

After a Student Suicide

HOW TO RESPOND
HOW TO HELP

A Suicide Prevention Toolkit



INTRODUCTION

A suicide in a school community is devastating to staff, students and families. Some students may be unable to cope and the community as a whole may struggle with how to respond. In a state of shock, the school community may be uncertain of what steps to take.

This toolkit provides practical information to schools after a student has died by suicide.

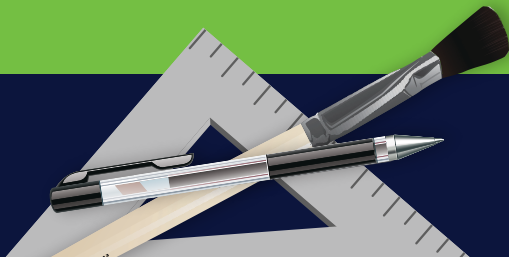


CRISIS MANAGEMENT

A school's coordinated crisis response plan needs to include an action plan for after a suicide. Most school districts have a district-wide crisis response policy. If not, develop your own. Here are some essentials:

- Identify crisis response team members including teachers and other school-trained health professionals;
- Establish where to access counselling support and how it can be implemented (including where in the school counsellors will meet with people);
- Assign roles to crisis team members so they can manage all aspects of the intervention;
- Organize a planning meeting for the crisis team and ensure everyone is aware of their role;
- Discuss and clearly communicate what mental health services can be provided and how the school community can access them;
- Designate a school representative to respond to all media requests and prepare an appropriate media message (Do not mention the method of suicide, and use neutral, nonsensationalized language).

(American Foundation of Suicide Prevention, 2011; Erbacher, Singer and Poland, 2015)



WHAT TO DO

Immediately following a student's suicide death, school administrators should:

1. Contact the family of the student who died by suicide to offer condolences and inform them that there is counselling support available;
2. Inform school district administration and board members so they are prepared for any reactions and questions they may receive;
3. Inform and prepare school staff and faculty for any reactions and questions they may receive;
4. With consent from the parents of the deceased student, send a letter home to all school families to alert them that a student in their community has died by suicide;
5. Endeavour to operate the school as normally as possible - maintaining a stable environment is key; and
6. Arrange for counselling services at the school. Make these services available for the entire school community.

(Erbacher, Singer and Poland, 2015; The American Foundation of Suicide Prevention, 2011; Centre for Suicide Prevention, 2014)



HOW TO TALK TO PARENTS

Bereaved Parents

Talking to bereaved parents is difficult. If a student's death has been declared a suicide, it is crucial to determine if parents of the deceased want this information disclosed and if so, how much information can be revealed.

Recommend that the cause of death be declared, as rumors and potential falsehoods regarding the death will dissipate in light of accurate information. Disclosing the cause of death may allow parents of the deceased, as well as students and staff, to fully grieve.

Clearly identify counselling services to the family in the community and/or at the school.

(Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2012)

When speaking with parents of the deceased student, maintain a culturally sensitive approach whenever possible. Being aware of the background of the family of the deceased and their beliefs and attitudes toward suicide will help foster open conversation.

(American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2011)



Parents of other students

If the decision is to publically recognize the death as a suicide, inform all parents with an official communication from the principal. Reassure parents that the school is returning to a normal routine. Inform them of counselling services for them and their children at the school. A list of warning signs and protective and risk factors for suicide, as well as information on community health providers should be included in the communication.

(Centre for Suicide Prevention, 2014; American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2011).

A list of warning signs, protective and risk factors for youth can be found here: bit.ly/TeenSuicideRT



HOW TO TALK TO STUDENTS

Discuss mental illness and its connection to suicide with students. Also, outline the typical warning signs of suicidal behaviour to them so they are more aware.

- Ensure some school staff are trained in suicide intervention;
- Offer small group counselling for those students in need;
- Use sensitive language (non-sensational, non-judgmental) to describe suicide and suicidal behaviour;
- Encourage those who are struggling to seek access to other mental health supports;
- Meet with the deceased's closest friends. Emphasize to them that they are not responsible for the student's death.

(Brook, 2002; Erbacher, et al, 2015)

Resource

Check out The 5 Things We Wish All Teachers Knew About Suicide Webinar Series, free online at bit.ly/WebSeri
Topics include:

- How to welcome back a student who experienced suicidality;
- What to do after a suicide;
- School suicide prevention programs;
- Social media;
- Contagion and suicide.



