

# Discussing sensitive issues: A guide for educators using Mindframe resources

This resource outlines the various steps you should consider when delivering education that may involve discussions about suicide or mental health concerns. The following checklist is designed to be used during the planning, delivery and post training stages.

- Model supportive behaviour
- Check in with your university's counselling service
- Let colleagues know you're going to be discussing these topics in class
- Review existing resources that support people holding group discussions about suicide
- Advise students in advance of the date/s on which you'll be discussing sensitive issues
- Ensure students have access to support services and help-seeking information
- Establish rules for class discussion
- Prepare responses for student disclosure or problematic discussion
- End with a discussion on self-care
- Have a plan for dealing with any student that may become distressed in class
- Follow up with any student who becomes distressed
- Maintain a connection with the student who has experienced distress
- Provide support to students who choose to research these topics
- Be familiar with your institution's policies



## Introduction

Suicide and mental health concerns are prominent public health issues in Australia and are important topics to cover in communication-related courses in the university setting.

However, discussing sensitive issues can be difficult for educators and students. Talking about suicide and mental health concerns can bring up certain feelings or reactions and may be distressing for those who have a lived or living experience of these issues.

Ensuring effective supports are in place is vital, however, determining which supports are most effective in each situation has become more difficult since 2020, when COVID-19 lockdowns forced educational facilities to fully embrace online learning.

Since becoming the preferred learning mode, online university platforms and communication channels have provided students more access to their lecturers and tutors than ever. This additional communication may be beneficial to students, with research suggesting it's needed given online learning may result in increased stress and downstream negative academic consequences<sup>1</sup>. However, many educators have reported that online communication channels have also led to substantially increased workloads and negative impacts on their wellbeing.

To protect themselves from burnout, educators are advised to establish boundaries for students using digital communication channels, and to consider additional student supports such as peer-chat sessions. The following suggestions for educators discussing sensitive issues with students are applicable for both face-to-face and online learning.

### 1. Model supportive behaviour

Educators play an important role in showing students how to stay connected and engaged, promoting happiness, and in preventing burnout, moral injury and mental health injury. By holding regular meetings with students during internships, maintaining contact via university chat groups, and using humour and empathy when possible, students are able to feel supported and 'in it together'.

Discussing sensitive issues can be difficult for both educators and students. Educators can support students to understand their sense of purpose by providing them with reminders that telling these stories is important, and that journalism and public relations are important facets in the creation of social changes. However, it is vital that both the student and the educators also look after themselves.

### 2. Preparation

#### Check in with your university counselling service

Consider giving the university counselling service prior notification that there may be an increase in student enquiries. Their staff may be able to provide support service information you can share in class, or offer additional support suggestions such as apps, websites and other resources.

A member of the counselling team may log-in/attend the first class where these issues are discussed to talk to students about their service, flag warning signs to look out for, and provide advice on self-care and disclosing personal stories. If this is not possible, use a presentation slide, handout or service brochure to share contact details for the service along with those of any other relevant nearby services.



## Let colleagues know you'll be discussing these topics in class

Your colleagues may have useful suggestions or be aware of other university-based stressors that could challenge student resilience around the time of your class (e.g. assignment deadlines). This discussion can also provide a safety net for your students, as other educators can be on the lookout for changes in student behaviour or signs of distress.

## Review existing resources that support people holding group discussions about suicide

There are various resources available to support people holding group discussions about suicide, such as the [Conversations Matter](#) resources. It can be helpful to reflect on these before teaching the class.

If you have difficulty with a particular topic because of your own past experiences, you may like to invite a colleague or a guest lecturer to deliver the material for you. If you are delivering the content yourself, plan some self-care such as a relaxing activity or catching up with a friend after the discussion. It's also good to plan for your own help-seeking, if required. The [Mindframe](#) portal has information on [self-care](#) and [help-seeking](#).

