

SUICIDE
Postvention
TOOLKIT

SUPPORTING K-12 SCHOOLS



helpline
center



Introduction and Purpose

Managing a student's death, particularly by suicide, poses significant challenges for school communities. Recognizing the importance of structured support to foster resilience, promote healing, and honor the memory of the departed, this toolkit offers a template for schools to navigate such tragic events. It outlines the creation of a crisis response team and delineates the roles of each member. Moreover, the toolkit provides guidance on communication strategies with family, staff, students, the community, and the media. Additionally, it includes policies for managing graduation ceremonies and memorialization efforts.

Initial Response

After learning a student has died by suicide, the first step a school should make is to verify the news. Rumors can be exacerbated by social media and it is important that the information comes from a credible source. The school's principal or superintendent, or another designated authority will communicate with the student's parent or guardian, the coroner's office, the local hospital, or law enforcement to confirm the death and ascertain the cause of death. Each school will have a designated group of individuals that make up the crisis response team. They will be responsible for coordinating the response, communication with staff, parents, students, and the media.

If the cause of death is unconfirmed:

Given how quickly news and rumors spread (including through media coverage, e-mail, texting, and social media), schools may not be able to wait for a final determination before they need to begin communicating with the students. If there is an ongoing investigation, schools should state that the cause of death is still being determined and that additional information will be forthcoming once it has been confirmed. Educate students that rumors may exist (which are often inaccurate), reminding them that rumors hurt the missing/deceased person's family and friends deeply. See sample death notification for *When the Cause of Death is Unconfirmed*.

Contacting the Family

There should be an elected person that is responsible specifically for connecting with and gathering information from the family. This can be any member of the crisis response team. In these discussions it is important the family understands the school will respect their needs and wishes related to the death of the student however they are bound by policy. Notifying parents of the school's boundaries may help alleviate potential misunderstandings about what the school can and cannot do after the death of a student.

Although the news about the student's death may be revealed immediately, official information on the cause of death should not be revealed to students until the family has been interviewed. Information may need to be shared carefully balancing respect for the family's requests. The school may elect to announce general, factual statements not using the student's name if the family has not given permission (e.g., "We have learned that a ninth-grade student died over the weekend").

If the family does not want the cause of death disclosed:

There may be instances where a death has been declared a suicide but the family does not want this information to be public. This could be due to stigma, privacy issues, fear of triggering contagion, or having difficulty accepting the cause of death. If this happens, a school official or mental health professional who shares good rapport with the family should be assigned to reach out to them. This person could explain that the students are already discussing the death, and that facilitating conversations about suicide and its underlying factors within the school environment could contribute to the students' safety.

Schools have a responsibility to balance the need to be transparent with the school community with the need to be sensitive to the family. If the family does not agree to information about the cause of death being shared, schools can announce that the family does not wish to disclose information regarding the cause of death at that time. This does not mean that schools cannot discuss suicide with students or address that the death has brought up the subject of suicide. Schools can then provide accurate information about suicide and how to get help if someone is concerned about themselves or their peers.

Crisis Response

Upon confirmation of a student's death, the school should immediately implement a coordinated crisis response to achieve the following:

- Effectively manage the situation
- Provide opportunities for grief support
- Maintain an environment focused on normal educational activities
- Help students cope with their feelings
- Minimize the risk of suicide contagion





Building your team

The number of members on the school Crisis Response Team should range from five to fifteen, depending on the size of the school or district. Members should be selected based on their qualifications, experience, and capacity for compassionate work under pressure. They should be a combination of administrators, counselors, social workers, school psychologists, and school resource officers.

Defining Roles

The coordinator of the Crisis Response Team is typically the principal. The team coordinator is in charge of all aspects of the crisis response and serves as the main point of contact. Their role is to:

- Maintain decision making responsibilities during a crisis
- Be the central point of contact
- Oversee all postvention efforts carried out by the school
- Manage communications with the media and various groups of people within the school, including the administration, staff, students, and parents.

The assistant coordinator of the Crisis Response Team should fill the role of coordinator if the coordinator is not available. It may be most helpful for the assistant coordinator to be a mental health professional. Their role is to:

- Share updates with the other Crisis Response Team members
- Help coordinate communication with staff, students, and community
- Collaborate with the mental health professionals to set up safe spaces for staff and students who require support
- Engage with parents who have concerns about specific students

Defining Tasks

The coordinator's tasks are:

- Notify the principal and superintendent of the death
- Communicate with the family to offer condolences, assess their needs, and gather information about funeral services and what information they are comfortable making public
- Facilitate a meeting to activate the Crisis Response Team
- Make arrangements to use the school's crisis alert system to inform personnel of the death as soon as possible. If possible, this should be announced in person, especially to individuals who had direct contact with the student.
- Facilitate an all staff meeting as soon as possible. See Sample for Initial All Staff Meeting.

