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Student Re-Entry After a Suicide Attempt or Hospitalization

A student who's been suicidal will continue to be at high risk when he or she comes back to school. It is critical that key school personnel such as the counselor or the suicide prevention risk specialist carefully monitor the student's suicidal behavior. This can best be done by utilizing the suicide monitoring tools provided free of charge under the E-resources available in the book *Suicide in Schools* by Erbacher, Singer, and Poland, 2015. E-resources (Tool #15) are available at: <https://www.routledge.com/Suicide-in-Schools-A-Practitioners-Guide-to-Multi-level-Prevention-Assessment/Erbacher-Singer-Poland/p/book/9780415857031>

The counselor/suicide prevention risk specialist should talk with the student and his/her parents about:

- How the student may have fallen behind on the curriculum that is important to graduating or passing to the next grade. Empathy and compassion should be shown in this situation. Academic expectations for lessons that were missed may be adjusted, to allow for extended time for assignments, possible modification of assignments, and a notation of “incomplete” for the term until the prioritized work has been turned in and assessed.



- How the suicidal student's teachers need to know that depression and possibility of suicide are of concern. Discussion as to why the student has been suicidal or possible contributing factors such as losses, family issues, mental illness or bullying are to be avoided with the emphasis on teachers simply acknowledging depression and suicide as a concern and recognizing the importance of being alert to further warning signs of suicide.

Postvention after a Suicide

If a student suicide has occurred in your student population, those who are in contact with community, parents, students, and extended district services must respond in an empathetic and factual way. The suicide of a student likely will have an effect far beyond the school they attended, as vulnerable youth often find each other through social media. Research has found that school postvention efforts were often too short in duration and focused on too few students. The information in Tools #20, 21, and 22 will provide steps for schools to follow after a suicide. Also see Postvention in Schools fact sheet available under Information Library at http://www.texasuicideprevention.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Postvention-Handout_8-1-16.pdf and the postvention information in the Coming Together to Care Toolkit available at <http://www.TexasSuicidePrevention.org> as well as the extensive information available on “After A Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools” at <http://www.sprc.org/sites/default/files/migrate/library/AfteraSuicideToolkitforSchools.pdf> .

It is strongly recommended that administrators review these documents prior to losing a student to suicide and essential they review them prior to making decisions after the suicide of a student. Delay in official notification/verification of the cause of the student death when suicide is suspected presents great problems for students, schools, and the community. School personnel are encouraged to visit the family immediately to express condolences and suggest the cause of death should be shared.

Research has found that suicide notes are left only about 30% of the time, but other factors may lead the family, police, or the coroner to clarify it was a death by suicide. If there is a delay of days or even weeks before there is an official verification of the cause of death, school personnel still need to process the death with students immediately. It will be helpful to use the phrase, “it is hard to not know the cause of death, but sadly, your friend/classmate has died and any and all thoughts or feelings you have are okay.” It will also be helpful to use the



following approach with affected students: “Although, we are not certain of the cause of his/her death, we do know that suicide is a leading cause of death for young people, and it is important that we all know warning signs of suicide, crisis hotline numbers, and the importance of getting adult help for ourselves or our friends.”

A second very challenging issue for schools is when the family does not want the confirmed death by suicide shared with anyone. It is recommended that school personnel such as the SPRS meet with the parents and let them know that the research stresses the importance of being able to tell the truth about the death, as this is how their child’s friends and classmates will be helped the most and the chances of further suicides reduced. The parents of the suicide victim need to be assured that school personnel will not focus on factors that might have contributed to their child’s death, but instead, will emphasize increasing suicide prevention awareness and promoting prevention resources.

If the parents are still adamant that the cause of death not be disclosed, then it is recommended that the school crisis team review sample letters in the After a Suicide: Toolkit for schools and consult with the superintendent and school legal counsel to decide how to proceed. Texas has very diverse schools and communities, and there will be considerable variation in the suicide knowledge base of superintendents and school legal counsel. Communications and responses such as the specifics of letters of notification will not be uniform across the state. It is however, strongly recommended that superintendents and legal counsel review the resources in Tools 20 and 21 in this Toolkit before decisions are made about not disclosing the cause of the death.