## 3. Introducing the topic

### Advise students in advance of the date/s you'll be discussing sensitive issues

Prior notice gives students time to address concerns with you and make arrangements for specific supports. Invite students to drop in or call you if they feel uncomfortable about the class or completing a related assignment. Explain that while the subject is important, alternative assessments may be possible and that support is available. This is preferable to them choosing not to attend the class or not participating fully, and gives you an opportunity to direct them towards appropriate support.

This notice period also gives students time to prepare for discussing these issues. We encourage educators to disseminate [Mindframe's](#) page on [student wellbeing](#) which includes tips for self-care and discussion guidelines. These guidelines emphasise that group members need to be supportive and respectful when discussing these issues. They discourage students from disclosing distressing personal experiences (such as a history of mental health concerns or suicidal behaviour) during the lecture or tutorial and invite them to talk with you or a counsellor if experiences are worrying them. It is important to assure students that having an emotional reaction to confronting issues is not unusual, but if they become more distressed or have continuing worries, they should discuss their feelings with a friend, counsellor, or another professional such as their doctor.



## Ensure students have access to support services and help-seeking information

It can be helpful to remind students of crisis services, even if they're not in a crisis but still need someone external to talk to. Provide students with the phone number, website and location of the university counselling service as well as contact details for helplines open 24/7 (e.g. Lifeline), to ensure they can access support for themselves or friends. Along with phone services, help-seeking avenues you can share may also include text-message based services, downloadable resources and online community forums. The *Mindframe* portal has a list of relevant support services to share with your students.

## Support services to consider sharing during and after sessions

**Lifeline:** 13 11 14 | Text 0477 13 11 14 | [lifeline.org.au](http://lifeline.org.au)

**Suicide Call Back Service:**  
1300 659 467  
[suicidecallbackservice.org.au](http://suicidecallbackservice.org.au)

**Beyond Blue:** 1300 224 636  
[beyondblue.org.au/forums](http://beyondblue.org.au/forums)

**MensLine Australia:**  
1300 789 978  
[mensline.org.au](http://mensline.org.au)

**StandBy Support After Suicide**  
1300 727 247

**Kids Helpline:**  
1800 551 800  
[kidshelpline.com.au](http://kidshelpline.com.au)

**headspace:** 1800 650 890  
[headspace.org.au](http://headspace.org.au)

**ReachOut:** [ReachOut.com](http://ReachOut.com)

**Head to Health:** Mental health portal  
[headtohealth.gov.au](http://headtohealth.gov.au)

**Life in Mind:** Suicide prevention portal  
[lifeinmind.org.au](http://lifeinmind.org.au)

**SANE:** 1800 187 263 (10am-10pm)  
online forums: [saneforums.org](http://saneforums.org)

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander:** [13YARN.org.au](http://13YARN.org.au) | 13 92 76

**Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and/or intersex:**  
1800 184 527 | [qlife.org.au](http://qlife.org.au)

**Culturally and linguistically diverse:** [embracementalhealth.org.au](http://embracementalhealth.org.au)

## 4. Facilitate discussion

### Establish rules for class discussion

When discussing an issue in class, set out rules at the beginning of the session to create a supportive environment where sensitive topics can be discussed safely. Some good guidelines include:

- The classroom (online or in person) is not the place for personal disclosure. It may be useful to re-emphasise the university's counselling services and reshare help-seeking information.
- Consensus is not necessary but respect for the views and emotions of others is essential.
- Inappropriate comments will not be tolerated. This may include negative stereotypes and jokes about mental health concerns, suicide or other sensitive issues.
- Ensuring students know what to do if you need to leave the physical or online room. Agreed protocols may include providing a direct message with an explanation when online; or giving a thumbs up if okay or leaving a physical learning space with a friend if upset or in distress.

It is important students are aware of your duty of care and your mandatory reporting commitments should certain information be disclosed. These responsibilities may differ if students are under the age of 18.

