

### **MEMORIALIZATION**

School communities often wish to memorialize a student who has died, reflecting a basic human desire to remember those we have lost. It can be challenging for schools to strike a balance between compassionately meeting the needs of distraught students while preserving the ability of the school to fulfill its primary purpose of education. In the case of suicide, schools must consider how to appropriately memorialize the student who died without risking suicide contagion among other students who may themselves be at risk.

### **KEY CONSIDERATIONS**

It is very important that schools strive to treat all deaths in the same way. Having one approach for memorializing a student who died of cancer or in a car accident and a different approach for a student who died by suicide reinforces stigma and may be deeply and unfairly painful to the student's family and friends.

Nevertheless, because adolescents are especially vulnerable to the risk of suicide contagion, it's equally important to memorialize the student in a way that doesn't inadvertently glamorize or romanticize either the student or the death. Schools can do this by seeking opportunities to emphasize the connection between suicide and underlying mental health issues such as depression or anxiety that can cause substantial psychological pain but may not be apparent to others (or that may manifest as behavioral problems or substance abuse).

Wherever possible, schools should both meet with the student's friends and coordinate with the family, in the interest of identifying a meaningful, safe approach to acknowledging the loss. This section includes several creative suggestions for memorializing students who have died by suicide.

### **Funerals and Memorial Services**

All the recommendations made here focus on keeping the regular school schedule intact to the maximum extent possible for the benefit of the entire student body (including those who may not have known the deceased).

While at first glance schools may appear to provide an obvious setting for a funeral or memorial service because of their connection to the community and their ability to accommodate a large crowd, it is strongly advised that such services not be held on school grounds, to enable the school to focus instead on maintaining its regular schedule, structure, and routine. Additionally, using a room in the school for a funeral service can inextricably connect that space to the death, making it difficult for students to return there for regular classes or activities.

In situations where school personnel are able to collaborate with the family regarding the funeral or memorial service arrangements, it is also strongly advised that the service be held outside of school hours.

If the family does hold the service during school hours, it is recommended that school remain open and that school buses not be used to transport students to and from the service. Students should be permitted to leave school to attend the service only with appropriate parental permission (regular school protocols should be followed for dismissing students over the age of majority).

If possible, the school should coordinate with the family and funeral director to arrange for counselors to attend the service. A guide for funeral directors is available at

<http://www.sprc.org/library/funeraldirectors.pdf>. In all cases, the principal or another senior administrator should attend the funeral.

Schools should strongly encourage parents whose children express an interest in attending the funeral to attend with them. This provides not only emotional support but also an opportunity for parents to open a discussion with their children and remind them that help is available if they or a friend are in need.

### **Spontaneous Memorials**

In the immediate aftermath of a suicide death, it is not unusual for students to create a spontaneous memorial by leaving flowers, cards, poems, pictures, stuffed animals, or other items in a place closely associated with the student, such as his or her locker or classroom seat, or at the site where the student died. Students may even come to school wearing t-shirts or buttons bearing photographs of the deceased student.

The school's goal should be to balance the students' need to grieve with the goal of limiting the risk of inadvertently glamorizing the death. In all cases, schools should have a consistent policy so that suicide deaths are handled in the same manner as any other deaths. A combination of time limits and straightforward communication can help to restore equilibrium and avoid glamorizing the death in ways that may increase the risk of contagion. Although it may in some cases be necessary to set limits for students, it is important to do so with compassion and sensitivity, offering creative suggestions whenever possible. For example, schools may wish to make poster board and markers available so that students can gather and write messages. It is advisable to set up the posters in an area that may be avoided by those who don't wish to participate (i.e., not in the cafeteria or at the front entrance). After a few days, the posters can be removed and offered to the family.