- Make a plan for notifying students in small groups. This announcement should not be done in a large assembly. Identify a mental health professional to accompany the teacher who is notifying the students in the homeroom or all day classroom of the deceased student. See Sample Death Notification Statement for Students.
- Determine which social media profiles require attention or supervision, and assign a crisis team member to monitor them.
- Send parents a written death notification. See Sample Death Notification Statement for Parents.
- Provide Facts about Suicide in Adolescents, Tips for Talking about Suicide, and Youth Warning Signs to teachers and other staff to provide guidance on how they can support students.
- Determine if and when outside resources are required.

The assistant coordinator's tasks are:

- Facilitate the all staff meeting and meetings with the Crisis Response Team when coordinator is unavailable.
- Ensure all teachers and staff have the support and resources they need.
- Plan the parents' meeting. See Sample Agenda for Parent Meeting.
- Delegate responsibilities to Crisis Response Team members for the following tasks: safety, support for staff and students, community liaisons, funeral, media communication, and social media management.

Outline of other team member's tasks:

- Safety
- Maintain regular school hours
- Plan for dismissal procedure
- School resource officers can help manage parents, community members, and media that may come to the school
- Monitor students who are withdrawing or who seem to be struggling.
- Encourage students to connect with counselors and staff with questions or concerns



Support for Staff and Students

- A staff member should follow the deceased student's schedule to monitor peer and staff reactions.
- Provide substitute teachers for staff that need to take breaks from their classroom
- Create a system for students and staff to easily request support or referrals to counseling
- Designate private areas for crisis counseling
- Ensure tissues and water are available
- Identify friends, family, and teammates of the student who may be more affected by the loss.
- Identify students who have a history of depression and suicidality
- Create a system for tracking and responding to memorialization requests

Community Liaisons

- Designate staff members to be the primary contact for coroner, law enforcement, and mental health professionals. This can be the coordinator or other members of the Crisis Response Team.
- Plan for who will respond to media communications

- Coordinate meeting times between community liaisons to ensure accurate information is being shared across all channels

Funeral

- Meet with the family to discuss if they are willing to share information about the funeral with families and staff. Communicate to them the importance of discussing mental health concerns and struggles their child was experiencing during the funeral. This could be done by a family member or a religious leader.
- The funeral should be held off school grounds and outside of school hours when possible. It is not recommended that school buses be used for transportation.
- If permissible, share relevant information with students, parents, and staff including:
 - Location and time
 - What to expect
 - How the family has asked for condolences
 - Details on what you require from students who will attend if during school hours
 - Details on how staff may attend if during school hours (substitute teachers, excused time off, etc.)
- If permissible, talk with the funeral director about logistics and the possibility of having crisis counselors or mental health professionals available.
- Arrange for mental health professionals to be present
- Encourage parents to attend with their children to provide additional support and be an outlet for students to communicate about their experience

Media Relations

- Provide the designated media relations spokesperson with a General Notification. They should be the only person authorized to speak with the media.
- Draft a statement that is accurate and aligns with the family's wishes and this policy
- Discourage students from interacting with the media
- Provide media sources with Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide
- Refer to social Media section of toolkit for managing social media



Communication

Notifying Staff

Staff should be notified as soon as possible. This should be done in person in small groups. The member or members of the crisis response team who facilitate these meetings should be identified in advance. Special considerations and support for teachers in direct contact with the student should be made. It is best to limit details of the student's death to only what is necessary and appropriate to share. Ensure there is enough time for conversations related to the student and the topic of suicide. Encourage staff to share their emotional reactions and any concerns they have about other students or staff members. Prepare resources in advance along with information about how to reach out for help or request special accommodation related to their work day or funeral services.

Notifying Parents

A death notification statement can be sent to parents in the most efficient way including mailing a letter, sending an email, or sending a letter home with students. Resources for talking to their child about suicide and mental health should be included. Parents should be notified of the student's name and cause of death if this aligns with the family's request. The letter should address the way in which their student was notified of the death as well as information about mental health and how to get additional support. Information about the parents meeting should be included.

Managing Community Impact

Schools are critical components of a community and can serve as a unifying aspect for families and other members of the local area. If possible, collaborate with agencies that have been affected by the student's death such as the student's parent's place of employment, the student's place of employment if relevant, the religious organization they were a member of if relevant, and the funeral home. These partnerships could provide more places to share information, provide resources related to suicide prevention and aftercare, and bring people together through their grief journey.

