicide. This new information prompts you to wonder whether anxiety or substance abuse are commonly associated with suicidal behaviour.

Explore a range of the recommended resources to answer the following:

- How might anxiety increase the likelihood of suicide or self-harm?
- How might substance use increase the likelihood of suicide or self-harm?
- What are some of the health consequences of heavy alcohol use?

The *Understanding Mental Illnesses* module from MindMatters may be helpful (www.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters), or information from the Australian Drug Foundation web site (www.adf.org.au) or the Commonwealth Government's health information web site, called *Health Insite* (www.healthinsite.gov.au).

Question Three Activity Five

Suicide and Psychosis

Susie's attempt to take her own life fortunately ended in her receiving appropriate help and treatment. However, a couple of months after Susie's attempt, a student in your school is diagnosed with schizophrenia, raising more concerns about mental health and suicide issues among the school community. A concerned school student asks you what schizophrenia is and whether the other young person will recover. Review some of the readings and websites suggested in the resource list, to answer the following questions. In particular, you may find the module *Understanding Mental Illnesses* from MindMatters helpful (www.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters).

- What is schizophrenia? Is it a split personality?
- How many people get schizophrenia?
- What is the difference, if any, between schizophrenia and psychosis?
- List three symptoms of schizophrenia.
- How is schizophrenia treated?
- Does schizophrenia/psychosis increase the risk of suicidal behaviour?

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Question 4:

What social or cultural factors could influence the behaviour of a student like Susie?

Learning Goals By completing this question, you will gain an understanding of:

- how cultural differences may influence mental health and suicidal behaviour (Activity [One](#))
- the links between body image and mental health (Activity [Two](#))
- gender differences in suicidal behaviour (Activity [Three](#))
- possible links between same sex attraction and suicidal behaviour (Activity [Four](#))
- the role of the media in understandings of adolescent suicide (Activity [Five](#))

Question Four Activity One

Cultural factors and Mental Health

If Susie was from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, what cultural considerations might be important in helping her and in facilitating her return to school? What would you need to consider to ensure your response was culturally appropriate? Are there aspects of Aboriginal cultures which might make a young person either more resilient or more vulnerable to mental health issues?

You might find the following resources helpful in considering Aboriginal mental health and suicide issues: The *Ways Forward* document from the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care (www.mentalhealth.gov.au), the *Community Matters* module of the MindMatters materials (www.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters) or the document by Hunter *et al* (www.mentalhealth.gov.au).

Consider what might be different if Susie was from another culture, perhaps an Asian or Indian background. Again, how would you ensure that your response was culturally appropriate?

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Question Four Activity Two

Self image and mental health

It emerges later that one thing that had been getting Susie down was concern about her weight and her looks, especially when her boyfriend Paul broke up with her and started going out with someone else. Even though she had been losing weight, she was getting really preoccupied with what she was eating, wouldn't eat in public, and was exercising a great deal.

Some people feel that unrealistic ideals in society cause problems like this, but research suggests the issues may be more complex. By referring to the *Understanding Mental Illnesses* module from MindMatters (www.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters) and/or some of the recommended websites (such as www.cyh.sa.gov.au or www.healthinsite.gov.au), make a comprehensive list of possible contributing factors. Include social issues, personality or family issues, and biological factors.

What do you think schools and teachers can do to help prevent eating disorders? Rather than thinking directly about eating disorders, consider some of the more general things schools can do to promote resilience, create a supportive environment and teach positive life skills. For more ideas about this approach, try *Community Matters*, *School Matters* and the *Enhancing Resilience* modules of MindMatters (www.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters).

Question Four Activity Three

Boys and girls and suicidal behaviour

There are apparent differences in the statistics for adolescent suicide between males and females. Consider some of the statistics represented in the recommended resource documents, or a similar source of reasonably recent statistics about youth suicide. You might refer to the document *Youth Suicide: A background monograph* or to material relating to the National Framework *LIFE: Living is for Everyone* (available at www.mentalhealth.gov.au). You should also review the reference materials on the Response Ability website (www.responseability.org).

Write a short piece (no more than 800 words) which summarises the differences between male and female youth suicide statistics, and the possible explanations for them. Discuss your findings with another student teacher or with a tutorial group.

What if the school student considering suicide in this scenario had been a young man? How might this change the scenario? Would your response to him have been any different from your response to Susie?

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Question Four Activity Four

Suicidal behaviour and same Sex attraction

Consider for a moment that a school student considering suicide is troubled because he or she is attracted to others of the same sex. The student is conscious of being 'different' and worries about how friends and family would react if they knew. Prepare a role play between yourself and the school student, in which you discuss their suicidal thoughts and their sexuality. In preparing the role play, you should briefly explore these issues:

Is there any link between same-sex attraction and suicidal behaviour? What issues do young people face when they experience same sex attraction? The resource by Rahamin *et al* may help you, and you should also review the relevant section of the *Community Matters* module of MindMatters kit (www.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters). You could also consider collecting information from local gay and lesbian support groups or youth centres, or you could look for information on the Internet. The SA Child and Youth Health site (www.cyh.com) has some sections on sexuality and coming out. The ReachOut! website for young people (www.reachout.asn.au) also has several relevant fact sheets. Who could assist this school student to explore their sexuality and to address their thoughts about suicide? List a few individuals or services who might help, and incorporate these options in your role play.