When a memorial is spontaneously created on school grounds, schools are advised to monitor it for messages that may be inappropriate (hostile or inflammatory) or that indicate students who may themselves be at risk. Schools can leave such memorials in place until after the funeral (or for up to approximately five days), after which the tribute objects may be offered to the family. It is generally not necessary to prohibit access to the site or to cordon it off, which would merely draw excessive attention to it.

It is recommended that schools discourage requests to create and distribute t-shirts and buttons bearing images of the deceased by explaining that, while these items may be comforting to some students, they may be quite upsetting to others. If students come to school wearing such items without first seeking permission, it is recommended that they be allowed to wear the items for that day only, and that it should be explained to them that repeatedly bringing images of the deceased student into the school can be disruptive and can glamorize suicide.

Since the emptiness of the deceased student's chair can be unsettling and evocative, after approximately five days (or after the funeral), seat assignments may be re-arranged to create a new environment. Teachers should explain in advance that the intention is to strike a compassionate balance between honoring the student who has died while at the same time returning the focus back to the classroom curriculum. The students can be involved in planning how to respectfully remove the desk; for example, they could read a statement that emphasizes their love for their friend and their commitment to work to eradicate suicide in his or her memory.

When a spontaneous memorial occurs off school grounds, the school's ability to exert influence is limited. It can, nevertheless, encourage responsible approach among the students by explaining

that it is recommended that memorials be time-limited (again, approximately five days, or until after the funeral), at which point the memorial would be disassembled and the items offered to the family. Another approach is to suggest that the students participate in a (supervised) ceremony to disassemble the memorial, during which music could be played and students could be permitted to take part of it home; the rest of the items would then be offered to the family.

Students may also hold spontaneous gatherings or candlelight vigils. Schools should discourage gatherings that are large and unsupervised; when necessary, administrators may consider enlisting the cooperation of local police to monitor off-campus sites for safety. Counselors can also be enlisted to attend these gatherings to offer support, guidance, and supervision.

It is *not* recommended that flags be flown at half-staff (a decision generally made by local government authorities rather than the school administration in any event).

### **School Newspapers**

Coverage of the student's death in the school newspaper may be seen as a kind of memorial; also, articles can be used to educate students about suicide warning signs and available resources. It is strongly recommended that any such coverage be reviewed by an adult to ensure that it conforms to the standards set forth in *Reporting on Suicide: Recommendations for the Media*, which was created by the nation's leading suicide prevention organizations.

### **Events**

The student's classmates may wish to dedicate an event (such as a dance performance, poetry reading, or sporting event) to the memory of their friend. End-of-the-year activities may raise questions of whether to award a posthumous degree or prize, or include a video tribute to the deceased student during graduation. The guiding principle is that all deaths should be treated the same way. Schools may also wish to encourage the student's friends to consider creative suggestions, such as organizing a suicide prevention-awareness or fundraising event.

Often, the parents of the deceased student express an interest in holding an assembly or other event to address the student body and describe the intense pain the suicide death has caused to their family in the hopes that this will dissuade other students from taking their own lives. While it is surely understandable that bereaved parents would wish to prevent another suicide death, schools are strongly advised to explain that this is not an effective approach to suicide prevention and may in fact even be risky, because students who are suffering from depression or other mental health issues may hear the messaging very differently from the way it is intended, and may even become more likely to act on their suicidal thoughts. Instead, parents should be encouraged to work with the school to bring an appropriate educational program to the school, such as *More than Sad: Teen Depression*, a DVD that educates teens about the signs and symptoms of depression {available at <http://www.morethansad.org>} or others that are listed in the Suicide Prevention Resource Center/American Foundation for Suicide Prevention Best Practices Registry (available at <http://www.sprc.org>).

### **Yearbooks**

Again, the guiding principle is that all deaths should be treated the same way. So if there is a history of dedicating the yearbook (or a page of the yearbook) to students who have died, that policy is equally applicable to a student who has died by suicide, provided that an adult makes final editorial decisions.

