

# EDUCATION

## POSTVENTION RESPONSE

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### INTRODUCTION:

Appropriate and timely interventions to a suicide or high profile attempt is an important protective factor and prevention measure for other members of the school community who may be vulnerable or at risk.

Given the density of teens and young adults all in one place and the similar demographics (age, hometown/geographic region, etc.), the opportunity for suicide contagion or clusters is very high.

The suicide of a student or staff of a school can have a devastating impact on students, staff, and administration. It is critical to have protocols in place to avoid succumbing to poor decision-making due to the emotional turmoil and inevitable chaos and confusion that follows these events. Developing written protocols in advance of an incident grounds everyone in what to expect and what to do. It can alleviate the pressure that sometimes occurs to “honor” or memorialize the deceased. Written protocols can also serve to protect the school administration about complaints of “unfair treatment.”

In this day of cell phones and instant messaging, information can travel rapidly. In the event of a suicide or serious attempt, the word will be out to family members, the community, and the media in an instant. Misinformation can also spread rapidly.

Some of the issues you will need to contend with may have complex and difficult legal and ethical implications. Identifying a clear answer or response may be further compounded by emotional attachments and grieving of staff and students. Having protocols in place will clarify tasks, roles, and responsibilities and ultimately improve the speed and quality of decisions regarding appropriate response to the event.

These protocols are an attempt to provide guidance for schools and school personnel in the event of a suicide in the school community. (Planning for a how to deal with a suicide should also include the possibility of a staff suicide.)

This protocol builds on the concept of having an identified team or crisis coordinator who will coordinate the school response to a suicide event. Developing and identifying a crisis coordinator is explained in greater detail in the Attempts and Threats section.

## **DISCOVERY OF A SUICIDE ON SCHOOL GROUNDS OR AT SCHOOL EVENT:**

- Render or request first aid if there is any possibility the individual may be saved or resuscitated.
- Immediately contact:
  - Nurse/EMT's (if indicated)
  - Police
  - Crisis Coordinator
  - School Administration
- Secure the scene:
  - Police will need to investigate in order to determine the official cause of death.
  - Avoid moving the body or disturbing any other evidence.
  - Keep students/onlookers away.
  - Write down names of all staff and students who witnessed the event or discovered the suicide.
    - If possible, keep these people together on-site and away from the general student/staff population. Provide them with support until the police have had a chance to talk with them and/or debriefing or counseling can be provided.
      - Provide debriefing for these individuals as quickly as possible (after police are done questioning them). Allowing them to discuss the details of what they witnessed with multiple staff and/or students can cause secondary trauma for people who did not witness the event.
      - In the event that debriefing is not available, provide them with support and encourage them to strike a balance between not going into graphic detail with others about what they observed vs. getting needed support from family and friends.
- Notification of family or next of kin:
  - In the event that a suicide takes place at school or a school event, have law enforcement notify family or next of kin. (See Law Enforcement protocol.)
  - Identify any siblings who may be in your school or another school and determine who will notify them and when and how that will occur.
  - One option to consider is sending a school representative with the police to notify family. This would depend on relationship with the family, police, etc.

## **COMPLETED SUICIDE OFF SCHOOL GROUNDS:**

- Get The Facts:
  - Situations involving suicide and suicide attempts are often clouded by misinformation, rumor, and innuendo. It is imperative to get the facts first before jumping into action.
  - Work with law enforcement or other reliable resources to confirm the death and cause of death and any other pertinent information before moving forward with your plan.
  - Under NH law, the cause (gunshot, asphyxiation, etc.) and manner (suicide, homicide) of death are a matter of public record. The NH Chief Medical Examiner's office (603) 271-1235 can provide this information in most situations. In some cases, toxicology tests take 6-8 weeks for results to be returned and the death certificate to be issued.
- Convene school-based Crisis Response Team.
- Notify superintendent who will notify the school board.
- Contact with family:
  - The principal or his/her designee should contact the family to express condolences and to gather information about funeral arrangements.
  - Grieving families often find it extremely difficult to accept that their family member took their own life and may not want this information made "public." (Even though many times everyone in the community is aware of the manner of death.) This creates a difficult dilemma for educators who are caught between being respectful of the family's wishes and reducing the risk of suicide contagion by being direct and open with students.