Question Four Activity Five

The media and adolescent suicide

Examine the newspaper article provided. Some people believe articles about suicide should not be published, or should be careful not to glamorise the act or be explicit about the method used, as this might increase the risk of suicide among vulnerable people. In a group, or as a piece of written work, discuss the following:

- Should this article have been published so prominently, with the photo and lead-in on the front page? You may notice the journalist's 'justification' in the early paragraphs.
- What messages does the article send about the links between mental health and suicide? Are these accurate?
- The media is often criticised for portraying youth suicide as a tragic social phenomenon which is difficult to prevent. What messages does this article contain about suicide prevention?
- Compare this article with *Achieving the Balance*, the Commonwealth's guidelines for reporting mental health and suicide, available on the internet. Has the journalist adhered to the guidelines? To access relevant guidelines, see www.mentalhealth.gov.au and follow links to Publications, then Media, OR go straight to a *summary* of guidelines at: <http://www.mentalhealth.gov.au/mhinfo/ems/pdfs/qrefsuic.pdf>

Having analysed this article, how much do you think the media might influence society's understanding of youth suicide? Youth suicide is a very emotional issue - how can you encourage young people to be careful in the way they interpret media reports?

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Question 5: How can the school support students like Susie, and school staff, in preventing and responding to suicidal behaviour?

Learning Goals

By completing this question, you will gain an understanding of:

- a whole school approach to suicide prevention (Activity [One](#))
- issues involved in the inclusion of suicide in the school curriculum (Activity [Two](#))
- a whole school approach to responding to a suicide or attempted suicide (Activity [Three](#))
- how a school can support the return to school of a student who has attempted suicide (Activity [Four](#))
- school policies, procedures and plans that are needed to support the mental health of staff (Activity [Five](#))

Question Five Activity One

School-based Suicide Prevention

Following Susie's suicide attempt, the school community has become much more concerned with trying to prevent suicidal behaviour. Under each of the following headings, write a few notes about what a school and its teachers can do to help prevent suicide. You may find the *Educating for Life* and *Enhancing Resilience* modules from MindMatters helpful (www.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters).

- Creating a safe and supportive environment
- Promoting resilience
- Using the curriculum
- Counselling and support services
- Professional development for teachers

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Question Five Activity Two

Suicide and the school curriculum

A colleague at another school has heard about Susie's story and is considering teaching about suicide as part of the Health and Personal Development curriculum. What would you suggest? What resources could you recommend for your colleague? Consult the Mindmatters booklet *Educating for Life* in considering your response (www.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters).

Now consider your syllabus area. Read through a copy of the current syllabus for your subject area and determine the possibility of discussing mental health issues as part of this syllabus. Discuss this with a group or with another member of your class.

Question Five Activity Three

Critical Incident Plan

A suicide or attempt within the school community is one example of an incident which may prompt schools to refer to their own Critical Incident Plan. The Principal of your school has asked you to prepare a draft Suicide Response section, which will help the school to manage suicidal behaviour appropriately. This plan will form one section of the school's broader Critical Incident Plan, which provides guidelines for the school community. Your broad draft will be discussed at the next staff meeting.

Start by listing the major headings in the suicide response plan, and write a few notes under each which summarise the key considerations. You may find it helpful to use *Educating for Life* from the MindMatters material (www.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters). You could also look at the James Cook University manual about *Working and Studying with a Psychiatric Disability* - although it is designed for universities, it has some good general principles. (<http://www.library.jcu.edu.au/disability>).

You should consider the following issues:

- responding to a student who is seriously considering suicide
- the school's immediate response to a suicide or attempt
- dealing with enquiries from the public or the media
- supporting staff and school students after a suicide or attempt
- facilitating a school student's return after attempted suicide

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Students' Resources for Teacher Education

Question Five Activity Four

Susie's return to School

Susie's mother has come to the school because Susie is reluctant to return to class. How can the school help Susie's return? What policies or plans are recommended for schools, which might be useful? The *Educating for Life* module from MindMatters should give you some ideas (www.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters).

Conduct a possible role-play between Susie's mother and the school principal. What support could the school principal suggest? Who would be involved in providing this support?

Question Five Activity Five

School Staff and Suicidal Behaviour

You have become concerned about another staff member who has hinted that they are starting to think that suicide is an option to cope with their current situation. They commented that maybe Susie had the right idea after all.

What strategies and policies should a school have in place to cope with this contingency and support this staff member? How can schools ensure that staff are supported, not only as part of a critical incident plan but as part of the everyday mental health of the school?

You might find some helpful ideas in the MindMatters module *Educating for Life* (www.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters). Otherwise, think about the sort of environment and policies which support the mental health of school students (for example in the *Enhancing Resilience* modules of MindMatters) and build on these principles to consider what might be needed to support the mental health of teachers.

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