

Seasons for Life

This Guide provides an overview of the Seasons for Life initiative and information about how to implement the Seasons for Growth change, loss and grief programs in your high school community.

There are four education offerings – one for students, one for parents/carers, one for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adult family members, and finally a session for staff. School staff will be trained to deliver the first three programs, and the Seasons for Life team will deliver the fourth.


State Coordinators are available to support you as you plan and implement these education programs in your school community. It is advisable to have one key contact that leads implementation at your school – a Seasons School Leader.

The following pages provide specific program information, hints and tips. There is space for you to record school related information on every page.

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Our Seasons School Leader

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Nominated School Staff to deliver Programs

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Our Seasons for Life State Coordinator

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Change, Loss and Grief at School

Change and loss are part of life, and grief is a normal response to these losses. Children, young people and adults need the opportunity to learn about how death, family changes, or other significant loss events may impact on their lives. The *Seasons for Growth* programs provide an opportunity for participants to learn the knowledge, skills

and attitudes required to understand and respond well to such experiences, building their resilience and wellbeing.

The change and loss experienced by young people may be unique in time and place to their family (parental separation) or may be shared within the community – pandemics, natural disasters, other significant losses. The loss by suicide of a member of the community is another such loss. Learning about the impacts of these losses on themselves and others through education can help.

Schools are communities and, like every community, relationships in schools are woven together with complex connections at a range of levels – between students, students and staff, staff and executive, staff and families. Young people are central in this community ecosystem. In times of shared loss there can be great benefit in young people receiving consistent responses and 'wraparound' support from school staff and parents/carers. In turn, it is important these adults have the opportunity to learn about change, loss and grief, too, and how they can best support the young people in their care.

Seasons for Life

Seasons for Life is a new initiative supporting high school communities across Australia with access to no-cost evidence-based loss and grief education, including the *Seasons for Growth* program, following a suicide or other significant loss experienced by the school community. *Seasons for Life* is fully funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care.

High schools participating in *Seasons for Life* receive funded support to train staff to:

1. deliver the eight-session *Seasons for Growth* Program to small groups of young people
2. deliver the *Seasons for Growth Parent Session*, following a loss by suicide in the community
3. deliver the *Seasons for Growth Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Adult Family Session*, following a loss by suicide in the community

High schools can also access:

4. an all-staff professional learning session, 'Loss and Grief in Schools,' delivered by a *Seasons for Life* State Coordinator, following a loss by suicide in the community or other significant loss.

Offering the Seasons for Growth Young People's program to students at your school

What is the Seasons School Leader role?

If there is more than one Companion (trained facilitator) at the school, it can be helpful to designate one person as the Seasons School Leader, with school executive approval. This allows a single point of contact for questions and changes, delegated authority to make relevant decisions around implementation, and support for the other Companion/s as the need arises. The Seasons School Leader may do some or all of the following:

- Introduce, integrate and maintain *Seasons for Growth* as part of the school culture
- Share information about *Seasons for Growth* with students, parents/carers and staff
- Conduct staff and parent/carers information sessions if/as required
- Organise the allocation of students (and Companions) to each group
- Support Companions to get started with their sessions, and consult/support where required
- Ensure adequate debriefing arrangements are in place for Companions
- Coordinate the implementation of the Seasons for Life evaluation within the school
- Provide a *Seasons for Growth* point of contact for parents/carers/family members, staff and young people
- Ensure the *Seasons for Growth* philosophy and Code of Ethics are followed
- Maintain contact with the *Seasons for Life* State Coordinator.

What do we need to do to get started with our Seasons for Growth groups?

1. Consult with the Principal

Share information about *Seasons for Life* funding and evaluation, Companion selection, dates and times, venues, mandatory reporting.

2. Undertake Training in the Seasons for Growth Young People's Program

Training is mandatory for Companions to deliver the small group education program. It consists of:

- a. *Seasons for Growth* Young People's Program (two days)

PLUS

- b. *Seasons for Growth* Supplementary Training: additional optional workshop focusing on supporting young people in *Seasons for Growth* groups following a loss by suicide (two hours).

PLUS

- c. Ensure all relevant child protection and mandatory notification training have been completed by trained Companions delivering the programs/sessions.

3. Brief school staff about the program

Share a 15 – 20 minute introduction about the program with staff. Explain that it is an education program, not counselling, and talk about what it does and doesn't do.