Members of the crisis response team will need to be in close contact with law enforcement. This ensures they are not sharing information to the school or community that would interfere with an investigation or if any staff or students will be interviewed. Depending on the circumstances related to the death, police may provide additional support at community gatherings or vigils to honor the student who died. Students may visit the place where the death occurred which may need to be monitored for any safety concerns.

Supporting Students

It is the school's responsibility to gauge the needs of their students and provide balance between continuing education and strong emotional reactions. Children and adolescents are still building their skills related to identifying and managing their emotions. Especially in the event of suicide, grief reactions are complex which can be overwhelming at any age. Their distress may manifest in physical ways such as changes in eating or sleeping, upset stomach, or headaches. It is important to pay attention to students who have stopped attending school after the death. If there are concerns about specific students, their parents or guardians should be involved in coordinating a care plan. It is appropriate to make referrals to mental health professionals for additional assessment and treatment.

Initial Discussions

It is critical that students are notified in a small group setting. It is not recommended that students are notified in a gymnasium or auditorium setting in a large group. Setting intentional time either in homeroom or set classrooms should be a priority after the death is confirmed and staff are notified. For these initial meetings, the school schedule may need to be altered however start and end times should remain the same as a regular day. The intention for these small groups is to be available to respond to their needs. It is important to share the following information during the meeting:

- Name of the student
- The cause of death was suicide (if this aligns with the family's wishes)
- Information about additional supports provided by the school is an important part of these group meetings
- Information about suicide and ways to get connected with professional help
- Appropriate ways to memorialize
- Emphasize the complex emotions related to grief and the need to respect other's individual experiences

A separate optional small group can be provided as a space for students to talk about their feelings and ask questions. It is important to not overshare or include graphic details. Remember, some students may not have strong reactions or feel comfortable sharing them in groups. Encourage students to consider how they want to honor the student who died and also take this time to explain the policies related to memorialization.

Coping Skills

Students may need help recognizing healthy things they can do or think about when they are feeling overwhelmed. It is helpful to explore and explain practical coping strategies to address feelings of intense worry, fear, confusion, guilt, and sadness. Some examples of healthy coping strategies include:

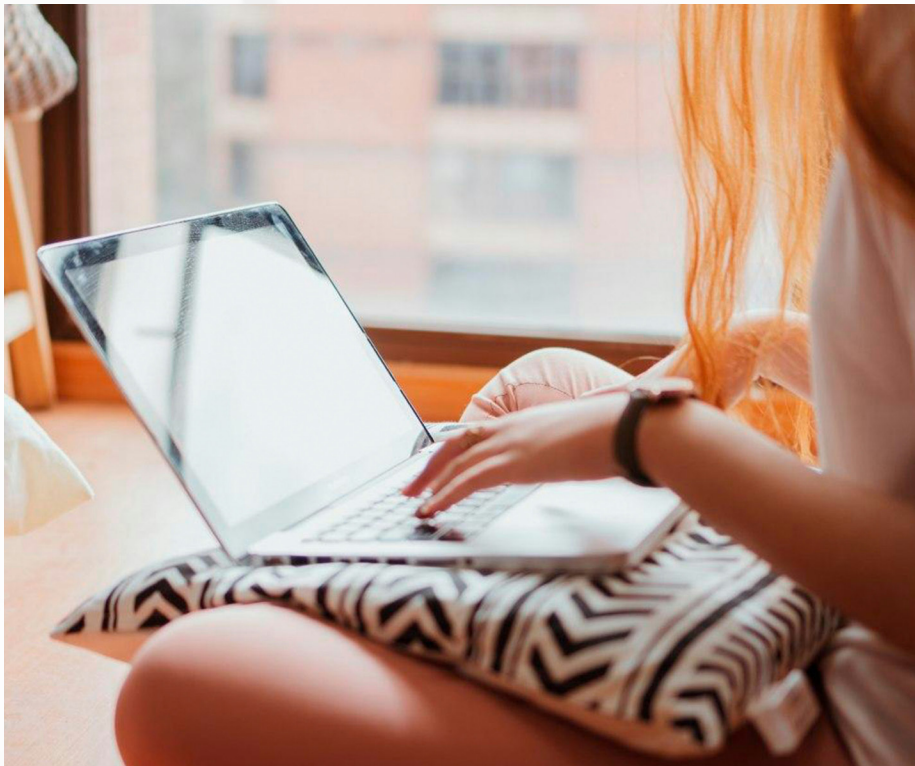
- Taking a series of deep breaths
- Take a break to sit in a calm area and relax or rest
- Practice affirmations
- Journal
- Go for a walk or do some exercise
- Engaging in hobbies for some distraction such as reading, listening to music, watching television, drawing, video games
- Talk with friends
- Talk with parents, caregivers, and family

The school may want to consider creating a meeting place after school for students to feel more connected. Mental health professionals can be present to offer support for students who are interested. Encourage students to keep a list of available supports they can use if they need extra support or if they are in crisis. Explain the services offered by Helpline Center and 988.



