

## **SECTION III: POSTVENTION RESPONSE TO SUICIDE OF A SCHOOL COMMUNITY MEMBER**

Postvention (interventions that are conducted after a suicide) assists students in ways that promote the mental health of the entire school community and supports students experiencing a mental or suicidal crisis after the suicidal death of a school community member. These interventions are meant to help manage the various aspects of the crisis and prevent contagion. Support and resources are provided for students, staff, parents and the entire community. All aspects of postvention strive to treat the loss in similar ways to that of other deaths within the school community and to return the school environment to its normal routine as soon as is possible. In this way, postvention is inextricably linked to prevention.

### **A. STEPS TO TAKE IN THE IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH**

#### **1. Day Zero (day of event)**

##### **a. Contact key individuals**

##### **i. Principal or Designee Verifies Death**

- Verify details of death with police or other local authority (see Attachment 3.16, ‘Working With the Community’)
- See Attachment 3.2 ‘Sample Postvention Telephone Tree’

##### **ii. Principal or Designee Contacts Family (see “Guidelines for Working With the Family”, attachment 3.3, p. 70)**

- Express sympathy as you would for any sudden death (see Appendix C5, “Comforting a Grieving Individual”)
- Inquire about what the school can share about their loss. If family is unwilling or not ready to share, help the family craft a message that they do want released in order to minimize rumors, misinformation, and speculation. Acknowledge that this is a great tragedy and assist them in understanding that crafting a message about the cause of death will help their child’s friends who are suffering.
- Ask what the school can do to support siblings.
- Ask what school can do to support them (e.g., PTA to assist providing meals, inform family about Kara or local grief support and AFSP “Surviving Suicide Loss” support such as the “Survivor Outreach Program” etc.)
  - AFSP’s Surviving a Suicide Loss: A Resource and Healing Guide:  
[http://openhightschoolcourses.org/pluginfile.php/11763/mod\\_resource/content/1/PRESENTATIONS\\_MISCELLANEOUS/Resource\\_Healing\\_Guide.pdf](http://openhightschoolcourses.org/pluginfile.php/11763/mod_resource/content/1/PRESENTATIONS_MISCELLANEOUS/Resource_Healing_Guide.pdf)
  - AFSP Survivor Outreach Program  
Call: 212-363-3500, ext. 2035 Email: [survivingsuicidloss@afsp.org](mailto:survivingsuicidloss@afsp.org)
  - Kara Grief Support: [http://www.kara-grief.org/joomla/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=59&Itemid=122](http://www.kara-grief.org/joomla/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=59&Itemid=122)
- Let them know the school will be checking in with them in the coming days and weeks to determine what support the school can provide

**iii. Principal Notifies Superintendent or Director of Student Services Who Notifies Schools Where Siblings and Close Relatives Attend**

- Shut down deceased student and his/her siblings in attendance system so no automated messages regarding absence are sent home
- Shut down face-page on District IT system

**iv. CRT leader notified who then activates Crisis Response Team**

**v. Ensure office staff knows how to respond to inquiries (see Attachment 3.4, "Sample Script for Office Staff")**

**vi. Campus Supervisor to prevent unauthorized visitors on campus**

**vii. Work with district to secure community mental health providers**

**viii. See Attachment 3.2 'Sample Postvention Telephone Tree'**

**b. Notify School Community**

**i. CRT Leader to notify all faculty and staff (see Attachment 3.5, "Guidelines for Notifying Staff,)**

**ii. Principal to notify families of students about the death and the school's response (see Attachment 3.6 "Sample Letter to Families", and Attachment 3.7, "Sample Death Notification for Parents")**

- Communicate letter to families in the most expedient way so they will know what their student will be facing at school when the death is announced.
- Letter should include a list of local resources (refer to Appendix B2, "Mental Health Resources")

**2. Day One (first school day after event)**

**a. Initial All-Staff Meeting (before school)**

**i. Crisis Response Team Leader conducts the initial all-staff meeting with principal or designated administrator. For a suggested meeting agenda, refer to Attachment 3.8, "Sample Agenda for Initial All-Staff Meeting"**

**ii. A few goals of this meeting are to:**

**1. Convey what information can be relayed to students**

- For sample announcements, refer to Attachment 3.9, "Sample Announcements" and "Sample Death Notification Statement for Students"
- Prepare staff to inform students in first period classes. In order to deal with student reactions provide them with copies of:
  - Attachment 3.10, "Talking About Suicide"
  - Attachment 3.11, "Talking Points for Students and Staff After a Suicide"
  - Attachment 3.12, "Sample Grief Discussion with Students"
  - Attachment 3.13, "Facts About Suicide and Mental Disorders in Adolescents"
- Identify staff uncomfortable with notifying students of the death. Designate CRT members or counselors to support those staff members in their classrooms throughout the school day.

