

If you discover or witness a suicide death

If you discover a person's body after a suspected suicide death, or witness that death, you can find yourself caught up in circumstances beyond your control. Traumatic events like this can have a lasting impact. They are shocking and distressing. What you saw or heard may be difficult to deal with. This is especially true if the person was someone you knew or were close to.

Report what's happened

Call police on 111. Police will ask you to provide a witness statement. A police officer will write down or record what you saw, heard, or know. After such a traumatic experience, people's memories of what happened can be a bit foggy or uncertain. Take your time and do your best.

- What you say must be true. Giving police false information is a serious matter.
- You'll be asked to read through your statement to check it's correct and to sign it to confirm it's an accurate report of what you witnessed.

As the investigation continues, you may be re-interviewed and asked to give evidence as a witness in a coronial inquiry. Your coronial case manager will explain what this involves.

Common reactions

Everyone will react differently and in their own way.

You are likely to experience a wide range of strong reactions. Common first reactions include shock, disbelief, horror, fear, helplessness, sadness, and anger. People can also find themselves feeling guilty and wondering... *"Was there anything I/we could have done to have stopped this from happening?"* These are all completely normal reactions to a traumatic situation.

Physically, you may find your body reacts in different ways: shakiness, nausea, a racing heart, a tight chest, body aches, headaches, difficulty sleeping, changes in appetite, uncontrollable sobbing or crying, or needing to sit or lie down.

Existing health conditions might worsen. You might find you are exhausted. It may be hard to remember things or to concentrate. Some people find they stay on alert and feel anxious in case something like that happens again. You might withdraw from others or need to be near others more. You might find you're more irritable than usual.

You might feel curious to know more about the person, if you didn't know them and want to make sense of what happened and why.

You may have recurring thoughts or memories about what you saw or heard, or experience nightmares or flashbacks, as if it were happening to you again. Often people try to avoid anything that brings back bad memories.

Flashbacks

A flashback feels as though you're back in the middle of your traumatic experience or reliving some aspect of it. This can be in vivid detail. During a flashback it can be difficult to connect back to the present and to what is real. To better understand flashbacks and ways to manage them, download the factsheet *Dealing with Flashbacks*. You can find it on the [Useful Resources](#) page on the [After a Suicide](#) website.

A blessing of the site

A blessing of the site where a person has died is very important for some families, whānau, and communities. If you would like to attend a site blessing, or if you are a close family member and want to arrange one, you could contact your local church or faith centre, marae, cultural leaders, or the officer in charge of your case.

Dealing with media interest

As a discoverer or a witness, media may seek comments from you, or interview you. Media can be demanding and intrusive. Our factsheet, *After a suicide – Managing media interest*, provides information on dealing with the media and useful tips for wisely using social media at this time. Download it from the [Useful Resources](#) page on the [After a Suicide](#) website.

The experience can be overwhelming – and the memories are not easily forgotten.

Looking after yourself is important

Eat healthy food. Drink enough water. Keep up routines and get good rest and sleep, as best you can. Do simple exercise. Take slow, deep breaths. Spend time with people you can relax with, or with a pet. Spend time in nature. If you find keeping busy helps, find useful tasks to do. See a doctor if you're unwell, extremely anxious, or are having difficulty sleeping. Draw on any cultural or spiritual beliefs you may have. Accept caring offers from others if that would help. Encourage others who have also been affected to do the same.

Talk about what happened

When you're ready, talk to someone you trust about what happened. This could be a trusted family or whānau member, a close friend, your doctor, a counsellor, a psychologist, a respected elder, or rangatira. If any aspects of your story are particularly disturbing, speak to a professional. Talking honestly about how things are affecting you can help release the stress and emotional tension inside.

Tips for coping with your reactions

Your reactions are normal responses to a traumatic event. Even though it may not feel like it now, these reactions will gradually lessen in the weeks and months to come.

If they don't lessen, or get worse and disrupt your daily life and work, it is best to seek the help of a professional who has experience supporting people after trauma. Some people may, for example, develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). If you have concerns, see your doctor, a counsellor, or a psychologist.

If your reactions trouble you

- Visit your doctor. They can do a health check and support you with any ongoing issues, such as sleeplessness, anxiety, flashbacks, or depression.
- Find a doctor, counsellor, or psychologist here <https://mentalhealth.org.nz/help/accessing-mental-health-services>
- You can access Aoake te Rā, a free suicide bereavement service that offers between six and eight counselling sessions with trained therapists. To help with referrals, email them at referrals@aoake-te-ra.org.nz, or leave a message on 0800 000 053 containing your name and contact details.



If the discoverer or witness is a child or young person

If the discoverer or witness is a child or young person, they will need loving support and understanding from caring adults. They may also need help from professionals with trauma support skills, even if they didn't know the person who has died.

Supporting a child or young person who may have discovered or witnessed a suicide

In a quiet place, gently ask them what happened. Keep it simple. They may not remember much at first and it may come back to them later. They might not want to talk because they're in shock or very frightened. Just be with them quietly instead.

Let them know you understand it was scary for them, and they're safe.

This is a very traumatic and overwhelming experience, and it could be a troubling time for them. They're likely to have some physical reactions – feeling sick, experiencing headaches, stomach aches, shakiness, bedwetting, or reduced appetite. Difficult memories could keep coming back. They might find it hard to sleep and could have bad dreams about what they saw.

Arrange for them to see a doctor, counsellor, or psychologist to help them work through any negative effects of what they have experienced.

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