Sensitive Events

There are certain events that may have a greater impact on students. The anniversary of the death, the student's birthday, holidays, first or final practices, games, or rehearsals are all situations to consider monitoring or offering support services. Students also may revisit some of their grief if there is another death by suicide in the school or larger community.



Social Media

Restricting student's use of social media is unrealistic however the school can use social media to share information related to parent meetings, prevention information, accurate information related to suicide, and support resources. Students often refer to social media quickly to share information about the death and their feelings related to the loss. Frequently, there are posts on the deceased person's social media pages that express strong emotions. The school may want to monitor the school community's related social media posts to identify students who may need additional support. It is important to ensure all posts from the school do not describe details of the means used and do not glorify suicide. Each school should have a designated person to manage social media platforms and posts. It may be helpful to draft templates to remove pressure and be prepared to respond quickly in a crisis. Schools may use social media platforms to disseminate information about counselors and resources including Helpline Center and 988.

Memorialization

Honoring students who die can be an important part of the grieving process for students, staff, and family members. Memorials for students who die by suicide while they attend this District will be aligned with the Board policy for student death by other circumstances. This ensures an equitable and consistent way to honor the grieving processes of all students, family, and staff. It is important that memorialization does not idolize and glorify the student or suicide. It is appropriate to acknowledge any mental health struggles that the student experienced and provide guidance to students who may be experiencing similar struggles about how to get help.

Student Lead Memorials

It is possible that students may create a memorial with items, notes, pictures, and other objects near the deceased student's locker or chair. There should be clear limitations and communications related to these memorials. Staff members should be identified to monitor them to ensure they are appropriate and they do not glorify death by suicide. Additionally, it may identify students who need extra support or intervention. Memorials should be removed after the funeral services are over or for a duration of approximately five days. Items can be shared with the family unless students want to keep what they arranged.

Other memorial items such as T-shirts or items that display images of the student should be discouraged in a compassionate and sensitive way. Respectfully communicate with participating students that these items can be comforting to some students but may upset others. Suggest alternative ways they can honor the student by wearing items that encourage positive messages or that promote mental health awareness.

Graduation

This policy's objective is to support faculty, students, and bereaved families by offering guidelines for making decisions about graduation. The graduation ceremony is intended to honor academic success and raise hopes for the future prospects that await all graduates. The District understands the impact a student's death can have on a school and the wider community. Honoring a deceased student at graduation who died while they attended this District will be uniform for all students. Having a different policy for students who died by suicide will increase the stigma related to suicide. Practices related to graduation will be consistent for all students who die while enrolled in this District. See Sample Memorial School Board Policy, National Association of School Psychologists.

Suicide Contagion

Adolescents are at risk of suicide contagion. Some students may have a stronger emotional reaction to a suicide death of another student or celebrity. This may cause other deaths by suicide in the school or larger community. For this reason, it is important not to inadvertently simplify, glamorize, or romanticize the student or their death. Contagion needs to be considered when discussing the death and with memorialization.

Bringing in Outside Help

The Crisis Response Team faces realistic limitations when responding to a suicide death and supporting students and staff. They also need to be mindful of their own boundaries and when they should refer to others because of their own grief process. It would be helpful to identify other members of the school district and local mental health providers who are trained in crisis response and trauma. The objective is to create a team of additional supportive professionals that can properly address the needs of the school and the members of the Crisis Response Team.

Debrief

It is necessary to hold a debrief session with the crisis response team members after the peak of the response has passed. They may have felt unable to address their own reaction to the student's death because they were operating through their role on the team. It is possible they feel unable to grieve in the same way as others, because they are supposed to remain strong helpers for other staff and students. Allowing space and time for reflection can help avoid unhealthy coping reactions that may surface. This can also provide the opportunity for any members of the team to elect to resign from their position on the team. If members of the team wish to no longer participate, a meeting should be scheduled as soon as possible to discuss necessary replacements. Debriefing with the crisis response team will also provide time to reflect on what went well, areas for growth, and suggest changes to the procedure.

Going Forward

Grief is a complicated and individualized journey and there is not a scripted way that schools or communities should grieve following the death of a student. Acknowledging the loss after managing the stress and pain of the aftermath is a critical first step in moving toward healthy grieving. Recognizing that some individuals may require ongoing support from professionals and normalize a longer grieving process is okay.

