



# Funerals in Aotearoa after a death by suicide

Guidance for whānau, kaumātua,  
funeral directors, celebrants and faith leaders



# Ruia te pō, ka ao, ka awatea

## Move from the darkness into the light

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Waerea, Waerea

Waerea i runga, Waerea i raro,

Waerea i roto, Waerea i waho

Waerea ngā taimahatanga o te wā,

kia wātea

Tūturu o whiti, Whakamaua kia Tina,

Haumi e, Hui e, Tāiki e!

Clear a path ahead

Clear above, clear beneath,

Clear all obstructions within and outside,

Clear and relieve us of any burdens that

today may bring

And let us be free in mind, body and spirit.

We comprehend and agree,

and we make it so.

Haumi e, Hui e, Tāiki e!

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Maringi tonu ana ngā roimata ki ō  
tātou taonga kua riro atu ki te pō i  
ngā rā, i ngā wiki, i ngā marama kua  
pahure ake nei. Haere, haere, haere  
atu rā koutou ki ō tātou tūpuna e  
tatari ana ki a koutou.

Our hearts still grieve for our loved  
ones we have lost within the days,  
weeks and months that have passed.  
Farewell and return to the loving  
embrace of our ancestors that wait  
to welcome you.

Kei ngā pātaka iringa kōrero, kei  
ngā kākā wahanui, kei ngā ringa  
toha aroha e manaaki nei i ō  
tātou whānau, tēnā koutou katoa.  
He rourou iti tēnei nā Te Hauora  
Hinengaro hei hāpai ake i te orange  
o ō tātou whānau puta noa i te motu  
nei. Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā  
tātou katoa.

To the keepers of knowledge, the  
gifted mouthpieces and the givers  
of love and compassion that care  
for our whānau, greetings to you all.  
This is a small token of love from the  
Mental Health Foundation to help  
support the wellbeing of our whānau  
throughout the nation. Greetings once,  
twice and final greetings to us all.

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## Introduction

This guide is for whānau leaders, kaumātua, funeral directors, celebrants, faith leaders, or anyone leading a funeral or hui mate for a person who died by suicide or suspected suicide.

Any kind of death is difficult and brings pain and grief to the bereaved, but a suicide loss can be traumatic and especially difficult to cope with. Feelings of shock, anger, guilt and shame can lead to a complicated bereavement experience, one which might require an even greater deal of sensitivity and compassion in your practice. This resource will accompany you as you walk alongside the bereaved whānau, kōrero/talk safely about suicide, and take care of yourself throughout the process.

Hui mate can translate to ‘a gathering for a loved one who has passed’. For Māori, this includes tangihanga, waerea, kawē mate and hura kōhatu. For the purpose of this resource, hui mate will focus on key aspects of a tangihanga ceremony after a death by suicide. This ensures we don’t diminish any processes specific to tangihanga.

While this resource incorporates mātauranga Māori, our intention isn’t to give advice on the rituals or processes/tikanga around tangihanga or hui mate, nor any other funeral ritual or burial rite. We would also like to acknowledge any cultural and religious differences in grieving.

This resource is a starting point for a wider and ongoing conversation about safer funerals and hui mate for those who have died by suicide in Aotearoa New Zealand. We hope it serves as a small source of tautoko/support as you navigate the complexities of your invaluable mahi/work with people bereaved by suicide.

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***The cause of death and the questions around it are one single incident.  
The work of the funeral is to tell the whole person’s life.***  
– Michael Wolfram, Funeral Director

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# Understanding suicide

When somebody takes their life, we say they have died by suicide.

**There's no single reason why a person may end their life.** A suicide death is complex and influenced by a combination of different factors, often occurring over a long period of time. These factors can include thoughts, perceptions, feelings, circumstances and unwellness. Most people who take their own life don't want to die, but feel this is the only way to end their intense and ongoing pain. Suicide is never anyone's fault.

## **What does suicide look like in Aotearoa New Zealand?**

Suicide is a major public health issue in Aotearoa. We have similar total population suicide rates compared to other OECD countries, but our youth suicide rates are some of the highest in the OECD. Data shows Māori are more likely to die by suicide than non-Māori. Other groups at a higher risk include LGBTQI+ people, men and people bereaved by suicide.