- Remind staff who the designated media spokesperson is and that they should refer any outside requests for comments or information to this individual.
2. Control rumors
    - Attachment 1.3 for Social Media
  3. Provide staff support
    - Inform teachers that roving substitute teachers are available for those instructors who may need a short break.
    - Advise staff that extra support is available for those who need it.
    - Offer end of day meeting for staff to debrief and to obtain support.
    - Provide staff with resources for themselves and the community (see Appendix B2, “Mental Health Resources” and Attachment 1.1 ‘The Imperative of Compassionate Self-Care’)
  4. Remind staff of risk factors and warning signs (see Attachment 1.9, “Risk Factors for Youth Suicide”, and Attachment 1.11, “Recognizing and Responding to Warning Signs of Suicide”) and to use gatekeeper training as situation warrants, etc.
  5. Inform staff where to send at-risk students and that they must be sent with another student or escorted by adult - **never alone**
  6. Identify designated locations on campus for students who would like to support one another with a trusted adult nearby. Determine who should monitor these stations (activities director, other mental health providers). Provide snacks if possible along with art and writing supplies for creative expression that may later be preserved for the student’s family.
  7. Share parent location designated for parents who come to campus to ask questions and express concerns.
- Send follow up email after the staff meeting with information discussed in the first meeting and any additional details, such as list of local resources.

**b. Support Students During the School Day**

- i. Counselors (preferably two) follow deceased student’s schedule to assess students and to assist teachers
- ii. Identify, monitor, and support students who may be at risk
  - Recognize that students who were close to deceased and known vulnerable students may be at-risk for suicide. Assign a CRT member to develop a list of students of concern with input from others.
  - Meet with at-risk students, document, and follow-up as needed.
- iii. Designate someone to circulate on campus to determine who might be in need and to monitor for rumors (e.g. campus supervisor).
- iv. Meet with students in small groups including established groups of the deceased (e.g. sports, clubs, friend groups) to provide emotional support. Meeting should be facilitated by counselor, school psychologist, community counseling and grief support, etc. To guide the meeting refer to Attachment 3.10, “Talking About Suicide”, Attachment 3.11, “Talking Points for Students and Staff After a Suicide”, and Attachment 3.12, “Sample Grief Discussion With Students”.

### **c. After-School Staff Meeting**

- i.** Acknowledge that it's been a difficult day for everyone and that this meeting is an opportunity to share experiences from the day and what their needs for support will be for the next day.
- ii.** Inform staff as to the continued availability of roving substitute teachers and counselors. Determine this based upon expressed need and day one experiences in the classroom.
- iii.** Allow staff to express concerns and ask questions.
- iv.** Emphasize self-care for teachers/staff since they have been primarily focused on taking care of students.
- v.** Reminder to continue to identify, monitor, and support students who may be at risk.

### **3. Advise on Appropriate Memorialization**

In the interest of identifying a meaningful, safe approach to acknowledging the loss, schools should both meet with the student's friends and coordinate with the family. 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. Refer to Attachment 3.14, "Memorialization" for more information from the AFSP & SPRC.

#### **Key Considerations for Memorialization**

- Any memorial should have the goals of being life-affirming, raising awareness, and reducing stigma.
- Encourage contributions to suicide prevention or mental health organizations such as AFSP, or to any other local/national organization that supports youth mental health promotion or suicide prevention.
- Because adolescents are especially vulnerable to the risk of suicide contagion, it's 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 brain conditions 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).
- Determine a date/time to gather materials from spontaneous memorials so that they can be organized and given to the family. Well in advance of this time, let students know when this will occur.
- CRT should be available to students concerned about rumors or social media postings about the death. Social media can be used effectively for the dissemination of accurate information and to promote suicide prevention efforts. See Attachment 3.19, "Media", for recommendations.

### **4. Key Considerations for Funeral/Memorial Service (see Attachment 3.14, "Memorialization")**

- a.** Discuss with the family the importance of informing clergy or whoever will be conducting the funeral about the risk of suicide contagion among adolescents.

- b. Communicate the importance of emphasizing the connection between suicide and underlying brain conditions (such as depression), as noted in the key considerations for memorialization listed above.
- c. Encourage the family to consider holding the funeral outside of school hours if at all possible.
- d. If family asks, principal should communicate with the funeral director about logistics, including need for mental health professionals and/or grief counselors to be present at the funeral.
- e. Depending on family wishes, the Principal will disseminate information about the funeral to students, parents, and staff as soon as it becomes available. Include the following information in the announcement:
  - i. Location of the funeral
  - ii. Time of the funeral (keep school open if the funeral is during school hours)
  - iii. What to expect (e.g. whether there will be an open casket)
  - iv. Guidance regarding how to express condolences to the family (e.g. treat like any other sudden death, family wishes for charitable donations vs. flowers, etc.). See Appendix C5, "Comforting a Grieving Individual" for helpful recommendations.
  - v. School policy for releasing students during school hours to attend (i.e., students will be released only with permission of parent, guardian, or designated adult).
  - vi. Consider having a trusted adult or family member accompany students who choose to attend the funeral to provide support.
- f. Support grieving students - See Attachment 3.25 ' Grief for Children and Teens After Suicide'