Meetings for Ongoing Suicide Prevention

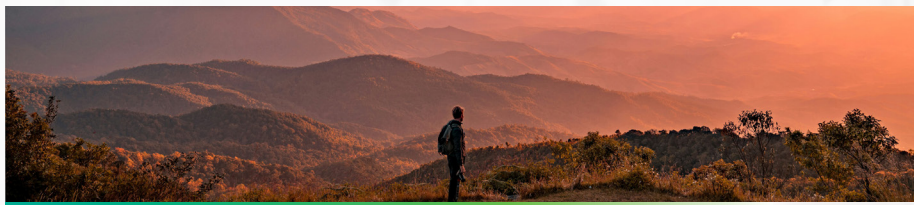
If the school does not have a suicide prevention program, this is an opportunity to develop one or identify resources to bring in to address suicide prevention models. There are models for how to safely inform students, staff, and parents on the topic of suicide. Seeking guidance on how to implement these programs is important because of the impact the topic can have on a school community. It is important to recognize that students and staff will need an opportunity to grieve before they are ready to participate in suicide prevention efforts. Introducing suicide prevention information too early can increase feelings of guilt and impact the grieving process.

Grief Loss and Support

School staff and students may want to become active participants in suicide grief and loss support initiatives. Research and identify the efforts in your local area and become aware of events that bring awareness to suicide and events that honor suicide loss survivors. If there are none in your area, contact Helpline Center for more information about events and how to start a suicide loss survivor group. Helpline Center is available for consultation on how to facilitate conversations about a suicide death or grief with students and staff. Helpline Center offers services to support suicide loss survivors.

Cultural Healing: Religion and Spirituality in Grief

During challenging times involving grief and loss, it is natural to seek meaning and comfort. Students, staff, and community members may feel themselves drawn to exploring the deeper aspects of life, such as religion and spirituality, in search of solace and understanding. Some individuals may find comfort in engaging in spiritual practices like prayer, meditation, or participating in cultural rituals that resonate with them. Those seeking a sense of community and support could explore joining a religious or spiritual group where they can share experiences with others who understand and empathize. Individuals may seek to connect with cultural, spiritual, or religious leaders who can offer wisdom and support. Ultimately, the path an individual chooses is theirs to navigate, guided by their own feelings, beliefs, and needs.



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Communication with Students

Sample Death Notification Statement for Students

I am sorry to tell you that one of our students, (NAME), has died by suicide.

It is normal to feel sad, angry, or confused.. Your emotional reaction will be unique to you and it is okay to feel however you are feeling right now. Suicide can create a lot of questions that may never be able to be answered. We may never know why (NAME) took their own life however we do know that suicide has many complicated contributing factors. For some, a mental health condition is one of those factors. It is important to remember that mental health conditions are treatable and know that you can reach out for help if you are feeling unwell or unsafe.

Rumors about what happened may come out but it is best to not spread them. They may be untrue and deeply painful to (NAME), their family, and friends. We will continue to provide the most accurate information as we receive it.

Everyone will react to (NAME)'S passing in a unique way so we need to be respectful of responses that are unlike our own. It is normal to feel confused, angry and very sad right now. Everything you are feeling is okay and it is important that you process how you are feeling with people who support you. You may have trouble concentrating on school work or find that it is a welcome distraction. Try to not put pressure on yourself to do things that seem overwhelming.

Our teachers and our staff are here for you. If you would like counseling to help process what you are feeling, we have counselors available. Please let administration, staff, or teachers know if you would like this type of support or you may find the counselors in (LOCATION) at (THESE TIMES). If you need help outside of these hours please contact the Helpline Center at 988.

We are here to move through this journey together. We will do whatever we can to process and understand this great loss as a community.

When the Cause of Death is Unconfirmed

I am sorry to tell you that one of our students, (NAME), has died. The cause of death has not yet been determined.

We understand there are rumors that the cause of death was suicide. Please do not continue to perpetuate these rumors as they may turn out to be untrue, which would be deeply unfair to (NAME), their family, or friends. We will continue to share the most accurate information we have as we receive it.

I want to take this opportunity to explain that the subject of suicide is highly complicated and many things contribute to an individual's decision to die by suicide. In many circumstances, mental health conditions contribute to this decision. It is critical to recognize if you are considering suicide or feeling depressed and know how to reach out for help.

Everyone will react to (NAME)'S passing a unique way so we need to be respectful of responses that are unlike our own. It is normal to feel confused, angry and very sad right now. Everything you are feeling is okay and it is important that you process how you are feeling with people who support you. You may have trouble concentrating on school work or find that it is a welcome distraction. Try to not put pressure on yourself to do things that seem overwhelming.

Our teachers and our staff are here for you. If you would like counseling to process what you are feeling, we have counselors available. Please let administration, staff, or teachers know if you would like this type of support or you may find the counselors in (LOCATION) at (THESE TIMES). If you need help outside of these hours please call or text 988.

