

Suicide

Take-Home Message

School staff face unique challenges when supporting students who are grieving a death by suicide. Effective and appropriate communication about a death by suicide is important in order to reduce the risk of other students or members of the community engaging in self-harm or attempting suicide.

Many people believe that talking about suicide will prompt individuals who wouldn't have otherwise thought of suicide to consider harming themselves. This is not correct—clear, open, appropriate discussions are essential. Schools will want to take steps to address the strong feelings of survivors and decrease the risk of another suicide in the school community.

Background on Suicide

Death by suicide is the third leading cause of death in children ages 10–14 and the second leading cause of death in children ages 15–19. Almost one in five high school students has considered suicide, and 2% to 6% of children attempt suicide.

It is highly likely that many members of the school community, students as well as staff, have personal experiences with suicide among family or friends. Also, anyone might have considered or attempted suicide in the past—you cannot tell by looking at or talking with someone.

Why It's Hard to Discuss

Suicide carries a great deal of stigma. People often do not wish to discuss personal experiences related to suicide. School staff and parents are also concerned that discussion of suicide with students may prompt others to consider harming themselves.

It is important to recognize that talking about suicide will

not cause students who otherwise wouldn't have to consider self-harm. People need clear, open, appropriate information and a chance to discuss their own reactions when a suicide occurs. However, sensationalized media coverage that brings notoriety to someone who died by suicide may increase the likelihood of a student who is already vulnerable to attempt suicide. This is why it is especially important to understand how to frame these discussions constructively and provide assistance to school staff as they approach this difficult topic with their students.

Resources for Support

Mental health and counseling staff of the school, as well as community-based partners, can serve as excellent resources to support classroom interventions.

It is important to offer support resources for school staff as well. Some individuals will have had personal experiences with depression. Some have probably also experienced suicidal intentions themselves. It is quite likely some have also lost family members or friends through suicide.

Remind staff of supportive services available to them personally, such as the employee assistance program. Provide information about suicide hotlines and related resources within the school and community.

Respecting the Wishes of the Family

Because of the stigma and pain of suicide, survivors often experience strong feelings of guilt, shame, regret, and anger. Families may not wish suicide mentioned as a possible or likely cause of their child's death, even when circumstances suggest otherwise.

When possible, explain to the family that an honest, sensitive discussion about the cause of death with students may decrease the risk that others will die by suicide.

Clear Communication With Students

If the family is unwilling for these open discussions to take place, school staff can still speak with students in a clear and appropriate way about the death while respecting the family's wishes.

For example, teachers can state that the cause of death was hanging, but the family is unsure whether or not it was accidental. When students raise concerns about suicide, they can be told: "The family is unsure of the reason for John's



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death and believe it to be accidental. However, many of you (or the media) have suggested that suicide may have been the cause. While we don't yet know the cause of John's death, suicide is a cause of death for a number of children and adults. I think it's important that we talk about suicide in general."

When talking with students, be sure to use the phrase "death by suicide." This demonstrates that you are prepared to discuss this sensitive topic. Some people avoid using the term "committed suicide" because it may be viewed as implying a criminal act.

Sample Scripts

The National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement (NCSCB) offers sample language for discussing suicide with children of different developmental levels within the document: "Guidelines for Schools Responding to a Death by Suicide." This guidance document can be found at the website of the NCSCB at www.schoolcrisiscenter.org or at www.grievingstudents.org in the Additional Resources section.

Help Students Navigate the Process

Death by suicide should not be sensationalized or glamorized. Media coverage should be minimized—for example, avoiding front-page coverage or details about the means of suicide. At-risk individuals experiencing depression or feeling disenfranchised may find this type of attention appealing and experience more powerful thoughts or impulses about suicide themselves.

On the other hand, it is important to acknowledge the grief of survivors who lost a friend and classmate and to guide students toward resources for support. Discussions with students should be geared toward remembering what made the student special,

and not emphasize the way the student died.

In addressing the topic of suicide at this time, the focus should be on the importance of students talking with a trusted adult if they are considering harming themselves or suspect that someone they know is potentially suicidal. Information about suicide hotlines and other school and community programs for suicide prevention should be prominent in school materials and media coverage.

Causes and Risks

Suicide is usually the result of underlying depression or other mental health problems. It may also be related to alcohol or other substance abuse. In general, this is not a logical "choice" made by someone who is thinking clearly and able to consider a range of solutions to problems.

The ready access to lethal means of self-harm, especially firearms, is a major risk factor.

In presentations to students, it's important to destigmatize seeking help for depression, other mental health problems, and substance abuse. Emphasize that while thoughts of escape through suicide may be fairly common—many people have such thoughts at some point in their lives—these thoughts are normally set aside by clear thinking.

Self-destructive behaviors occur when a person is not able to think clearly. They are often the result of impaired problem-solving abilities.

The Danger of Keeping Secrets

Peers often know when a friend is thinking of self-harm. They are often asked to keep this information confidential.

Explain that just as true friends don't allow their friends to drink and drive, they should never agree to keep suicidal intentions secret. Emphasize that this advice is intended to help prevent future deaths by suicide, not to make people feel guilty if they had concerns or information about someone who completed a suicide and chose not to bring that to an adult's attention.

Commemorating the Death

Avoid formal acts that recognize and memorialize someone in the school community who has died by suicide. This would include actions such as a yearbook dedication or planting a tree or placing a plaque in the person's honor.

We generally recommend that for all deaths, no matter the



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cause, informal, individualized responses that are meaningful to students be chosen instead. In the case of someone who has died by suicide, for example, students may wish to implement a yearly speaker series addressing topics related to the mental health of students. They might want to arrange a community service initiative that isn't directly related to suicide. They might choose personal gestures rather than organize a broader, school-wide activity.

After a student dies by suicide, it is particularly important not to invite anonymous comments from students. Some schools have posted a large piece of paper in an unattended area and invited students to write comments. Negative comments about the deceased or the means of death may be written in these situations. Other students who are considering suicide themselves may disclose this, and there is no way to follow up or provide assistance.

Preventing Another Suicide

A major goal of suicide postvention activities (those that occur after a death by suicide) is to decrease the risk of another suicide. Those closest to the deceased should be given additional support at this time. So should individuals who believe they may have neglected or mistreated the person who died. They may feel guilt themselves or be targeted and blamed by peers—for example, an ex-girlfriend who just ended a relationship with the deceased.

Individuals experiencing depression, those who have contemplated or attempted suicide in the past, or those with family members who died by or are at risk for suicide may also have more difficulties and warrant additional support.

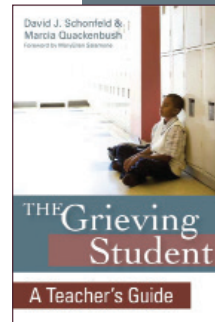
School counselors, school nurses, school psychologists,

and school social workers can help teachers and other school staff identify risk factors and signs of distress among individual students that may indicate the need for mental health services beyond what is offered in the school.

Schools should communicate with other schools and community mental health agencies to monitor whether there is an increase in suicide attempts, or any pattern that would suggest a possible suicide pact or cluster. If this is a possibility, we strongly recommend involving experts who have experience dealing with suicide clusters in order to minimize the chance of secondary cases.

Use Guidance From Other Modules

Commemoration and Memorialization provides guidelines for memorializing a member of the school community who has died.



For more information on supporting grieving students, refer to *The Grieving Student: A Teacher's Guide* by David Schonfeld and Marcia Quackenbush.

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