

CRISIS PREVENTION AND RESPONSE

Appendix B: Information and Resource Guide

Helping Students Cope:

In the aftermath of a suicide, students and others in the school community may—not surprisingly—feel emotionally overwhelmed, which can disrupt the school’s ability to return to its primary function of educating students, and can increase the risk of prolonged stress responses and even suicide contagion. The following are strategies that schools can use to help students balance the timing and intensity of their emotional expression and restore the school’s ability to function effectively.

Three basic things you can always do:

1. **Show you care** – Listen carefully and be genuine. *“I’m concerned about you.”*
2. **Ask the question** – Be direct, caring and non-confrontational. *“Are you thinking about suicide?”*
3. **Get Help** – Contact others based on the warning signs. *“You are not alone. I will help you get the help you need.”*

Key Considerations:

The term *emotional regulation* refers to a person’s ability to appropriately experience and express intense emotions such as grief and fear. Most adolescents have mastered basic skills that allow them to handle strong emotions encountered day to day. But these skills may be challenged in the face of a suicide. In addition, young people may not yet have learned how to recognize complex feelings or physical indicators of distress, such as stomach upset, restlessness, or insomnia. Moreover, adolescence marks a time of increased risk for difficulties with emotional regulation, given the intensification of emotional responses that come with puberty and the structural changes in the brain that occur during this developmental period. It is therefore important for schools to provide students with appropriate opportunities to express their emotions and identify strategies for managing them, so the school can continue its primary focus of education.

When implementing these strategies, leadership will most likely be provided by the school counselor, school nurse, and/or community mental health partner, all of whom should be members of the school’s Crisis Response Team. However, all adults in the school community can help by modeling calm, caring, and thoughtful behavior.

Meeting with students:

It will likely be necessary to adjust the regular academic schedule in order to spend time with students to help address their emotional needs. It is preferable to reach out to students in a deliberate and timely way rather than to allow the emotional environment to escalate. It is also preferable to meet with students in small groups, which enables adults to identify those youth who appear in need of additional attention.

If possible, have counselors go into the classrooms to give students accurate information about suicide, the kinds of reactions that can be expected after hearing about a peer’s suicide death, and safe coping strategies to help them in the coming days and weeks. Wherever possible, group meetings should follow a structured outline, keep to a time limit, and provide each student with an opportunity to speak. The meetings should focus on helping

students identify and express their feelings and discuss practical coping strategies (including appropriate ways to memorialize the loss) so they may return their focus to their regular routines and activities.

Practical Coping Strategies:

Encourage students to think about specific things they can do when intense emotions such as worry or sadness begin to well up, including:

- Simple relaxation and distraction skills: taking three deep slow breaths, counting to 10, or picturing themselves in a favorite calm and relaxing place.
- Engaging in favorite activities or hobbies such as music, talking with a friend, reading, or going to a movie.
- Exercising.
- Thinking about how they've coped with difficulties in the past and reminding themselves that they can use those same coping skills now.
- Writing a list of people they can turn to for support.
- Writing a list of things they're looking forward to.
- Focusing on individual goals, such as returning to a shared class or spending time with mutual friends.

Often, youth will express guilt about having fun or thinking about other things. They may feel that they somehow need permission to engage in activities that will help them feel better and take their mind off the stressful situation.

Students should also be encouraged to think about how they want to remember their friend. Ideas range from writing a personal note to the family, to attending the memorial service, to doing something kind for another person in honor of their friend. Be sure to educate students about the school's guidelines regarding memorialization. Acknowledging their need to express their feelings while helping them identify appropriate ways to do so can begin the process of returning their focus to their daily lives and responsibilities.

Suicide Warning Signs

These signs may mean someone is at risk for suicide. Risk is greater if a behavior is new or has recently increased in frequency or intensity, and if it seems related to a painful event, loss, or change.

- Talking about wanting to die or kill oneself.
- Looking for ways to kill oneself, such as searching online or buying a gun.
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live.
- Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain.
- Talking about being a burden to others.
- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs.
- Acting anxious or agitated, or behaving recklessly.
- Sleeping too little or too much.
- Withdrawing or feeling isolated.
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge.
- Displaying extreme mood swings.

Adapted from After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools, created by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention/Suicide Prevention Resource Center Workgroup and The Suicide, Prevention, Intervention, and Postvention manual – San Diego County.