We are here to move through this journey together. We will do whatever we can to process and understand this great loss as a community.

When the Family Has Requested the Cause of Death Not Be Disclosed

I am sorry to tell you all that one of our students, [NAME], has died. The family has requested that information about the cause of death not be shared at this time.

You may have heard discussion that the cause of death was suicide. Please do not perpetuate these rumors as they may turn out to be untrue which would be deeply unfair to (NAME), their family, or friends. We will continue to share the most accurate information we have as we receive it.

I want to take this opportunity to explain that the subject of suicide is highly com-

plicated and many things contribute to an individual's decision to die by suicide. In many circumstances, mental health conditions contribute to this decision. It is critical to recognize if you are considering suicide or feeling depressed and know how to reach out for help.

Everyone will react to (NAME)'S passing a unique way so we need to be respectful of responses that are unlike our own. It is normal to feel confused, angry and very sad right now. Everything you are feeling is okay and it is important that you process how you are feeling with people who support you. You may have trouble concentrating on school work or find that it is a welcome distraction. Try to not put pressure on yourself to do things that seem overwhelming.

Our teachers and our staff are here for you. If you want counseling to process what you are feeling, we have counselors available. Please let administration, staff, or teachers know that you would like this type of support or you may find the counselors in (LOCATION) at (THESE TIMES). If you need help outside of these hours please call or text 988.

We are here to move through this journey together. We will do whatever we can to process and understand this great loss as a community.

Communication with Parents

Sample Death by Suicide Notification for Parents

I am sorry to tell you that one of our students, (NAME), has died by suicide. All students were notified of the death by (WHO) at (THISTIME/HOMEROOM) today. Please see the attached copy of the announcement that was given to them.

Suicide can create many questions that may never be answered. We may never know why (NAME) took their own life however we do know that suicide has many complicated contributing factors. For some, a mental health condition is one of those factors. It is important to remember that mental health conditions are treatable. Please know that there is help if you and your child are feeling unwell or unsafe. We have included information about how to talk to your child about suicide.

Our Crisis Response Team is available to help you and your child throughout the next few weeks. If you need additional assistance please contact us for a list of local mental health resources. For more information about suicide or how to support your child if they are struggling, please call 988.

We will share information related to the funeral service as we receive it. We strongly encourage you to attend the funeral with your child if they want to attend. We will require parental permission for students to be released from school if the funeral is held during school hours.

There will be a parent meeting on (THIS DATE) at (THISTIME) at (THIS LOCATION). Support services will be provided by our Crisis Response Team and (ANY LOCAL MENTAL HEALTH AGENCY/PROFESSIONALS). We will share information about suicide and tips on how you can help your student through their grief. You can also learn more about warning signs and youth mental health.

Please contact (THIS PERSON) at (THIS NUMBER/THIS EMAIL) if you have any questions or concerns. We are here to support you and your family through this journey.

Sincerely,
(PRINCIPAL)

When the Cause of Death is Unconfirmed

I am sorry to tell you that one of our students, (NAME), has died. The cause of death is not yet been determined by authorities.

All students were notified of the death by (WHO) at (THISTIME/HOMEROOM) today. Please see the attached copy of the announcement that was given to them.

We understand there may be rumors that the cause of death was suicide. We have asked students not to perpetuate these rumors as they may turn out to be untrue, which would be deeply unfair to (NAME), their family, or friends. We will continue to share the most accurate information we have as we receive it.

Our Crisis Response Team is available to help you and your child throughout the next few weeks. If you need additional assistance please contact us for a list of local mental health resources. For more information about suicide or how to support your child if they are struggling, please call 988.

We will share information related to the funeral service as we receive it. We strongly encourage you to attend the funeral with your child if they want to attend. We will require parental permission for students to be released from school if the funeral is held during school hours.

Please contact (THIS PERSON) at (THIS NUMBER/THIS EMAIL) if you have any questions or concerns. We are here to support you and your family through this journey.

Sincerely,
(PRINCIPAL)

When the Family Has Requested the Cause of Death Not Be Disclosed

I am sorry to tell you that one of our students, (NAME), has died. The family has requested that information about the cause of death not be shared at this time.

All students were notified of the death by (WHO) at (THISTIME/HOMEROOM) today. Please see the attached copy of the announcement that was given to them.

We understand that there may be rumors that the cause of death was by suicide. Because students are talking about this, it is essential to know that suicide has many complicated contributing factors. For some, a mental health condition is one of those factors. It is important to remember that mental health conditions are treatable. Please know that there is help if you and your child are feeling unwell or unsafe. We have included information about how to talk to your child about suicide.

