

# A message from the National Suicide Prevention Adviser

## We are re-learning the power of staying connected to one another

Today marks World Suicide Prevention Day and RUOK? Day in Australia. Now more than ever it is important that we continue to work together as governments, communities, families, colleagues and individuals to ensure a comprehensive approach to suicide prevention and empower people to reach out and support each other through tough times.

The impact of someone's suicidal behaviour will affect most Australians at some point in their lives, often leaving long lasting and far-reaching impacts on individuals, families, workplaces, schools, services and communities. Most Australians know someone who has died by suicide or attempted to take their life.

We often cite the number of people who die by or attempt suicide each year to highlight the scale and impact of the issue, but this is only part of the overall picture. There are many more people who live with suicidal ideation and who experience suicidal distress. The factors surrounding suicide are stories of struggle and pain. Behind each of those numbers is a person, a journey, and a network of other people.

This year in my role as National Suicide Prevention Adviser, I have had the opportunity to talk to many people across our community who have personal experiences of suicide and its impacts. What they have said is that what we need are connected, compassionate and supportive responses to the underlying pain, distress, adversity and trauma so many people experience. We need a comprehensive approach to reach people well before the point of crisis.

Access to affordable and effective mental health services is critical for suicide prevention. However, it is not sufficient in and of itself. Attention must also be given to other factors that contribute to suicidal behaviour - financial distress, relationship breakdown, housing insecurity, childhood adversity, discrimination, and over use of alcohol and other drug to manage stress. These significant life stressors and key points of disconnection and transitions require all available government and community touchpoints for a comprehensive early response. The critical factor is to link people to support rather than waiting for them to seek help.

Suicide prevention has traditionally been the responsibility of Australian Health Ministers, with significant activity and investment across jurisdictions. Suicide, however, is a multi-factorial behaviour which means that no single government, government portfolio, person, or organisation can reduce suicide attempts and suicide deaths alone. Collectively, however, they can make a big difference.

What I have witnessed this year is a genuine commitment and goodwill across government portfolios and across our organisations and communities to work together. It is only through this shared commitment, drawing on knowledge and expertise from those with a lived experience of suicide, that lasting impacts can be achieved for individuals and communities.

There is no doubt that it has been a challenging 12 months for Australians. We have lived through – and continue to live through - the impacts of drought, floods, devastating bushfires and the COVID-19

pandemic. These events have exposed and exacerbated vulnerabilities – including increased levels of distress, financial pressures and unemployment, disruption of education and young careers.

The creation of National Cabinet has afforded opportunities to strengthen multi-jurisdictional and cross-portfolio approaches, including a proactive response to reducing distress and providing support in new ways. Governments have responded proactively to suicide risks on multiple levels, including economic policies to reduce financial distress, social policies and investments, and innovation to unlock health and crisis response services.

The COVID-19 response has shown what is possible when the health and wellbeing of a nation is everyone's priority. As a nation, we have been reminded of the powerful role social connection plays as a protective factor and the importance of both offering support and receiving support from others.

Families, friends, schools, and businesses have all made incredible efforts to help each other. This is the heart of the RUOK? Day message and a reminder about the powerful role you can play as an individual in the prevention of suicide.

If there is someone that you have been thinking about and wondering how they are going – ring them, set up a video call or arrange a way to connect and do it today. How often has our 'gut' feeling told us that something is not quite right with someone we care about, but we avoided the conversation for fear of getting it wrong, or not knowing how to respond if the answer is, "No, I'm actually not OK"?

Do not think that you need to be an expert to support someone going through a tough time. The first important step is to reach out and ask R U OK? If they are not ok, there are many support services available. Our connection with each other is what builds us up and keeps us strong. Having people sit beside us when times are good and when times are bad makes all the difference. You can be that support for the people you know and love. Reach out.

### **Steps for Asking RUOK?**

- **ASK:** Notice any changes in behaviour and pay attention to events that may be impacting on people around you and ask R U OK?
- **LISTEN:** It is important not to try to solve the problem or diminish their concerns but be present and listen without judgement so they feel heard.
- **ENCOURAGE ACTION:** Support the person to take the next step - whether that is asking them who else they feel comfortable telling, making an appointment with their doctor or getting more information from a service online.
- **CHECK-IN:** Follow-up with them tomorrow or in a few days to keep that connection.

If you or someone you know needs support, contact one of the services below:

- Lifeline – 13 11 14 or [lifeline.org.au](https://www.lifeline.org.au)
- Kids helpline – 1800 551 800 or [kidshelpline.com.au](https://www.kidshelpline.com.au)
- BeyondBlue – 1300 224 636