## Prepare responses for student disclosure or problematic discussion

Regardless of your preparation, discussions still have the potential to become problematic. Having some prepared responses may help you feel more confident facilitating discussion on these sensitive issues. Some examples of responses you may want to use include:

- “Thank you for sharing your ideas. I’d like to remind everyone about the language guidelines that we discussed at the beginning of the session. The suggestions in that list give you safe and sensitive alternatives to some of the terms used in the past.”
- “Thank you for sharing your experience. I’m happy to discuss that further with you after class, but would like to move forward with the hypothetical scenario set out here.”

## End with a discussion on self-care

A good way to end a discussion on sensitive topics such as suicide and mental health concerns is to do a short session on [wellbeing](#) and [self care](#). A proactive emphasis can help students feel less drained and more hopeful after the class. It is also a good reminder for students that actively working on their own wellbeing can help them deal with the stressors of their university education. One example of a self-care session can be asking each student to choose one self-care activity to do after class.

Have your own examples ready to share, and remind students that self-care can be:

- Physical
- Professional
- Emotional/ relationships
- Psychological/spiritual.





## 5. Offer support

### Have a plan in the event that a student becomes distressed in class

Avoid attracting attention to any student/s who become distressed during the class. A student may feel more comfortable quietly leaving the room or logging off (after sending you a private direct message), particularly if there is a large group. In a smaller tutorial, set a task for the rest of the group and if you're in person speak discreetly with the student. If teaching in an online setting, send a direct message offering to chat with the student after the tutorial.

Whether the student chooses to leave or stay, try to make contact with them after class to offer support and refer them to additional channels if needed. If you have trouble reaching them, it may be helpful to connect with their other teachers or even their close friends to ensure that the student is receiving appropriate support.

### Follow up with students who experience distress

Follow up with any student who does become upset as quickly as possible, preferably in person rather than by telephone. However, if the lesson was delivered remotely, following up via online channels may be more appropriate. Listen with understanding and empathy but avoid becoming too involved. It is also important not to react emotionally or judgementally to anything the student may express or disclose.

Resist the temptation to offer solutions, just listen. Reflect back what they say to make sure you have understood and to show empathy. If the student's work may be affected, work with them to explore managing these issues, prioritising the student's agency. You can contact your institution's counselling service or a disability liaison unit for advice on appropriate management options.

If the situation is complex or if the person is very distressed, it is best to refer them to talk with a professional such as the university's counselling staff. If the person is in immediate danger of harming themselves or others, call emergency services.

### Maintain a connection with the student

Maintaining contact with the student is important, even if other people have taken over the main role of helping them to deal with their issues. Find a quiet moment to ask whether the situation has improved. Encourage the student to persevere or seek further help if necessary. Continue to negotiate with the student, the counsellor and your colleagues about any implications for the student's academic progress and outcomes.

### Provide support to students who choose to research these topics

Make sure that students who choose to research topics such as suicide or mental health concerns in more depth have adequate support from a lecturer or tutor. Sometimes people are drawn to such topics because of their own distress or unresolved experiences. Research or individualised projects can often be quite isolating, so it is important to check in with students who are doing in-depth work on these sensitive issues. Build regular check-ins and self-care into the project plan.

## 6. Understand academic issues

### Be familiar with your institution's policies

Students who are having personal difficulties may become concerned about their ability to complete their academic requirements, particularly if they take time away from the course or feel unable to deal effectively with a particular topic area.

Make sure you are familiar with your institution's policies regarding special consideration. Reassure the student that this issue need not affect their academic grades and that allowances can be made for difficult circumstances. This might mean taking steps such as delaying or adjusting the assessment process. Details can be negotiated at a later time, but early reassurance may be an important step in encouraging the student to seek help. Make sure you are aware of any relevant paperwork that needs to be completed along with any medical certificates or other documentation the student may be required to provide.

### References

1. Akpınar, Ezgin. (2021). The Effect of Online Learning on Tertiary Level Students' Mental Health during the Covid19 Lockdown. *The European Journal of Social & Behavioural Sciences*. 30. 3300-3310. 10.15405/ejsbs.288.
2. Bélair-Gagnon, V., Holton, A.E., Deuze, M., & Mellado, C. (Eds.). (2023). *Happiness in Journalism* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003364597>