

WINE VVS

Responding to student suicide is a difficult topic for schools, but the approach has evolved

By Simon Royal

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When I was 15, a boy from my high school vanished.

He went home on Friday and didn't return on Monday.

Not a public word was uttered, but there was no mystery about it either.

In country towns news travels swiftly, so everyone knew he had ended his life.

Often when we hear that sort of news it's the odd details we recall — what we were doing, what the weather was like.

I remember none of those things, but I've never forgotten the teacher's furious warning not to talk about — or ask questions about — the boy's death.

It was that rigid wall of silence that really made him disappear.

One of his best friends, Richard Fechner, still recalls it vividly some 40 years on.

"It was almost as if he'd gone from that moment, he was erased in a way," Mr Fechner said.

"As a bunch of 15-year-old boys we used to meet before school at another friend's home.

"I remember walking into the room on that Monday morning with a smile, saying 'what's up guys?' and they just looked at me and said 'he's dead'. It was that abrupt."

If you or anyone you know needs help:

- Lifeline on 13 11 14
 - Kids Helpline on 1800 551 800
 - MensLine Australia on 1300 789 978
 - Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467
 - Beyond Blue on 1300 22 46 36
 - Headspace on 1800 650 890
 - QLife on 1800 184 527
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PHOTO: Richard Fechner as a boy and as a man. (ABC News: Taryn Southcombe)

A culture of silence

In 1978, in the Barossa Valley, suicide wasn't discussed openly.

For that matter, it wasn't discussed much in private either.

The polite and kind response was to ignore it and carry on as usual, which is exactly what the school did.

While that undoubtedly achieved a veneer of politeness, it was anything but kind.

Mr Fechner's other memory is of a bunch of confused teenage boys, searching alone for answers.

"We asked ourselves why? We questioned whether we'd missed something, did we contribute? We were searching for understanding," he said.

"I think we were actively discouraged from going to the funeral. I know I didn't go. I don't think many, if any, did.

"Without that external support for us as a group of friends to seek, resolve and understand we just packed it up, packed it away and moved on."

Silence isn't helpful, expert says

The silence always struck me as an injustice.

We shouldn't let 15-year-old children go without a word.

Fortunately it seems the old school silence has been replaced by a culture of greater openness.

Much of that has been shaped by Ann-Marie Hayes, who heads the South Australia Education Department's Child Development Unit.

"People have understood that silence like the way of the 1970s isn't that helpful," Ms Hayes said.

"Clarity and communication with parameters is really critical for keeping everyone safe."

She works closely with Leanne Davies, who leads a specialist group of social workers.

They go into a school after a student suicide, or indeed any sudden or accidental death — kids and schools are never left to go it alone.



PHOTO: Leanne Davies and Ann-Marie Hayes help school communities deal with suicide. (ABC News: Simon Royal)

Ms Davies said the language used in such an emotionally charged atmosphere was crucial.

"We don't generally call it a suicide, we'd call it a traumatic death," she explained.

"We don't need to unnecessarily alert kids to the fact it was a suicide, and also we are not coroners, it's up to them to decide.

"For some families it's still seen as shameful, less so than in the past, but it's still there."

Small groups rather than whole-of-school assemblies are used to break the news.

That's because of the difficulties in pitching things to different age groups, and monitoring individual children's reactions.

Remembrance a subtle and sensitive issue

Both educators emphasise the need to avoid permanent memorial structures.

"There are lots of issues with permanent memorials," Ms Davies said.

"Say a tree is planted ... families spend 20 years driving past that tree, thinking about their child and then it gets cut down for a car park."

Ms Hayes argues there's also risk to vulnerable teenagers in creating something that might, inadvertently, become a shrine.

"The risk in idealising things is you get an increase in suicidal ideation," Ms Hayes said.

"We call it contagion, it's a well-documented risk.

"You don't want to sensationalise or overdo it, which is why there are very clear guidelines ... we are walking a line of balance between the needs of the family and the needs of the school community."

In a way, balance is what drove this article.

I asked the boy's family if they wanted to speak about him.

They declined, which is why his name hasn't been used.



PHOTO: Mr Fechner recalls his friend when he meets people with the same first name. (ABC News: Taryn Southcombe)

But a family nursing their grief in private, and a public acknowledgement of someone's life and death, are not mutually exclusive — we can do both.

Now living in Sydney, with teenage kids of his own, Mr Fechner has never forgotten his friend, or the things he'd wanted to say.

"After all these years, I always think of him when I meet someone with the same first name," he said.

"[My friend's] family probably aren't aware of the insight and impact he left with many other people, myself included.

"I think what happened to him made me more aware of the emotional frailty we all have.

"He mattered to me ... we didn't get the chance to say that to him, or his family — that he mattered, and that he left a legacy."

Topics: suicide, death, community-and-society, education, schools, educational-resources, teachers, sa, adelaide-5000