Our Crisis Response Team is available to help you and your child throughout the next few weeks. If you need additional assistance please contact us for a list of local mental health resources. For more information about suicide or how to support your child if they are struggling, please call 988.

We will share information related to the funeral service as we receive it. We strongly encourage you to attend the funeral with your child if they want to attend. We will require parental permission for students to be released from school if the funeral is held during school hours.

Please contact (THIS PERSON) at (THIS NUMBER/THIS EMAIL) if you have any questions or concerns. We are here to support you and your family through this journey.

Sincerely,
(PRINCIPAL)

Agenda for Parent Meeting

Prior to the parent meeting, information about the cause of death must be validated and the meeting should reflect the family's wishes. The objective of this meeting is to share information, offer support, and address questions and concerns. Interpreters should be available to make the information accessible to everyone. All members of the Crisis Response Team should be present as well as mental health professionals from the community. Consider and prepare for parents of the deceased to attend. Large open microphone style meetings are not recommended as that may perpetuate blaming and panic. This should be a two part meeting where general information is given to the group then in an optional second session attendees have an opportunity to ask questions with mental health professionals.

The meeting should consist of adults only. You may open it up to parents and other members of the community. If possible, offer childcare to meet the needs of parents with young children. There should not be media present. Utilize security or law enforcement services to manage crowds if necessary. Consider having water and tissues available.

Part 1 (40 – 60 minutes)

Principal, Crisis Response Team Coordinator, or Superintendent

- Welcome and condolences
- Introduce administration and Crisis Response Team members
- Talk about how staff is supporting students
- Discussing memorialization policies and how the guidelines are the same as those for any other student death
- Provide balanced reactions between healthy grief and glorifying suicide

Principal or Crisis Response Team Coordinator

- Inform parents about school's response to the media
- Provide information about the funeral if relevant
- Discuss risk factors and warning signs
- Shares handouts Facts About Suicide in Adolescents and Youth Warning Signs and Tips for Talking About Suicide
- Discuss coping skills

- Provide resource information
 - 988
 - Professionals at the school who are providing support
 - Community mental health professionals
 - Emergency psychiatric facilities

Part 2 (45 – 60 minutes) Strongly encouraged but optional

- Approximately 10 people per group
- Ideally will have 2 mental health professionals in each group
- An open forum for parents and members of the community to ask questions and get clarity on support services
- Set individual follow ups for anyone who requests one

Communication with Staff

Initial All-Staff Meeting

Information about the cause of death must be validated prior to holding an all staff meeting. Ideally, this should be held in person, before the school day, and before students are notified of the death.

Objectives of the meeting:

- Introduce Crisis Response Team
- Disclose information about the student's death and the family's needs and preferences
- Notify staff of how students are being informed. If it involves them sharing the information in small settings, provide specific death notification based on information you have and the family's wishes
- Discuss how their reactions impact students.
- Explain warning signs to look for in other students who may need extra support and discuss the reporting system if they are concerned about another student
- Identify the support systems in place for students and staff
- Hold a nonjudgmental space for staff to express their reactions
- Discuss process for getting substitutes and if extra time off will be given

- Offer suggestions on how to communicate with parents if they are contacted
- Share the contact person responsible for answering to media outlets asking for information
- Share Tips for Talking About Suicide and Facts About Suicide in Adolescents
- Assure staff that they will continue to be informed as more information is shared with administration

Communication with the Media

General Notification

School staff, parents and caregivers, and students were notified that a (AGE)-year-old student at (SCHOOL NAME) has died by suicide. We are supporting his/her family, peers, and staff during this difficult time.

There will be a meeting for parents and adult members of the community on (THIS DATE) at (THIS TIME), at (THIS LOCATION). The school's Crisis Response Team and (OTHER MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS) will be present to provide information about suicide, adolescent mental health, and warning signs of suicide. They will be available to address questions and concerns. Qualified mental health professionals will be able to provide support for students and staff in the following weeks. No media outlets will be permitted to attend this meeting.

For more information please contact (WHO) at (PHONE NUMBER/EMAIL).

The following is a list of warning signs and how to help youth who are struggling with mental health.

Immediate Crisis Warning Signs:

- Talking about suicide
- Talking about a plan for suicide
- Engaging in self harm
- Expressing hopelessness about the future

What to Do:

- Ask directly about suicide

- Listen non-judgmentally
- Call 988 or a local mental health agency
- If possible, bring them to a relevant resource such as school mental health professional or local emergency behavioral care center

Potential Crisis Warning Signs:

- Isolation or change in social behavior
- Increased irritability or anger
- Changes in regular sleeping and eating patterns
- Engaging in high risk behaviors

What to Do:

- Ask them about how they are feeling
- Ask directly about suicide
- Listen non-judgmentally
- Educate them about mental health supports that can help them such as 988, school mental health professionals, or community mental health professionals

Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide

Media plays an important role in the response to suicide. How they report can be a form of prevention but can also cause harm if not done safely. Covering suicide safely can challenge myths and provide accurate information about suicide and mental health.