Encourage colleagues to speak openly and positively about the program so that ALL students are aware of it and participants and their parents/carers volunteer to attend, rather than feel 'nominated'.

A sample information session slideshow is available for you to use.

Three large light blue rounded rectangular boxes for notes, each with a pencil icon in the top right corner.

4. Decide dates, times and venues for the program

Confirm when and where the group will be held before advertising the program.

Scheduling to finish before recess or lunch can be helpful. The eight weekly sessions should not break for holidays between sessions 3-4 (Winter season sessions), but either before or after these sessions.

You may wish to schedule a parent information session (online or at school), too.

5. Advertise Seasons for Growth availability to whole school community

Share information about the program with students and parents/carers through regular channels.

Ensure the messaging emphasises that participation is voluntary, the program takes place in small groups, and is about learning skills to manage the difficult things that sometimes happen in life including death, separation and divorce, and other changes and losses.

Each school is to follow their own consent processes with parents/carers.

6. Provide a parent information session (online or face to face) – optional

The purpose of the information session is to provide key information about what students will be learning, introduce the Companions who will be working with the groups, and answer any questions or concerns that they have.

7. Finalise membership of groups

The Seasons School Leader and Companions assess and create groups, considering gender, siblings, literacy levels, behaviour management, peer considerations, neurodiversity, membership of specific groups and other needs as required.

8. Introduce participants to their Companions

Once groups have been finalised following the optional information session, share information in a short meeting or via email about the time, date and location, and welcome them to the group.

9. Prepare and familiarise Companions with referral pathways

It is important to establish and confirm student referral pathways both within and beyond the school community prior to commencing the first group.



What do we need to do while we are implementing our Seasons for Growth groups?

1. Plan the first (and subsequent) sessions

Take time to understand the session content and prepare materials.

Write down any questions you would like to find the answers to.

Think about the students you have and reflect on what they may need.

2. Conduct the first (and subsequent) sessions

Explain confidentiality and when you may need to involve others.

Focus on sharing the session content to meet the learning outcomes, but also on building a supportive space, where each student feels cared for, valued and respected, and has opportunities to contribute.

3. Be mindful of any students who may benefit from further support

We know that grieving students may show a range of externalising and internalising behaviours consistent with their grief, and in time many behaviours may settle. If you wish to refer a student for further support, have a private conversation with the young person first to share your thoughts with them, and where possible plan who to speak with together.

4. Reflect and debrief after each session

This is covered on page 9 of this Guide.

Four light blue rounded rectangular boxes are arranged vertically on the right side of the page. Each box is intended for notes and has a small pencil icon in its top right corner. The boxes are empty, providing space for the user to write down their thoughts or questions related to the text on the left.

Offering the Seasons for Growth Parent Session: Supporting young people following a loss by suicide in the community

For many years, parents whose children have participated in the *Seasons for Growth* Young People Program have asked 'is there a program that can help parents, too?' The *Seasons for Growth* Parent Program has been developed to meet this need. These parent sessions provide an opportunity for parents to better understand experiences of change, loss and grief from a young person's perspective, and strategies they may wish to consider as they provide support.

The latest Parent Session is suitable for school communities who have been impacted by suicide loss. The session focuses on parents and carers supporting their high-school aged children following a loss by suicide in the community. It is a single 90 minute session and trained school staff (Companions) deliver it to small groups (up to 15) parents and carers.

1. Consult with the Principal

Share information about *Seasons for Life* funding and evaluation, Companion selection, possible dates, times and venues, mandatory reporting.

2. Undertake Training in the *Seasons for Growth* Young People's Program

Training in the *Seasons for Growth* Young People's Program is mandatory backgrounding for delivering the single session Parent Program. One or two Companions can deliver each session. Training consists of:

- *Seasons for Growth* Young People's Program (two days)

PLUS

- *Seasons for Growth* Parent Program Training: additional workshop focusing on parents/carers supporting their children following a loss by suicide (three hours).

3. Decide date, time and venue for the single session program

Confirm when and where the group will be held before advertising the program.

4. Confirm executive/wellbeing school staff to attend the program in a support capacity

It can be helpful to have an additional executive or wellbeing staff member present.

5. Prepare and familiarise Companions with referral pathways

It is important to establish and confirm student and family referral pathways both within and beyond the school community prior to offering the session.

Four light blue rounded rectangular boxes for notes, each with a pencil icon in the top right corner.