Whenever possible, the focus should be on mental health and/or suicide prevention. For example, underneath the student's picture it might say, "In your memory we will work to erase the stigma surrounding mental illness and suicide." The page might also include pictures of classmates engaging in a suicide prevention event such as an Out of the Darkness community walk (<http://www.outofthedarkness.org>).

### **Graduation**

If there is a tradition of including a tribute to deceased students who would have graduated with the class, students who have died by suicide should likewise be included. For example, schools may wish to include a brief statement acknowledging and naming those students from the graduating class who have died. Final decisions about what to include in such tributes should be made by an adult.

### **Permanent Memorials and Scholarships**

Some communities wish to establish a permanent memorial (sometimes physical, such as planting a tree or installing a bench or plaque; sometimes commemorative, such as a scholarship). Others are afraid to do so.

While there is no research to suggest that permanent memorials per se create a risk of contagion, they can prove to be upsetting reminders to bereaved students, and therefore disruptive to the school's goal of maintaining emotional regulation. Whenever possible, therefore, it is recommended that they be established off school grounds. Moreover, the school should bear in mind that once it plants a tree, puts up a plaque, installs a park bench, or establishes a named scholarship for one deceased student, it should be prepared to do so for others, which can become quite difficult to sustain over time.

### **Creative Suggestions**

Some schools may resist allowing any kind of memorialization at all, damping down on any student desire to publicly acknowledge the death for fear of glamorizing suicide and risking suicide contagion. But simply prohibiting any and all memorialization is problematic in its own right—it is deeply stigmatizing to the student's family and friends, and can generate intense negative reactions, which can exacerbate an already difficult situation and undermine the school's efforts to protect the student body's emotional regulation.

Schools can play an important role in channeling the energy and passion of the students (and greater community) in a positive direction, balancing the community's need to grieve with the impact that the proposed activity will likely have on students, particularly those who were closest to the student who died.

It can be helpful for schools to proactively suggest a meeting with the student's close friends to talk about the type and timing of any memorialization. This can provide an important opportunity for the students to be heard and for the school to sensitively explain its rationale for permitting certain kinds of activities and not others. Schools may even wish to establish a standing committee composed of students, school administrators, and family members that can be convened on an as-needed basis.

It can also be helpful for schools to come equipped with specific, constructive suggestions for safe memorialization, such as:

- Holding a day of community service or creating a school-based community service program in honor of the deceased
- Putting together a team to participate in an awareness or fundraising event sponsored by one of the national mental health or suicide prevention organizations (e.g., <http://www.outofthedarkness.org>), or holding a local fundraising event to support a local crisis hotline or other suicide prevention program
- Sponsoring a mental health awareness day
- Purchasing books on mental health for the school or local library
- Working with the administration to develop and implement a curriculum focused on effective problem-solving
- Volunteering at a community crisis hotline
- Raising funds to help the family defray their funeral expenses
- Making a book available in the school office for several weeks in which students can write messages to the family, share memories of the deceased, or offer condolences; the book can then be presented to the family on behalf of the school community

**Additional Information**

Centre for Suicide Prevention (Calgary). School Memorials After Suicide: Helpful or harmful? (2004). [http://www.sprc.org/library\\_resources/items/school-memorials-after-suicide-helpful-or-harmful](http://www.sprc.org/library_resources/items/school-memorials-after-suicide-helpful-or-harmful)

Gould, M. et al. Media Contagion and Suicide Among the Young. *American Behavioral Scientist* 46:9 (May 2003) 1269-1284.

Jellinek, M. et al. When a Student Dies. *Educational Leadership Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development* (November 2007); 78-82.

National Association of School Psychologists. Memorial Activities at School: A List of "Do's" and "Don'ts" (2002). [http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis\\_safety/memorialdo\\_donot.pdf](http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/memorialdo_donot.pdf)

National School Board Association. Student Suicide Memorial Policy. *School Board News*.18 (March 24, 1998).