## **Why safe and supportive kōrero around suicide matters**

Too often, suicide is surrounded by whakamā/shame and stigma, or a mark of disgrace. This can make it hard for people bereaved by suicide to find comfort and support. It can also prevent people struggling with suicidal thoughts from reaching out for help.

For individuals experiencing suicidal thoughts, whakamā can be interpreted as feelings of inadequacy, embarrassment, shame or guilt which can be triggered by a range of factors.

Those who lost a loved one or a peer to suicide are more at risk of suicide themselves. Safe, supportive kōrero at a funeral or hui mate can help lift any feelings of whakamā and encourage vulnerable people to seek help.



## CHECK-IN

As a provider, are you feeling okay to be involved in this funeral or hui mate? If you're not in a good space, respectfully decline and let someone else step in. Not only could you put yourself at risk, but you may not be able to provide the level of support and guidance the bereaved whānau needs.



*If we're more open about suicide, we've got a better chance of dealing with it. If it's masked and hidden, it's very hard to deal with.*

*– Sir Mason Durie*

## Walking alongside people bereaved by suicide

People experiencing a suicide loss may be going through a range of emotions. Grief and sadness, taimaha/intense pain and heaviness, numbness, anger or even relief are all common feelings and reactions.

Whānau may express they are feeling taimaha – an extreme heaviness weighing on their body, mind or spirit brought about by losing their loved one.

**Meet people where they are and walk alongside them.** Because of the complexity and stigma that can surround a suicide death, it's important to be present, show compassion and provide gentle support.

“Tautokona te whānau, arohaina te whānau, manaakitia te whānau.”  
Support, love, and take care of whānau with tika, pono and aroha at the forefront.

Tika means to be upright, honest and appropriate. Pono is to believe in the sanctity of life, and aroha means love and compassion.





*Having openly confronted the manner of death it is right, indeed essential, to broaden the picture and encompass the whole of the person's life. The act of suicide does not negate or invalidate the full life that has been.*

*- Reverend Alister Hendery*



## A guide to safe kōrero about suicide at a funeral or hui mate



### CHECK-IN

Is the whānau okay with having suicide mentioned during the service? It's fine if not – respect people's wishes and meet them where they are. Reassure them it's okay to feel however they're feeling. If the bereaved are not comfortable with the word suicide, it's important to hold a safe space for their emotions and perception. You may like to suggest using “**sudden death**” instead.

If the bereaved whānau agrees with it, talking about suicide safely during the service can provide comfort and hope. It's also the best way to address any speculation, stigma or sense of whakamā.

During the hui mate, the bereaved whānau has the opportunity to kōrero and waiata/sing freely to whakanui/acknowledge their loved one and express they have returned to the homelands to be with their ancestors. These rituals include pō whakamutunga, the final night of the hui mate they spend in person with their loved one, and nehu/day of burial. Throughout this time, kaumātua and whānau leaders play a key role in guiding attendees on sharing kōrero that is safe, uplifting and mana-enhancing.

When talking about suicide, people might get worried about saying the wrong thing or not knowing what to say. Whenever you're in doubt, allow aroha/compassion and manaakitanga/kindness, generosity and care to lead your kōrero.

Here is some guidance on the type of messaging to avoid and why it may be harmful.

Avoid	Why
Using the term “committed suicide”.	Suicide is not a crime. The phrase “committed suicide” can increase shame and stigma which can make people less likely to reach out for support. Say “died by suicide” or “took their own life” instead.
Saying things like: “They are at peace/in a better place now.” or “This was part of God’s plan.”	These phrases might portray suicide as an inevitable outcome or suggest to vulnerable people it’s an appropriate way to deal with difficult situations.
Using the word “closure”.	Grief becomes a part of the bereaved and who they are. Using the word closure can suggest the end of this grief.
Simplifying or speculating about the causes of suicide, e.g., bullying or a relationship breakup.	This can make suicide sound like the result of a single cause or an option in response to challenges. It can also put those who identify with the situation at risk and make the bereaved feel blame and shame.
Kōrero that portrays suicide as selfish or focussing on how it has harmed those left behind.	Sometimes, people who take their own lives don’t feel like they have a choice, or they might feel like they’re relieving others of a burden. Anger and shame can make it difficult for the bereaved to share their feelings and deter those at risk from seeking help.
Reading the suicide note or sharing details about the death (e.g., method or location).	These details are deeply distressing and sharing them can put those experiencing suicidal ideation at increased risk.
Making political statements or comments about the current state of our society and/or mental health system.	The days and weeks immediately after a suicide are not the time to do this. The focus should be on starting the grieving process and supporting one another.
Saying things like: “We’ll never recover from this experience.”	Gently support the understanding that over time, we learn to live alongside grief and loss and find our “new normal”.