- One approach to this dilemma is to openly discuss this with the family. This would involve letting them know that being open and direct about this suicide can reduce the risk for others in the community who may be vulnerable.
    - Clergy or undertakers may be valuable allies in this process.
- Notifying your local police department, mental health center, clergy association, teen drop-in center or after school programs, or other social service agency will give these organizations advance notice so that they might provide additional support for the community and students.
- You may wish to ask for crisis assistance/support for staff and students:
  - Your local community mental health center may be able to send trained clinicians to provide counseling and support. Call the Helpline 1-(800) 852-3388 to contact the mental health center nearest you.
  - The State of New Hampshire also has a Disaster Behavioral Response team to assist in these situations. You may request assistance from these teams by contacting the Emergency Services Director of your local mental health center or by calling Paul Deignan (603) 271-2231. (See Resources section at bottom.)
  - On the seacoast, a volunteer team provides Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD). Contact Ann Bliss at the Center for Trauma Intervention pager # (603) 240-7239. (See Resources section below.)
  - Local clergy might also be willing to be available to speak with students at school.
- Disclosure of information to students and staff:
  - Have an existing plan in place that will be followed.
  - Be sure to notify siblings (and provide appropriate support) before the general school population is informed.
  - Announcements should be made to small groups of students by a teacher or staff person who is familiar with them (e.g. homeroom teacher). These small meetings should occur with all students at the same time and allow time for some follow-up discussion.
  - Ideally, it is best to identify those students who are closest to the student and tell them together. (E.g. teammates, social group, best friends, etc.) Bringing together the students who are likely to be impacted the greatest has several advantages, including:
    - You can target them with the best supports.
    - They can support each other.
    - It may lessen the impact on other students who did not know the individual as well.
  - Do not use large assemblies for communicating information regarding suicides or suicide attempts. (Smaller groups are more effective because they prevent secondary trauma to students not directly involved, minimize mass emotions and hysteria, and they encourage dialogue between staff and students.)
  - Do not use a PA system or other form of general announcement. (This is very impersonal and discourages discussion and dialogue with staff and teachers who may help identify students at risk.)
  - Make the announcement early in the school day (so students can be provided with support and structure and an opportunity to talk).
    - Do not make an announcement immediately before dismissal.
  - Do be honest and direct about what occurred without going into graphic detail.
    - The more accurate information students are provided with, the less rumors and innuendo that will circulate.
    - Avoid using euphemisms or other indirect forms of communication.
    - Credibility and trust will be critical issues in the days following an incident. How the school handles the initial announcement is important in establishing that trust.
  - Following the announcement, do not allow students to leave school (mid-day) without parental permission or accompanied by an adult.
  - Provide students (and staff) with the opportunity for counseling and support.
    - Activate the School Crisis Response team.
    - Contact your community mental health center and ask for their assistance.

- Have the school administration consider asking a neighboring town/school for counseling support for students and staff.
- Consider having an emergency response team come to the school to provide grief counseling or Critical Incident Stress Debriefing. (See Resources/Links section below.)
- Do not close the school.
  - Many students will not have known or been close to the deceased.
  - Students who were close to the deceased may benefit from the structure, support, and routine of the school environment.
  - During a time of crisis, it is beneficial for students and staff to keep to a routine.
- Send a note or letter home to parents (with students) so they will be aware of what is happening. A note or letter serves several purposes:
  - Provides accurate and timely information to parents.
  - Allows the parents to provide extra support to their son/daughter.
  - Lets the parents know what the school is doing to respond to the situation.
  - Reduces the possibility for rumor or inaccurate information.
  - Provides the parents with contact information at the school if they are concerned about their son or daughter.
  - Involves the community in supporting students, staff, and the family of the deceased.
  - May be used to provide information to parents about suicide contagion and warning signs.
  - Developing a sample letter in advance can expedite the process when an event occurs.
- Provide students or their parents with information regarding funeral arrangements as soon as it is known.
- Have a plan in place for identifying and monitoring at risk students.

#### **MEMORIAL SERVICES AND REMEMBRANCES:**

In the aftermath of a suicide, one of the most challenging aspects for families, survivors, schools, and communities is planning a memorial service for the deceased. The memorial service can be a highly emotional event that has the potential for either increasing or decreasing the possibility of suicide contagion.

Suicide contagion can occur when events (such as memorial services and media coverage) glorify the life or sensationalize the death of the individual. This increases the risk factors for youth who are depressed, troubled, or at increased risk for suicide. Media reports, as well as memorial services, are two of the biggest factors that contribute to suicide contagion. It is a human tendency to overstate the positive qualities of the deceased while at the same time minimizing or even ignoring less positive attributes, particularly their decision to take their own life. Yet this inclination can increase the risk level of suicide for survivors.

Teens or young adults who are troubled, socially outcast, or at increased risk of suicide may wrongly perceive this glorifying and memorializing as the only option to “make good” for their own life. Believing they may be remembered in the same manner increases the risk that they may attempt or complete suicide. Essentially, the challenge becomes one of how to appropriately grieve, remember, and honor the deceased without (unintentionally) glorifying their death.