## **5. Minimize Risk of Suicide Contagion by Working with the Media**

*For more information on Contagion - See Attachment 3.2 'Contagion and Clusters'*

- a. CRT leader to direct all media inquiries to the district media spokesperson.
- b. Assemble media packet.
  - i. A statement is prepared in advance and a hard copy provided by media spokesperson when contacted by outside organizations for comments or information regarding the death.
  - ii. For guidelines and sample statements refer to:
    - o Attachment 3.18, "Guidelines for Working With the Media"
    - o Attachment 3.20, "Sample Media Statement"
    - o Attachment 3.21, "Key Messages for Media Spokesperson"
  - iii. Include Appendix B2, "Mental Health Resources" for local resources and hotline numbers
  - iv. Provide media with SPRC/AFSP media guidelines (see Attachment 3.22, "Recommendations For Reporting on Suicide", and Attachment 3.23, "At-a-Glance: Safe Reporting on Suicide").
    - o <https://suicidepreventioncommunity.files.wordpress.com/2008/10/media-guide-suicide-summary3.pdf>
    - <https://afsp.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/recommendations.pdf>
- c. For more on the 'Imperative of Compassionate Self Care' refer to Attachment 1.1 in the Promotion of Mental Wellness section.

## **B. STEPS TO TAKE IN THE LONG-TERM AFTERMATH**

### **1. Coordinate implementation of long-term response protocol**

- a. Schedule daily debriefs with Crisis Response Team while in initial assessment period to discuss

at-risk students who need follow-up and to review confidential database. This generally lasts 1-2 weeks, but can vary with the situation.

- b. Discuss with family of deceased student any concerns they may have for siblings, friends or acquaintances and follow up accordingly. Counselor monitors and checks in with at-risk students as long as needed. Documents name of student, date/time of check-in, assessment of areas of concern, follow-up referrals and notifications on standardized forms (see Attachment 3.15, "Student Suicide Risk Documentation Form").
- c. Send e-mail updates to staff to keep them informed about funeral arrangements; resources and supports available for them; physical, emotional, cognitive, and social manifestations of grief in students; referral process for students of concern, etc. This generally lasts 1-2 weeks, but can vary with the situation.
- d. Develop prearranged protocol for removing personal items from locker or desk, respecting family wishes for privacy and/or support
- e. Use QPR/gatekeeper techniques as needed
- f. Convene CRT and facilitate a tactical debriefing of what worked and what could be improved upon during the initial assessment period (1-2 weeks post-intervention). Team leader documents successes, challenges, and recommendations for improvement to be incorporated into the Comprehensive Suicide Prevention Toolkit.

## **2. Enhance identification and support of vulnerable students**

- a. Identify students in need and refer to counselor (note alternative approaches to identifying students at risk in Section I: Promotion of Mental Health Wellness). Attendance office to alert health tech or counselor about increased student absences.
- b. Continue to monitor for rumors.
- c. Campus supervisor to rove on campus throughout the day and monitor the emotional climate (e.g., an increase in fights or school delinquency).
- d. Continue to meet with students in small groups, especially those groups of which the deceased student was a member.
- e. Recommend more individual supports (make sure to offer continued support if needed).
- f. See Section Intervention - 'Identify and Monitor At-Risk Students' on page 103.

## **3. Prepare for anniversaries and special events**

- a. Prior to graduation ceremonies for the deceased student's class, check with family about any requests. Acknowledgment of a student who has died by suicide should be consistent with acknowledgement of a student who has died by any other means.
- b. Be aware of special events (e.g. proms, birthday etc.), holidays, and anniversaries, as these may activate possible stress/grief responses (physical, emotional, social, cognitive) in students or staff. See Attachment 3.17, "Guidelines for Anniversaries of a Death".
- c. The probability of contagion is heightened on the anniversary of the death as well as on other meaningful days.

## **4. Expect the possibility of long term memorials (see Attachment 3.14, "Memorialization") and continue to work with family, students, and social media.**

- 5. Provide support as needed for siblings of the deceased enrolled in the district.** Coordinate with parents. Refer to and choose among the resources located in Appendix B for more information as needed.
- 6. Principal or designee to remain in contact with family through the funeral and in the weeks following death.**
- 7. Communicate with and support the broader school community.**
  - a. Provide parent/community education about suicide, grief, and self-care within the first month following death.
  - b. Site-based staff, district psychiatrist, district nurse may show AFSP “More than Sad” program <https://afsp.org/our-work/education/more-than-sad/>

providing staff and parents with information about warning signs of suicide, risk-and-protective factors, importance of means restriction, supportive services, community resources, crisis line, and helpful responses to student ques