

Preparing for and Responding to a Death By Suicide

Steps for Responding to a Suicidal Crisis

An effective suicide prevention program should be comprehensive; it should not limit its scope to include only preventative and intervention measures but should also address postvention measures, or measures that are taken after a suicide crisis (1,2,7,8). The school community must address suicide attempts and deaths by suicide in order to provide appropriate support for students and staff.

What is done after a suicide crisis (threats, attempts, or deaths by suicide) is just as important as what is done before one.

The best way to address the needs of the school is to be prepared with a comprehensive and recognized plan of action. Unfortunately, however, many schools lack a preplanned postvention program and tend to respond to a suicidal crisis in an unorganized fashion (4). Appropriate postvention programs can be viewed as a form of prevention since, if carried out correctly and successfully, can reduce potential cluster (copycat) suicides (5). By not having an adequate postvention program in place, schools may unknowingly contribute to further suicidal behaviors or copycat suicides.

The rationale behind postvention programs in schools is not only to reduce subsequent morbidity and mortality of suicide in fellow students, but also to reduce the onset and degree of debilitation by psychiatric disorders, such as posttraumatic stress disorder (3). After a suicidal crisis, friends and family are at an increased risk of developing posttraumatic stress disorder, as well as relying more heavily on alcohol and drug use to numb the pain (6). A comprehensive postvention plan increases the likelihood that a school can decrease the risk of copycat

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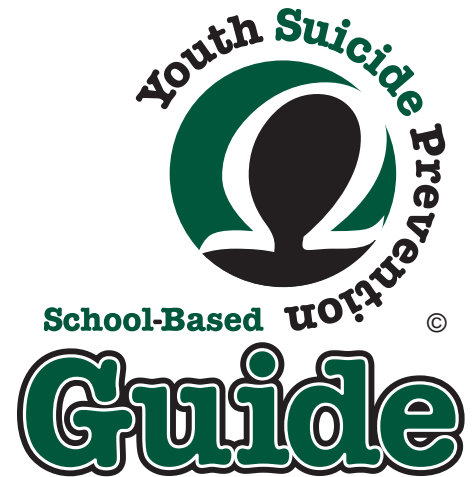
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Issue Brief



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suicides and provide a much-needed service to those left behind following a suicide.

It is not enough for a suicide prevention program to implement and maintain “before the fact” prevention elements, designed at preventing a suicidal event from occurring, but a program must have an established method of responding to a suicidal crisis. An effective postvention plan may also decrease the chance that an acute stress reaction caused by the suicide will lead to a more chronic and debilitating reaction for those left traumatized and grieving. This could be prevented through counseling and utilizing community links to get those individuals help.

The Checklist 7a: Preparing for and Responding to a Suicidal Crisis, presents a brief overview of some of the necessary components of a postvention plan. It must be noted that the checklist is flexible and should be used in a way that is complementary to the schools’ needs and abilities.

Steps for responding to a suicidal crisis include:

1. The school principal should contact the police or medical examiner in order to verify the death and get the facts surrounding the death. It is important to know the facts in order to reduce imitative behaviors and to place focus on means restriction strategies for parents, as well as the school.
2. The superintendent of the school district needs to be informed of the death. He or she should also be involved in the school’s response to the suicide through information dissemination with other school districts and media contacts.
3. Prepare and activate procedures for responding to the media. Suicide is newsworthy and as such can be expected to attract the media. Utilize a designated media spokesperson and remind staff not to talk with press or spread rumors and if asked refer to media spokesperson. For more information refer to Issue Brief 7b: Responding to and Working with the Media.
4. Notify and activate the school’s crisis response team (for more information on crisis response teams refer to Issue Brief 6b: Crisis Intervention and Crisis Response Teams.
5. Contact the family of the deceased. Find out if the deceased has any siblings enrolled in other districts. If so, then notify the principals of those schools.
6. Schedule a time and place to notify faculty members and all other school staff. This meeting should be arranged as soon as possible. After this has been done, staff can provide critical and appropriate support for students.
 - Inform all staff about the facts behind the suicide.
 - Allow time for staff to ask questions and express feelings.
 - Ensure that all staff have an updated list of referral resources.
 - Review the process for students leaving school grounds and tracking student attendance.
 - Announce to staff how the school will interact with the media and inform staff who will act as the school’s media spokesperson. Remind staff not to talk with the press and refer any questions to the designated media spokesperson.
 - Review planned in-class discussion formats and disclosure guidelines for talking to students. Prepare staff for student reactions.
 - Compile a list of all students who were close to the deceased.
 - Compile a list of all staff members who had contact with the deceased.
 - Update and compile a list of students who may be at-risk for suicide (see Issue Brief 3a: Risk Factors for more information on risk factors).
 - Remind staff about the risk factors and warning signs for adolescent suicide.
 - Provide staff counseling opportunities and supportive services available to them.