There may be a number of different viewpoints about what type of services or memorial to have. How to respect the wishes of grieving and emotional family, friends, or others, while balancing the need to reduce possible contagion, can be a very difficult task. Many community members play a role in this process. Clergy, funeral directors, and others who have access to the family and are likely to be consulted about planning the memorial services can help educate the family about the risk of contagion and assist in designing services that are both respectful and reduce the risk of more suicides.

Below are a set of suggestions and explanations about points to consider when designing a memorial service or remembrance.

- Contact your local community mental health center or other social service agency to see if they can have crisis/grief counselors available before and after the memorial service.
  - Be sure to let people know they will be available and how to connect with them.
- Have someone watch out for and provide extra support to those people who might be at greatest risk, including siblings, immediate family, girlfriend/boyfriend, teammates and other close friends.
- Work with local law enforcement officials to request their assistance.
  - They can often assist with directing traffic.
  - Discuss with them how they think they can best assist.
    - Their presence can have a calming effect for some youth/adults.
    - For other individuals, police presence may make them more tense or agitated.
    - Different police and police departments have different relationships with youth/communities. (Decide what works best for your situation/community.)
- Oftentimes, the suicide of a youth or young adult draws large crowds of mourners for memorial services. Be prepared for a large turnout and plan how to accommodate mourners.
- Some communities do not have a church or other public facility large enough to handle the anticipated crowd.
  - Consider all available options/locations including churches, civic halls, and neighboring communities.
  - Use school facilities only as a last resort (see below).
- Avoid any type of large scale memorial service or remembrance that takes place at school and especially during school hours.
  - Students who did not know the deceased may be traumatized by attending a mandatory or school-wide service.
  - Other students may forever associate that room/hall with the student's funeral or death.
  - If school facilities must be used:
    - Hold the service in the evening or on weekends when students can be accompanied by their parents and family or other responsible adult.
    - If possible, use an elementary school or middle school (off hours) so that it is not held at the same school the student and peers are currently attending.
  - Avoid closing the school during the memorial service. This gives students the option of whether they wish to attend or not. For some students and staff, staying with their usual routine (and supports) is the healthiest way to grieve.
- Do not allow permanent plaques or dedications to the individual to be erected in public buildings or other locations (other than traditional cemetery markers).
  - Do not dedicate yearbooks, dances, ballgames, etc. in memory of the person.
    - These types of memorials increase the likelihood of suicide contagion.
- Publicly acknowledge that the death is a suicide.
  - Providing factual and timely information about the cause and manner of death greatly reduces the rumor and innuendo that often accompany an untimely death.
  - Publicly acknowledging the suicide allows mental health, school officials, and others take steps to reduce possible suicide contagion.
  - The cause and manner of death listed on the death certificate is public information and can be obtained by the media or any qualified individual who calls the Medical Examiner's office. (603) 271-1253
  - In most communities/situations, believing that this information will remain a secret is not realistic.
- Celebrate the deceased's life, accomplishments, personal traits, etc.
  - Also talk about the loss/unknown potential of what the individual might have accomplished in the future.
  - Openly acknowledge and discuss the pain (anger) and heartache the death has caused.
    - Both of the above help reduce the risk of contagion by de-glamorizing the suicide.

- Some families choose to publicly disclose that the individual struggled with mental illness or substance abuse which contributed to their decision to take their own life.
  - This is one way of not glorifying the person's death by humanizing how mental illness/substance abuse impacted their life.
  - It also offers an opportunity to identify options for getting help to others for mental illness/substance abuse disorders.
- Encourage anyone who is depressed, or has been having thoughts of harming themselves, to ask for help.
- Encourage donations to the bereaved family, to favorite charities of the deceased or their family, or to suicide prevention efforts.
- Consider having a temporary memorial site where students or community members can leave remembrances and other personal expressions of grief. Examples include a scrapbook or spot where students can leave appropriate memorial remembrances.
  - Let people know in advance:
    - The display will be time limited. (e.g. 1 week)
    - All remembrances will be turned over to the family at the end of that time period.
- Review Media Recommendations (see Appendix) before talking with the media or providing the media with personal information about the deceased. A few key points to remember regarding the media:
  - The family is not obligated to speak with any media person.
  - The family may wish to identify a spokesperson (who is familiar with how to speak with the media about suicide) to talk on their behalf.
  - Redirect the media by asking them to focus their story on services available to youth in your community or to suicide prevention efforts (rather than details about the deceased's life/death).