Finding the right words to share with the bereaved can be difficult. Here are some tips around supportive messaging you might find helpful.

Do	Helpful phrases/ideas	Why
Name the hurt and grief that comes with a death by suicide.	“We feel like we shouldn’t be here today.”	This helps normalise the grief and gives people permission to come to terms with their <i>mamae</i> /pain and hurt.
Reassure the bereaved that nobody is to blame for this death.	“Suicide is always complex and never anybody’s fault. There is no single cause or reason why someone may take their life.”	Suicide is complex. Many different factors combine, often over a long period, to influence a person’s suicidal actions. These factors can include thoughts, perceptions, feelings, circumstances, and unwellness.
Honour their life, but don’t glorify their death.	Honour the person by calling them by their name. Focus on who they were and what they loved about life.	Glorifying, romanticising and sensationalising suicide can be harmful to others at risk of suicide. Saying the person was “called back to heaven” or “too gentle for this harsh world” oversimplifies the complexity of suicide and might leave vulnerable people yearning for the same sympathy.

## Including children and youth

Evidence-based research shows children and youth should be included in age-appropriate kōrero about suicide, as well as in a funeral or hui mate after a suicide.

If the bereaved whānau agrees, young ones can participate in ways that help them feel important and included. They may like to choose a waiata/song, carry a photo, create a slideshow or write a message on the coffin.

When sharing kōrero around suicide with children and youth, the wairua/spirit behind it is important. Kōrero honestly and with aroha. Use simple language they can easily understand – for example, you could say the person who has passed was so sad they couldn't see a way through. For more guidance on how to talk to young ones about suicide, visit **Victim Support's website – Telling others after a suicide**. <https://victimsupport.org.nz/get-support/suicide/telling-others-after-suicide>

## Managing safety at online funerals or hui mate

If the funeral or hui mate will be livestreamed or shared online, check who the whānau would like to share the link with. Remind those who have access to not share it widely or on social media. For additional safety, you might want to enable password access.

If young people are attending, they should be supervised by an adult in case they become overwhelmed or have any questions. Include links to relevant helplines and support information in the livestream – you can find a list at the end of this guide.

# Creating a safe space for grief

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*Do what you would do for other deaths – to do less is stigmatising;  
to do more is glorifying.*

*– David Cairns, former DHB Suicide Prevention Coordinator, Canterbury*

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Here are some tips to help you in the lead-up, during and after the funeral or hui mate.

## Before the service

- Spend time with the bereaved whānau to build trust and get a sense of what kind of ceremony feels right for them.
- Create a connection with kaumātua or whānau leaders. You can plan the service together, keeping tika, pono and aroha at the forefront.
- Don't place your own judgements or beliefs about suicide on the bereaved. Simply support them through the process with aroha and compassion.
- Give whānau the space and time they need to make decisions – feelings can change quickly in the days and weeks after a suicide.
- You might want to have one or more speakers chosen ahead of time. Ask them if they would like to have a support person with them.
- If whānau are considering an open microphone, make sure they're aware this means less control over what people might say and how that could affect people attending the service.
- Use the safe kōrero guidelines in this resource to help guide your planning.
- If the suicide death happened at home, the house may need blessing by a kaumātua, kuia or church minister before the funeral or hui mate.



## CHECK-IN

There can be a thin line between honouring the person who died and glorifying/romanticising suicide. To navigate this, ask yourself: “Will this kōrero or approach make suicide sound like an option to those who are already vulnerable?”