6. Advertise *Seasons for Growth* Parent Program availability to whole school community

Share information about the single session program with parents/ carers through regular channels.

Ensure the messaging emphasises that participation is voluntary, the program takes place in small groups, and is about learning some helpful information and skills to support their child following a loss by suicide in the community.

7. Finalise membership of groups

Groups should be capped at 15 adults. Consider how best to discern membership of groups if more than 15 parents wish to attend.

8. Plan the session as a team

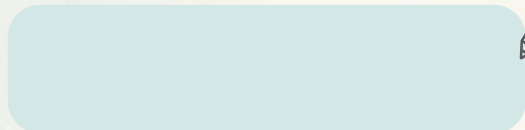
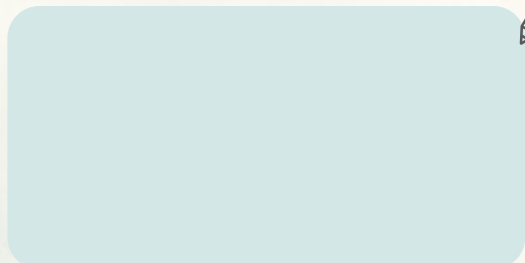
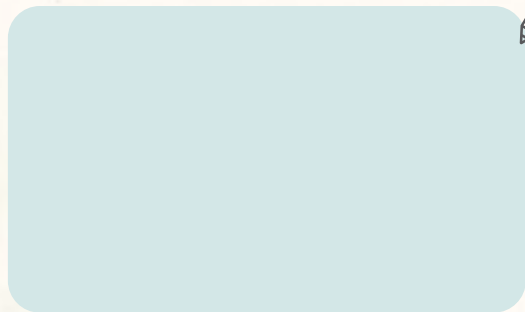
Take time to understand the session content and prepare materials.

Plan to stay on track and focus on young people's experiences of grief, not the details of any particular loss.

Discuss who will lead, who will discuss referral pathways and answer questions.

9. Reflect and debrief after the session

This is covered on page 9 of this Guide.



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Adult Family Session: Supporting young people following a loss by suicide in the community

This 90 minute, single session program is being co-developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults and young people. Please refer to the website or speak with your State Coordinator for updates.

The Seasons for Growth Approach

Psychosocial Education

The *Seasons for Growth* programs are evidence-based and rely on research, strategies and techniques consistent with high quality, psychosocial education. The programs have a sound curriculum structure and rely on a wide-range of age appropriate strategies including writing, discussion, sharing stories and music, guided meditation, art activities, and journalling. Participants' learning is largely generated through these activities and the conversations that emerge from stories shared, questions asked, skills learnt, and relationships developed. This person-centred approach to learning encourages participants to not only value who they are and the particular story they have, but also to modify where necessary their thinking, attitudes, beliefs and constructs about life, and to take ownership of their behaviours.

"The purpose of [psycho-educational] groups is to provide children with information, which will help them adjust their responses to their life situations and to behave in more adaptive ways. Psychoeducational groups emphasise the acquisition of knowledge ... and may develop content in accordance with a structured curriculum, specifically defined goals, and explicit expectations of group members. Although the focus is on learning, the process usually involves group interaction, with members of the group sharing and discussing thoughts, feelings, experiences, attitudes, beliefs and values, particularly as these relate to relevant topics" (Geldard et al., 2018).



Thoughts and comments on psychosocial education:



Reflective Practice

Reflective practice is a key tool that can be used by Companions as they face new and different situations and challenges with their groups. Companions who develop (or already have) skills in reflection have essentially 'learned how to learn', and as such will be very well placed to respond to the unique issues and challenges involved in their work with groups – both with young people and parents/carers.

Thoughts and comments on reflective practice:



Debriefing

It is important that Companions meet with each other, or appropriate executive/wellbeing staff for the purpose of debriefing following each session. This is critical both for the success of the program, and also for the continued wellbeing of Companions. Please ensure that there are debriefing processes in place for all staff involved in *Seasons for Growth* at your school.

Debriefing is important because it enables Companions to:

- Name and respond to issues occurring in their relationships with others
- Name and respond to issues which may have impacted on group processes
- Express their feelings and reflections about the group sessions
- Discuss what changes may be needed for the following session
- Discuss needs of individual young people (maintaining appropriate confidentiality) and the group.

