

Warning Signs for Suicide Contagion in a Community

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When a suspected suicide or a serious suicide attempt occurs in a community, there is the possibility that this may lead to further suicide attempts or suicides. This occurs through the process of contagion, where suicidal behaviour influences others to also engage in suicidal behaviour. After a suicide, this risk is thought to be greatest in the first few months, and is especially elevated in the first month. However, the risk of suicide contagion in a community may continue to be elevated for some time, including around the one year anniversary of a suicide. Adolescents and young adults are especially vulnerable to the effects of suicide contagion and this vulnerability can extend years after the event which impacted them; although suicide contagion is also known to occur in older populations.

Warning signs for suicide contagion in a community may include (but are not limited to):

- An increase in suicide attempts, suicides or other suicidal behaviour for the community of concern than would otherwise be expected over a given time period.
- Known links between those who died by suicide and those who make suicide attempts (e.g., they belong to same peer or social group, school or alternative education provider, workplace, club or gang).
- Similarities between those who have died by suicide and those who have made suicide attempts (e.g., same gender, ethnicity, age, method).
- Those who have died by suicide took their lives at the same location (e.g., same bridge, cliff, beach or park) creating a “hotspot”.
- Evidence of concerning content in texts between members of the community about the suicides or suicide attempts.
- Gatherings of unsupervised young people often at makeshift shrines or graves especially if alcohol or other substance use is involved.
- Concerning activity in the community related to suicide (e.g., insufficiently monitored or supported highly emotive public meetings or memorials for the deceased, expressions of suicidal ideation or other suicidal behaviour on social networking sites).
- A heightened emotional atmosphere in the community (e.g., people are talking about the deaths at the supermarket, on the streets or other community gatherings).

If any of these warning signs are noted, please contact your local health or mental health services and Community Postvention Response Service (www.casa.org.nz or 0800448908)

For information on CPRS and how CPRS can help, contact us and see also the CPRS Information sheet.

References:

- Abrutyn, S., & Mueller, A. (2014). Are suicidal behaviours contagious in adolescence? Using longitudinal data to examine suicide suggestion. *American Sociological Review*. Published online 31 March 2014.
- Barker, E., O’Gorman, J., & De Leo, D. (2014). Suicide around anniversary times. *Omega*, 69, 305-310.
- Hazell, P. (1993). Adolescent suicide clusters: Evidence, mechanisms & prevention. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 27, 653-665.
- Larkin, G.L., and Beautrais, A.L. (2012) *Geospatial Mapping of Suicide Clusters in New Zealand*. Te Pou o Te Whakaaro Nui.
- Swanson, S. A., & Coleman, I. (2013). Association between Exposure to suicide and suicidality outcomes for youth. *Canadian Medical Association Journal*. DOI:10.1503/cmaj.121377.