(After a Suicide: Toolkit for schools from www.afsp.org and www.sprc.org. After a suicide: Challenging time for schools by Dr. Scott Poland available at www.nova.edu/suicideprevention)

1. Verify that a death has occurred and confirm cause.
2. Mobilize the School Crisis Response Team.
3. Assess the suicide’s impact on the school and estimate the level of needed postvention response.



4. Notify and support school staff.
5. Contact the family of the suicide victim.
 - Contact should be made in person and as soon as possible but certainly within 24 hours of the death. Try to :
 - express sympathy
 - offer support
 - identify the victim's friends who may need assistance
 - discuss the school's postvention response
 - identify details about the death that could be shared with outsiders
 - discuss funeral arrangements and whether the family wants school personnel and/or students to attend
6. Determine what information to share about the suicide.
 - Sample Letters should be available to use a templates depending on the messaging;
 - Death has been ruled a suicide
 - Cause is unconfirmed (ask that rumors not be spread)
 - Family has requested cause of death not be disclosed. (If there have already been rumors of suicide, though, it might be noted in the letter that suicide is a leading cause of death for youth and we must all know the warning signs of suicide and where to get help for ourselves or our friends. Suicide is very complex, but mental illnesses such as depression are usually the cause.)
7. Determine how to share information about the death
8. Identify students significantly affected by the suicide and initiate a referral mechanism
 - Risk Factors for Imitative Behavior
 - Facilitated the suicide
 - Failed to recognize the suicidal intent
 - Believe they may have caused the suicide
 - Had a relationship with the suicide victim
 - Identify with the suicide victim

- Have a history of prior suicidal behavior
- Have a history of psychopathology
- Show symptoms of helplessness and/or hopelessness
- Have suffered significant life stressors or losses
- Lack internal and external resources

9. Conduct a faculty planning session

10. Initiate crisis intervention services

11. Memorials

- Strive to treat all student deaths the same way
 - Encourage and allow students, with parental permission, to attend the funeral
 - Reach out to the family of the victim
 - Contribute to a suicide prevention effort in the community
 - Develop living memorials, such as student assistance programs, that address risk factors in local youth
 - Address spontaneous memorials on school grounds
- Prohibiting all memorials is problematic
 - Recognize the challenge to strike a balance between needs of distraught students and fulfilling the primary purpose of education
 - Meet with students and be creative and compassionate
 - Spontaneous memorials should be left in place until after the funeral
- Avoid holding services on school grounds
- Monitor off campus gatherings
- Student newspaper coverage should follow media reporting guidelines available at www.afsp.org and www.reportingonsuicide.org and use safe messaging which can be found at <http://www.sprc.org/sites/default/files/migrate/library/SafeMessagingrevised.pdf>
- Yearbook and graduation dedication or tributes should all be treated the same regardless of the cause of death of the student



- Grieving friends and family should be discouraged from dedicating a school event and guided instead towards promoting suicide prevention
- Permanent memorials on campus are discouraged, but schools need to memorialize all students the same way regardless of the cause of death. If a precedent has already been set for flying flags at half-mast or planting a tree on campus, then it should be continued

12. Social Media

- Create a Social Media Manager to assist the Public Information Officer
- Use students as "cultural brokers" to help faculty and staff understand the social media that is currently most used by students
- Train students in gatekeeper role, and specifically identify what suicide risk looks like when communicated via social media
- Have staff monitor social networks and provide safe messaging when important (this will require that districts not completely block these networks)
- Have parents get involved in their child's social media
- Monitor for high risk students
- Make use of social media to post prevention messages, hotlines and community mental health resources.
- Give students specific helpful language to include when making use of social media
- Work with YouTube and Facebook to take down disturbing messages, images, or language
- Use the Facebook application for concerns or issues with content

13. Debrief the postvention response with school crisis team members and identify needed additional actions.