NEXT STEPS - POSTVENTION

“Postvention” is the Best Prevention!

Postvention care after a suicide is critical. **Those who have been exposed to suicide are a greater risk of suicide themselves.** Postvention actions help to reduce the risk of future suicides. Postvention is based around education, planning, communication and implementation. Provide group-based grief and loss counselling for school community members who choose it. Keep a close watch on other vulnerable youth: a suicide death in their community could become triggering for them.

(Erbacher, Singer and Poland, 2015)

A student who dies by suicide may affect others who are at risk for suicide themselves. These students should be identified immediately.

Warning signs for those at risk

- Loss of interest in social activities
- Decline in academic performance
- Self-harm
- Previous suicide attempts
- Talk of being a burden to others
- Changes in sleeping patterns
- Changes in behaviour
- **Withdrawal from social media activity**

(American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2011)

MEMORIALIZATION

Memorialization involves a sensitive balancing act of both honouring the deceased and protecting the people currently at risk of suicide. Here are some recommended practices:

- Respond to grief in a way that considers other students' vulnerabilities as a result of the suicide;
- Treat all deaths in a school environment the same way to not glamourize or romanticize a suicidal death;
- Permit planned and temporary grieving opportunities;
- Recommend funeral services be held outside of school hours;
- Discourage official, school-wide memorials as they have the potential to glamourize the death and communicate the wrong message to vulnerable youth;
- Construct any physical memorial off school grounds.

(Centre for Suicide Prevention 2004; The American Foundation of Suicide Prevention, 2011; Kerr, et al., 2010)



SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media are the preferred means of communication among young people. In the event of a school suicide, social media will unavoidably be used to convey news of the tragedy. If used effectively, these media can be important tools to promote suicide prevention-oriented messaging.

- Establish social media protocols and procedures to foster the sharing of accurate and beneficial information regarding the death;
- Use social media to offer support to students who may be struggling to cope;
- Monitor websites to promote safe and positive messages;
- Communicate with parents and community members through social media where appropriate;
- Avoid glamorizing the death on social media memorial pages.

(The American Foundation of Suicide Prevention, 2011; Erbacher, Singer and Poland, 2015)



CONTAGION

Suicidal contagion refers to a cluster or multiple incidents of suicides or suicidal behaviours that can occur in an accelerated time-frame or defined geographical area. Although rare, adolescents appear to be more vulnerable than any other age group to contagion. Those who may be at risk include:

- Close friends of the person who died;
- Witnesses of the death;
- Students who had contact with the person shortly before they died;
- Those who are experiencing thoughts of death and dying or suicidal ideation;
- Those who have experienced other losses or suicides in the past.

Postvention efforts to contain possible suicidal contagion include:

- Psychological screening and debriefing for those identified as at risk;
- Individual and group counselling to affected peers;
- Responsible media reporting of suicide contagion;
- Promotion of positive mental health.

(Cox, et al., 2012; American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2011)



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RESOURCES

Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention (CASP)

CASP provides information and resources to reduce the suicide rate and minimize harmful consequences of suicidal behaviour.

www.suicideprevention.ca

Crisis Centres across Canada listing: www.suicideprevention.ca/thinking-about-suicide/find-a-crisis-centre/

Kids Help Phone

Kids Help Phone is anonymous, confidential phone and web counselling, available 24/7 for youth ages 20 and younger.

www.kidshelpphone.ca

Phone: 1 (800) 668-6868

Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA)

CMHA has regional and provincial offices all across Canada.

Alberta: www.mymentalhealth.ca

National: www.cmha.ca

Centre for Suicide Prevention (CSP)

A branch of CMHA, CSP is an education centre that provides workshops, information, and resources on suicide prevention.

www.suicideinfo.ca

Prevention Resources

Train school staff and administration in suicide prevention workshops to help inform and prepare them to identify a student at risk of suicide, and effectively intervene with them. Contact CSP for the following workshops in your area.

[safeTALK: Suicide Alertness for Everyone](#)

This three hour workshop emphasizes the importance of recognizing the signs, communicating with the person at risk and getting help or resources for the person at risk.

[ASIST: Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training](#)

Attending this two-day course will train you to intervene with an individual who is suicidal.

[Straight Talk: Youth Suicide Prevention Workshop](#)

Straight Talk is a youth-focused workshop for people working with youth ages 12 to 24.

[Tattered Teddies: Preventing Suicide in Children](#)

This half-day workshop will examine warning signs in a child and intervention strategies.





www.suicideinfo.ca



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