Schools and other organizations face unique challenges in helping students, faculty, and staff grieve a suicide by a student or other member of the school community. A few special considerations for schools include:

- Have policies in place for appropriate commemorative activities for the death of any member of the school community. This eliminates the possibility that someone will perceive that the student who suicided received more or less attention than another death in the school community.
- A good rule of thumb to consider before deciding on a permanent memorial (for any student or staff death) is to consider what it would be like to times it by three or five if similar events happened in the future. What may seem like a good idea at the time (planting a tree, erecting a park bench, etc.), may seem much less appropriate when applied in multiples.
- Allow students and faculty time away from school to attend a wake, funeral, or other memorial service.
  - Consider allowing attendance at service to be an excused absence.
  - Require a note from parents giving permission to attend.
  - Encourage parents to attend the service with their son/daughter or have them be accompanied by another parent or responsible adult (if they are leaving school grounds).
  - Avoid using school transportation (buses) to transport students to and from the service. If school transportation will be used, it should be chaperoned by teachers, parents, or other adults who can provide support to students and keep an eye out for students who may need additional supports.

### **SELF-CARE SKILLS:**

Self-care skills are essential for everyone involved. This includes the survivors, as well as the people who are supporting them and caring for them. While these self-care skills may seem very basic, they are very important and can get easily pushed aside during the chaos and confusion that immediately follows a suicide. Talk openly about them and show by example how to follow them. For instance, you might bring a meal (or arrange for neighbors and friends to provide a series of meals) to the immediate family of the deceased. Or, offer to go for a walk or exercise with the person.

- Get plenty of rest.
- Maintain proper diet and nutrition; drink plenty of water.
- Exercise.
- Use relaxation skills. (See Distress Tolerance section in Appendix.)

- Be gentle with yourself/others.
- Seek out supportive people.
- Avoid use of (or increased use of) alcohol or other substances.
- Ask for help.

#### ONGOING EFFORTS

- Review and encourage self-care skills with students and staff.
- Boys in particular may be particularly vulnerable in that they may express their grief through rage and anger which easily goes unrecognized or is misunderstood.
- Develop school policies (in advance) for how the school newspaper will cover suicide events involving students or/at the school.
  - Follow the established Media Recommendations (Appendix) when developing these policies or when writing stories.
  - Have teachers or school advisors closely monitor/edit stories so that they follow school policies and established Media Recommendations.
- Remember that following a suicide or similar traumatic event, the grieving and healing process will take months and years.
- Make a commitment to stay with the process for the long run.
- Recognize that different people grieve in different ways.

#### RESOURCES:

This article is written by a high school journalism professor and reviews her personal experience with covering student suicide in the school newspaper. <http://ojr.org/ojr/highschool/p1022803113.php>

#### RESOURCES/LINKS:

**State Bureau of Emergency Management** maintains a website with information regarding the NH Disaster Behavioral Health Response Team (a state-sponsored, volunteer emergency response team for mental health emergencies), as well as general emergency information. Emergency contact number is (603) 271-2231 <http://www.nhoem.state.nh.us/>

**Granite State Critical Incident Stress Response Team.** Their website provides general information about critical incident stress, and services provided by the Granite State Team (a privately run, volunteer emergency response team for mental health emergencies). They specialize in providing debriefing to first responders. Emergency contact number is (603) 595-3792. <http://www.geocities.com/SouthBeach/5583/cisd.html>

**The Center for Trauma Intervention and the Trauma Response Network (TRN) team.** Their website includes general information regarding trauma and critical incidents. The Trauma Response Network (TRN) consists of 200 trained volunteers from New Hampshire and Southern Maine who can provide Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) following an event. Their phone number is (603) 431-1191. The 24 hour emergency pager number is (603) 240-7239. (Enter your phone number followed by the # sign and the on-call clinician will get back to you.) <http://www.centerfortraumaintervention.net/>

**New Hampshire Helpline** provides information and referral services 24 hours per day. The Helpline can assist with contacting community mental health centers emergency services and other local resources. They also provide an online database with information regarding NH resources. Call 1-(800) 852-3388 for assistance. <http://www.nhhelpline.org/>

**Communicating in a Crisis.** A publication from SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) that provides comprehensive guidelines and suggestions for communicating with the public and the media during a crisis. Available in hard copy or printable version on the web. <http://www.riskcommunication.samhsa.gov/index.htm#content>

**Second Growth** is located in NH's Upper Valley Region and serves schools and communities. Founded by Robert Bryant, who has been doing suicide prevention and postvention work in NH and Vermont for two decades, Second Growth offers a variety of curriculums specifically for youth and/or adults, as well as counseling services. In addition to dealing with suicide prevention and postvention, Second Growth offers curriculum on bullying, harassment, and other youth related topics. Their website offers some sample products. [www.secondgrowth.org](http://www.secondgrowth.org)