Spokesperson's Message

- We are distraught over the death of one of our students. We are here to support his/her family, peers, and the entire community
- We will provide support for students and staff as long as it is needed
- There will be an informational meeting for parents and adult members of the community on (THIS DATE) at (THISTIME) at (THIS LOCATION)
- Reporters and television cameras will not be allowed in the school or on the grounds

Media Reporting

Avoid

- Sharing graphic details about method or location of death
- Describing content of suicide note
- Disclosing personal information about the person who died or their family
- Glamorizing or sensationalizing the story or making it a prominent story
- Oversimplification or assumptions of reasons they took their own life

Include

- Facts using sensitive language to respect the grieving family
- Warning signs and risk factors
- Context that does not glamorize suicide
- General facts about suicide
 - Suicide involves complicated contributing factors
 - Mental health disorders can be one of the contributing factors
 - There is treatment and recovery support available for people who live with a mental health or substance use disorder
- Resources such as 988 and mental health professionals

Facts About Suicide in Adolescents

Suicide is complex and is caused by many different factors. There is not one indicator of suicide but a multitude of aggravating factors. For some, stress or life circumstances become too overwhelming and suicide becomes a solution. Many people who die by suicide have a mental health condition although that is not true for everyone who dies by suicide.

Factors that put adolescents at a higher risk of suicide:

- Diagnosis of major depressive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, or eating disorder
- Physical, sexual, emotional abuse
- Neglect
- Trauma
- Family history of mental illness

- Death of a family member
- Major loss (pet, friendship, freedom)
- Exposure to suicide in the family or by a peer
- Low self-esteem or poor problem solving skills
- Highly impulsive or risk taking tendencies
- Substance use
- School problems including bullying
- Access to lethal means in the home

Not every adolescent who are at a high risk die by suicide. It is important to recognize when multiple aggravating factors occur simultaneously. These risk factors can also put an individual at higher risk of being diagnosed with a mental illness.

If you believe that someone is at immediate risk of suicide it is critical to get help as quickly as possible. Options for care include local psychiatric hospitals or local emergency departments. Family physicians, assessment clinics, and community or school based mental health professionals may be utilized if it is determined that there is not an immediate risk. If you are unsure of where to seek help or want to learn more about your local resources contact Helpline Center at 988.

Youth Warning Signs

It is normal for children and adolescents to experience strong emotions and experience challenges regulating them. Monitoring when there is a change from their average behavior can be an indicator that an adolescent may need support. Warning signs can present as words, actions, or environmental factors. It is important to take all talk or threats of suicide seriously.

Warning Signs:

- Talking directly about suicide
- Talking about ways to die by suicide
- Engaging in self harm
- Making comments about not seeing a future for themselves
- Expressing hopelessness
- Being overwhelmed with emotion

- Highly reactive or irritable
- Isolating
- Increase or decrease in sleeping and eating
- Factors listed in Facts About Suicide in Adolescents

Any drastic changes in personality or behaviors may indicate there is a problem. Talk with others who interact with the student frequently to see if they have noticed anything that may be concerning. Contribute to a school culture that does not permit bullying and promotes overall wellness.

Tips for Talking About Suicide

When talking about suicide, it is best to be direct. You can start the conversation naturally and use less direct language to ask about how they are feeling. If you are concerned, it is important that at some point in the conversation you ask if they are having thoughts of suicide.

- Find a quiet and private location where you can have the conversation.
- Give yourself enough time and listen to them nonjudgmentally.
- Manage your personal emotional response
- Ask if they have a plan for how they will kill themselves and if they have access to the method they have chosen.

Starting this conversation will not prompt them to think about suicide if they are not already. It removes the pressure off of them to start the conversation and provides an opportunity for them to share their thoughts and experiences. Express why you are concerned, why you are asking them about suicide, and that you care about them. Be respectfully persistent but understand that they may not be ready to talk or they may prefer to talk to someone else. Let them know about other people who can help and inform them about Helpline Center's resources and 988.

If they respond with a yes, that they are thinking about suicide, do not leave them unattended. The Crisis Response Team should identify who is contacted in the event a student says they are having thoughts of suicide. Assure the student that their privacy is important as well as their safety, so you will be notifying some other staff members to get them help. Keep the student informed throughout the process and give them choices related to their care when appropriate. Inform them of the treatment options that are available and that there is help. Reassure them that having the courage to be honest about their thoughts was the right thing to do and that you care about them.



SOUTH DAKOTA
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

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