

# DAV Distressing Content Policy

Self-harm, suicide and other forms of mental distress are complex, nuanced, and important topics to be discussed in society. Schools and the Department of Education and Training have structures in place to support students undergoing periods of difficulty.

The DAV recognises that students, audience members, adjudicators and school staff can all be unintentionally harmed by insensitive or poorly expressed points around self-harm, suicide, and mental health.

The DAV wants to keep debating and public speaking competitions as safe a space as possible for students, where they feel comfortable and competent to express ideas and actively listen to others.

## Adjudicators

DAV adjudicators are not positioned for ongoing pastoral care with students.

When presented with a situation where one or more students have brought up distressing content, adjudicators should:

- Assess whether there is an immediate risk to the student(s). If DAV members have reason to believe that a child is in immediate danger, they should first call 000.
- Respond to the issue brought up in the debate sensitively, referring to the content and purpose of this policy, encouraging students to seek assistance from a trusted adult as required. The main goal is that all participants in debates are safe.
- Be transparent that students are not in trouble, but the situation will be reported to staff for follow-up purposes.
- Report the incident to the staff member(s) responsible for the students involved. This will include debaters who heard the content, as well as those expressing it. If school staff cannot be approached directly, inform the RC or DAV Staff of the incident who will follow-up with the school.
- Consider their own response to the distressing content and seek support for their own mental health as needed.

## Staff

Staff should alert the DAV coordinator(s) and their students as to where they can be found during onsite programs in case of any issues arising.

Many guides exist for discussing suicide and self-harm in sensitive, safe ways, such as Orygen's [#Chatsafe initiative](#). It provides suggestions for phrases to avoid and alternative ways to express thoughts and have been co-designed with young people. Staff should direct students to the above sources and communicate the instructions for students (listed below) to their speakers.

## **Students**

Every school has structures in place to support students undergoing periods of difficulty. Students should speak to a teacher or other trusted adult if they feel impacted by any of the issues in this policy.

In debating, we learn how to express opinions and make persuasive arguments by being assigned topics, sides, and roles. Regardless of personal opinions, speakers must argue the case you are given. Personal examples about ourselves, our families, and friends are discouraged in debating, in part because debating is about more than just us.

For some members of the debating community, issues surrounding suicidality or self-damaging behaviours can be very personal. For others, they may know people who have coped with difficult mental health. It is very important that, if we discuss these things, we do so sensitively and safely.

### **Some important things to do:**

- Never discuss your personal experience of mental distress in debating and public speaking.
- Refrain from describing particular methods of dying by suicide or intentionally self-harming.
- Avoid framing self-destructive behaviours as solutions, shameful or inevitable.
- Consider whether discussing potentially traumatic, complex issues is the best way to convey your case to the 'average reasonable person'.

Bear in mind: Doing any of the above things does not constitute an automatic loss. This policy is designed to reduce the number of potential incidents and respond to those that do occur, not create new rules for how to be persuasive.