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*It is important for funeral providers to find the leaders in the bereaved whānau and mobilise them to lead the hui mate. This is to ensure what is wanted and needed by whānau at this time is followed.*

*– Reverend Canon Brent Swann*

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## During the service

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*The role of the person leading the service is to create a safe holding environment for people to start their journey of grieving.*

*– Reverend Sarah Moss*

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- Acknowledge the person who died with aroha. If you have permission from whānau, be honest and open about suicide being the cause of death.
- A farewell ceremony can be a powerful tool to start the process of recovery and healing. Encourage mourners to express their emotions and cry during the service if they want to, while also acknowledging everyone grieves differently and that's okay.
- Remind people that hope can live even in the darkest spaces, alongside sorrow and grief.
- Be adaptable. People's intense grief and other emotions can lead to some unexpected reactions and responses.
- Acknowledge that people may be experiencing a lot of distress and encourage them to seek professional help and/or support from those they trust.
- Ensure helpline information is available at the service. You might want to include a list of relevant numbers and support services at the back of the service sheet or order free resources from the Mental Health Foundation website.

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*I recommend mentioning suicide during the service. People are already speculating. If you can tell them, then you're in charge of the information being given out.*

*– Lianne Fraser [VCANZ] National President of Celebrants Aotearoa  
– the Celebrants' Association of New Zealand*

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## Hui mate processes to support the bereaved whānau

While sending off a loved one is extremely pōuri/sad, hui mate are not just about death but the whole ceremonial process of tuku roimata me te hūpē/shedding of tears and mucus, poroporoaki/commemorating and farewelling a loved one passed, and whakanui/celebrating and acknowledging the person's time on this earth.

It is important for kaumātua to uphold Te Taha Wairua/the spiritual dimension through tikanga/cultural customs and protocols. These might include:

- **Karakia** – incantations, prayer or ritual chants recited throughout the hui mate. Utilised to open and close all parts of the hui mate proceedings, karakia holds a pivotal role in protecting, supporting and uplifting whānau and all attendees.
- **Hākari** – a ceremonial feast to commemorate the loved one passed and to hiki i te tapu/lift the sacredness or any spiritual restrictions of the hui mate. After a suicide death, the hākari gives whānau the chance to noho tahi/spend quality time together by sharing kai, kōrero and waiata to uplift each other's minds and spirits before returning home.
- **Pō whakamutunga** – the final night of the hui mate whānau have in person with their loved one, when they can commemorate and celebrate the person's life through story and song.
- **Tuku roimata, tuku hūpē** – the expression of love, compassion and empathy through the shedding of tears and mucus. This physical and spiritual process allows whānau to express their extreme mamae and release it in a safe space.
- **Koha** – an offering or contribution to support the bereaved whānau and assist with the running of the marae. Koha serves to remind the bereaved of the aroha and tautoko their whānau have for them.

If mixing cultural practices, whānau may need to decide which tikanga will take precedence. It may be helpful to reach out to local marae, community and/or iwi for some extra guidance and support.





## After the service

- Make sure the bereaved whānau knows where to access ongoing support and grief counselling.
- As appropriate, take some time to check in on them in the days or weeks after the service.
- Following a hui mate, the house of the bereaved whānau will need to be blessed. This is known as waerea. To help whānau step into a space of healing, the house has to be cleared of any tapu/spiritual restrictions, prohibitions or taboo that may have inhabited the house or its possessions before, during or after the hui mate.

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*Ko te mahi waerea, koia pū te mahi whakamutunga mō te hui mate kia whakawātea te whare i ngā kino katoa. I te kuhunga atu o te whānau pani i te whare, ka takahi i te ara oranga mai i te pōuriuri kia puta anō ki te Ao Mārama.*

*The waerea process is the final piece that completes the hui mate. Its sole purpose is to clear the house of all negative things so when the whānau enters the house again, they traverse from the dark space of the hui mate back into the world of enlightenment.*

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## Looking after yourself

Leading a service for somebody who took their own life can take a toll on you and might even trigger your own thoughts of suicide. The same is true for everyone else working in this space, including mortuary staff, embalmers, reception staff, A/V technicians, and others. Don't hesitate to ask for help and support if you found an experience unsettling or distressing.