Access to qualified mental health professionals is also essential in case issues and/or concerns requiring professional intervention and support arise in the course of their involvement with Seasons for Growth. Have referral contacts ready for young people and Companions.

Thoughts and comments on debriefing:



Hosting a *Seasons for Life* Professional Learning Session for All School Staff

Young people can experience grief following a wide range of changes and losses in their lives. Teachers often see the impacts on student wellbeing, behaviour and performance, but can feel uncertain about how best to offer support.

Through the *Seasons for Life* initiative, a team of State Coordinators is available to deliver a 90 minute professional learning workshop to upskill staff in understanding and recognising loss and grief, and how best to support students, including in the context of suicide loss. The learning-focused workshop supports school staff to:

- **Learn**
 - Learn about loss and grief
 - Learn about a range of ways grief may be experienced
 - Learn about what this may look like in the classroom
 - Learn about ways to respond as a school, and as a staff member
 - Learn about the importance of self-care
- **Feel**
 - Safe and supported during the workshop
 - Affirmed in their current strengths in supporting students and others during difficult times
 - Capable around the things they can do after the workshop
 - Inspired to consider different perspectives during and after the workshop
- **Do**
 - Apply a grief literate mindset for understanding loss experiences
 - Respond intentionally to others
 - Undertake self-care.

What do we need to do to plan and host a Staff Professional Learning Session at our School?

1. Consult with the Principal about the Seasons for Life initiative

It is important to update the Principal to ensure they are informed and can contribute their thoughts and advice. Share information with them about *Seasons for Life* funding and evaluation, your liaison with your State Coordinator, possible dates, times and venues that have been identified, and suggested referral pathways for staff.

2. Liaise with your Seasons for Life State Coordinator

It is likely that you will be offering the staff session in conjunction with other *Seasons for Growth* education offerings at your school. Your State Coordinator will be able to discuss relevant considerations with you to assist with the timing and suitability of the workshop for your community.

3. Decide date, time and venue for the single session program in conjunction with your Coordinator

Confirm when and where the workshop will be held before sharing information with staff.

4. Confirm executive/wellbeing school staff to attend the session in a support capacity

It is advisable to ask appropriate school executive and/or wellbeing staff to be present in a supportive capacity. Grief and loss affects everyone and people may revisit aspects of their own experiences during or after the session.

5. Prepare and familiarise presenter (State Coordinator) with referral pathways to share

It is important to establish and confirm staff referral pathways both within and beyond the school community prior to offering the session.

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The Seasons for Life Initiative: Evaluation 2023 – 2025

The *Seasons for Life* initiative is a three year project funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care as part of the National Suicide Prevention Leadership and Support Program (NSPLSP).

A key aim of this funding program is to evaluate projects to continually improve how these contribute to suicide prevention in Australia. The *Seasons for Life* initiative is very proud to be partnering with Professor Myf Maple and Associate Professor Sarah Wayland from the University of New England in evaluating the initiative.

What does this mean for participating schools?

Ethics approval will be gained from all Australian education jurisdictions. Following this, participating schools will be asked to offer the chance to participate in the evaluation to the young people taking part in *Seasons for Growth*.

Parents and carers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adult family members, Companions, and school staff will also be invited to participate and share their views about, and experiences of, the *Seasons for Life* initiative.

For more information on the evaluation, please speak with your *Seasons for Life* State Coordinator, or visit: www.mackillopseasons.org.au/programs/seasons-for-life/

Additional Supports for Companions

Seasons for Life State Coordinators

The *Seasons for Life* State Coordinators are highly qualified education and mental health professionals. They are available to provide coaching and implementation support to school executive and wellbeing staff, Seasons School Leaders and Companions in their implementation of the *Seasons for Life* programs and sessions.

In addition, the *Seasons for Life* State Coordinators are available to provide a professional learning workshop, "Loss and Grief in Schools," to schools throughout Australia who have been impacted by a loss by suicide in the community, or other significant loss. This 90 minute workshop will be delivered at no charge to the school.

Seasons for Growth Community of Practice

Seasons for Growth Companions also have access to support through their Trainer and the regular professional learning and conversation opportunities offered through MacKillop Seasons. In addition, an exciting new online Community of Practice is currently being established to provide Companions with the opportunity to connect with other Companions (in their region or across Australia), find out the latest news, ask questions, and learn together.

We look forward to inviting you to the new Community of Practice!

For more information

Seasons for Life Initiative

Resources

Get in touch

For further information please contact us:

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