

# Witnessing a suicide

Anyone who is exposed (directly or indirectly) to a suicide may experience stress and trauma reactions.

Although you may or may not have known the person who died, all people can experience trauma and stress reactions. **Stress and trauma responses are normal reactions to a distressing event.**

Everyone's experience of traumatic events will be different. How people are affected, cope and recover varies greatly.

When someone dies by suicide, your fight, flight or freeze response may be activated. Your safety, the safety of family, friends and others, and the safety of the person who died has been threatened.

Some people feel a sense of helplessness, isolation or a loss of power and control. Common reactions can include nightmares and difficulty sleeping, heightened fear or worry, irritability, feeling detached and feeling slower than normal.

Experiencing some or all or none of these reactions is normal. There is no set timeline for how long they will last but usually, these reactions decrease over time.

## Support Idea!

*Witnessing a Suicide* might be a useful handout to provide to those impacted. Resources are available to download and print at [www.standbysupport.com.au/resources/](http://www.standbysupport.com.au/resources/)

**Fight, Flight and Freeze responses are your body's normal reactions, activated when something poses a real or imagined threat to your safety. This automatic response is your brain's way of helping you react to a stressful situation.**

### Fight: Confront the threat

**Physical:** Hands fisted, tight jaw, anger, urge to stomp/kick/smash things, grinding teeth, wakefulness, nausea and crying.

**Feeling:** You may experience strong reactions to small irritations; an unusual desire to be physical or a strong feeling you need to be alert or 'on'.

### Flight: Outrun or escape the threat

**Physical:** Restless legs, shallow breathing, fidgety, wide/darting eyes, 'jumpy' or easily startled by loud noises and/or sudden movements, agitated if contained.

**Feeling:** You may experience a strong a sense of having to remain alert, needing to vacate a room or place, or have little to no desire to eat.

### Freeze: Decide you cannot confront or outrun the threat.

**Physical:** Holding your breath, feeling cold or having pale skin, pounding heart, stiffness/lack of normal movement, shutting down physically.

**Feeling:** You may experience a strong desire to be alone or afraid of being alone, feelings of dread, feeling 'stuck' or feeling 'numb'.



This mini resource is part of the **StandBy Support After Suicide Toolkit: Postvention Response for Site Owners and Leadership**. For more information or to download the full toolkit [www.standbysupport.com.au/resources/](http://www.standbysupport.com.au/resources/)

**StandBy** – an initiative funded by the Australian Government

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