To best serve those bereaved by suicide, you need to take care of your own physical, mental, emotional and spiritual hauora/wellbeing first. Connect with things that matter to you, whether it's by spending time with your whānau and friends, being in te taiao/nature, practising your whakapono/faith, or pursuing a hobby you love. Nurture connections with your colleagues and make the most of peer-to-peer support. Take time to reflect, review, and recharge.

## Professional and peer supervision

Suicide deaths are more complex than other deaths, so you might find supervision particularly useful. Professional supervision is a supportive and confidential process that allows you to explore and think about your own practice with a skilled, trained supervisor. Peer supervision is a similar process that occurs between colleagues. For Māori, supervision may include visiting kaumātua, kuia or elders.

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### ***Hokia ō maunga kia purea e ngā hau a Tāwhirimātea.***

*Return to your ancestral mountains to be cleansed by the winds of Tāwhirimātea.*

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To find your supervision provider, ask your colleagues for a recommendation or contact a trained professional via:

- New Zealand Association of Counsellors
- New Zealand Association of Psychotherapists (NZAP) and Waka Oranga
- Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW)
- The Celebrant School
- Celebrants Aotearoa – the Celebrants' Association of New Zealand
- The Grief Centre

## Worried someone is thinking of suicide?

People bereaved by suicide are at greater risk of dying by suicide themselves, especially if they're isolated, lack access to support, have existing mental health issues and/or a history of loss and suicidality.

If you're worried someone might be thinking about suicide, don't be afraid to ask them directly, in a gentle and compassionate way. This will not put the thought in their head – it may give them permission to open up and save their life. Listen to them and let them know there is help out there. We've included a list of relevant resources and key support services at the end of this resource.

If the person is in immediate danger, call 111. If they have reached crisis point, you can take them to the nearest hospital emergency department or call your local DHB Mental Health Crisis Team. Try to stay calm and don't leave them alone until help arrives.





## Support services and resources

### Relevant organisations and resources

#### After a Suicide

[www.afterasuicide.nz](http://www.afterasuicide.nz)

Practical information and guidance after a suicide death.

#### Asian Helpline - Asian Family Services

[www.asianfamilyservices.nz](http://www.asianfamilyservices.nz)

0800 862 342

Free and confidential services available in ten languages.

#### Aoake te Rā

[www.aoaketera.org.nz](http://www.aoaketera.org.nz)

Free counselling support for individuals and whānau bereaved by suicide. You can refer yourself or somebody else online, via email or by calling 0800 000 053.

#### CASA

[www.casa.org.nz](http://www.casa.org.nz)

CASA (Clinical Advisory Services Aotearoa) specialises in working with agencies and communities to help them best manage suicide risk.

#### Chatsafe by Orygen

[www.orygen.org.au/chatsafe/remembering](http://www.orygen.org.au/chatsafe/remembering)

Tips on how to talk online about someone who has died by suicide.

#### Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB)

[www.cab.org.nz](http://www.cab.org.nz)

0800 367 222

CAB may know about support groups and grief programmes in the local area. They can also connect the bereaved with a budgeting service to help them manage funeral costs.

#### Coronial Services of New Zealand

<https://coronialservices.justice.govt.nz/coronial-services/>

The Coronial Services' website has a pamphlet on coronial services in New Zealand when someone dies suddenly.

## LeVa

[www.leva.co.nz](http://www.leva.co.nz)

Information and support for Pasifika families on mental health, addiction and suicide prevention. Includes a resource on supporting Pacific communities bereaved by suicide developed by Hibiscus Research. <https://leva.co.nz/resources/pacific-suicide-postvention-supporting-pacific-communities/>

## LGBTIQ+ Suicide Postvention Response Plan

[www.switchboard.org.au/s/Switchboard-LGBTIQ+Postvention-Final-Launch.pdf](http://www.switchboard.org.au/s/Switchboard-LGBTIQ+Postvention-Final-Launch.pdf)

General guidelines developed by Switchboard Victoria for LGBTIQ+ communities and peer organisations involved in providing postvention.