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7. Contact community support services, which should be supervised by the school's crisis response team leader. Community support services include local mental health agencies, other school counselors, community crisis hotline agencies, and clergy members.
8. Arrange a meeting for parents.
 - Provide parents with warning signs for adolescents who may be suicidal.
 - Provide information about supportive services available to students at the school.
 - Provide information about community resources they may wish to utilize.
 - Provide information about how to respond to students' questions about suicide.
 - Remind them of their child's special needs during this time.
 - Avoid a large parent meeting and try to keep the number of parents at a minimum. Communicate with other students' parents through telephone or written notice.
9. Meet with all students in small groups (classrooms).
 - Notify students as early as possible following the staff meeting.
 - Make sure all teachers announce the death of the student to their first class of the day. It is preferable to describe the deceased as "having died by suicide," rather than as "a suicide," or having "committed suicide." The latter two expressions reduce the person to the mode of death, or connote criminal or sinful behavior.
 - Disclose all relevant facts pertaining to the student's death. Do not provide morbid details, such as method or exact location of suicide.
 - Allow students an opportunity to express their feelings. "What are your feelings and how can I help?" should be the mantra behind the structure of discussion.
 - Explain and predict what students can predict as they grieve (feeling angry, guilty, shocked, anxious, lonely, sad, numb, or experiencing physical pain). Express to students there is no one right way to grieve. What is important is to recognize feelings and communicate them.
- Inform students of the available support services in the school (and outside the school) and encourage them to use them.
- Reorient students to ongoing classroom activities.
- Avoid assemblies for notification and do not use impersonal announcements over the public address system. Notify students in small, individual classrooms through faculty members or crisis team members.
10. Provide additional survivor support services. A school may want to invite friends of the deceased to join a support group so they can be counseled separately with more focused attention. Provide individual counseling to all students identified as at-risk.
11. Members of the school's crisis team should follow the victim's classes throughout the day providing counseling and discussion to assist students and teachers. This could also help to identify and refer students who may be at-risk.
12. Establish support stations or counseling rooms in the school and make sure that everyone including faculty, students, and other school staff members know where these are located. There should be more than one location and should be set up in small to mid-size rooms.
13. De-brief staff (including members of the crisis team) at the end of the day for approximately five days following the suicidal crisis.
14. Reschedule any immediate stressful academic exercises or tests if at all possible.
15. Avoid flying the school flag at half-mast in order to avoid glamorizing the death. Memorialization should be consistent with other types of deaths of students.
16. Memorialization should focus on prevention, education, and living. Encourage staff and students to memorialize the deceased through contributions to prevention organizations such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving, a suicide hotline, or a suicide survivors group.

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17. Inform local crisis telephone lines and local mental health agencies about the death so that they can prepare to meet the needs of students and staff.
18. Provide information about visiting hours and funeral arrangements to staff, students, parents, and community members. Funeral attendance should be in accordance with the procedures for other deaths of students.
19. The family of the deceased should be encouraged to schedule the funeral after school hours to facilitate the attendance of students.
20. Arrange for students and staff to be excused from school to attend the funeral if necessary.
21. Follow up with students who are identified as at-risk and provide on-going assessment and monitoring of these students. Follow-up should be maintained as long as possible.

Seven major sources were utilized and synthesized into developing steps for dealing with a suicidal crisis:

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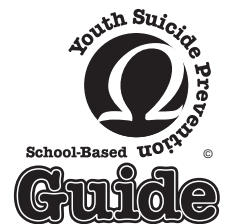
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Notes



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