## LifeKeepers

[www.lifekeepers.nz](http://www.lifekeepers.nz)

A national suicide prevention training programme, free and available to New Zealanders over the age of 18 who are likely to interact with people at risk of suicide.

## Mental Health Foundation

[www.mentalhealth.org.nz/suicide-loss](http://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/suicide-loss)

- Visit <https://mentalhealth.org.nz/getting-through-together/grief-and-loss-in-covid19> for guidance on dealing with grief and loss during Covid-19.
- Look up Suicide Bereavement Support Groups to find a peer support group in your area.

## Skylight

[www.skylight.org.nz](http://www.skylight.org.nz)

0800 299 100

Waves is an eight-week programme run by Skylight that supports adults bereaved by suicide.

### Vaka Tautua - 0800 OLA LELEI

[www.vakatautua.co.nz/0800-ola-lelei](http://www.vakatautua.co.nz/0800-ola-lelei)

0800 652 535

A national “by Pacific, for Pacific” health, disability and social services provider. Ola Lelei is their free national Pacific helpline for anyone who needs someone to talk to, help and support. Available in Samoan, Tongan, Cook Islands Māori and English.

### Victim Support

[www.victimsupport.org.nz](http://www.victimsupport.org.nz)

0800 842 846

Available 24/7. Victim Support provides immediate help after the suicide loss. It also offers ongoing support for as long as needed and can share local knowledge of others who may help.

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#### Other agencies or groups to contact may include:

- local whānau and community support agencies
- churches or faith groups
- marae
- cultural centres
- community centres, community workers
- counsellors, school guidance counsellors or counselling agencies
- social workers
- doctors, community health centres, or primary health organisations
- community mental health teams or hauora Māori mental health teams

## Finding a counsellor

To find a counsellor, check out these online listings:

- Aoake te Rā - [www.aoaketera.org.nz](http://www.aoaketera.org.nz)
- The New Zealand Association of Counsellors - [www.nzac.org.nz](http://www.nzac.org.nz)
- Talkingworks - [www.talkingworks.co.nz](http://www.talkingworks.co.nz)
- New Zealand Psychological Society - [www.psychology.org.nz](http://www.psychology.org.nz)
- New Zealand College of Clinical Psychologists - [www.nzccp.co.nz](http://www.nzccp.co.nz)
- The Grief Centre (Auckland) - [www.griefcentre.org.nz](http://www.griefcentre.org.nz)
- Grief Support Services (Tauranga) - [www.griefsupport.org.nz](http://www.griefsupport.org.nz)
- Loss and Grief Centre (Invercargill) - [www.lossandgriefcentre.com](http://www.lossandgriefcentre.com)







## Free helplines

Below is a list of free, 24/7 services that offer support, information and help:

### 1737, need to talk?

[www.1737.org.nz](http://www.1737.org.nz)

Call or text **1737** for support from a trained counsellor.

### Lifeline

[www.lifeline.org.nz](http://www.lifeline.org.nz)

Call **0800 543 354** for counselling and support.

### Youthline

[www.youthline.co.nz](http://www.youthline.co.nz)

Call **0800 376 633**, text **234**, email [talk@youthline.co.nz](mailto:talk@youthline.co.nz) or go to website for an online chat.

### Healthline

[www.health.govt.nz](http://www.health.govt.nz)

Call **0800 611 116** for advice from trained registered nurses.

### Depression Helpline

[www.depression.org.nz](http://www.depression.org.nz)

Call **0800 111 757** to talk to a trained counsellor about how you are feeling or to ask any questions.

### Samaritans

[www.samaritans.org.nz](http://www.samaritans.org.nz)

Call **0800 726 666** for confidential support to anyone who is lonely or in emotional distress.



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We've created this resource in collaboration with people with lived experience of suicide bereavement, grief counsellors, experienced funeral directors, church ministers, celebrants, the MHF Suicide Bereavement Advisory Group, as well as whānau and hapori across the motu. We acknowledge and thank everyone who generously gave their knowledge, time and support to its development. Mauri Ora.

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