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## **After a Suicide: Answering Questions and Assisting Students**

*Adapted from Guidelines written by Scott Poland, Ed.D., and Richard Lieberman, MA, LEP*

### **Overview:**

The aftermath of a youth suicide is a sad and challenging time for a school or community. Key tasks for suicide postvention include helping youth manage feelings of shock, grief, and confusion, as well as preventing further suicides.

Research indicates that after a suicide occurs, there is a significant increase in the risk of additional suicides among adolescents and young adults. These guidelines are intended to assist teachers, parents, and others in supporting youth during this difficult time.

### **Guidelines and Recommendations:**

#### **1. Balancing Truth and Privacy:**

- It is crucial to be truthful and honest while respecting the privacy of the suicide victim and their family. Avoid glorifying their actions and focus on promoting understanding and support.

#### **2. Facts and Speculation:**

- Ensure accurate information about the incident and be vigilant against speculation or misinformation circulating among students. Redirect discussions toward productive and healthy conversations.

#### **3. Suicide Contagion Awareness:**

- Teenagers and young adults are particularly susceptible to suicide contagion. Those at higher risk include students who were part of a suicide pact, had recent negative interactions with the deceased, or have their own history of adversity or suicidal thoughts.

#### **4. Memorials and Prevention Activities:**

- Avoid permanent and vivid memorials, as they can unintentionally glorify suicide. Instead, encourage activities like funding for suicide prevention programs, an art project in the support room and other temporary memorials.

#### **5. Talking About Suicide:**

- Research shows discussing suicide openly does not implant suicidal thoughts but can provide an opportunity for individuals to seek help. Encourage honest conversations to reduce stigma and promote timely intervention.



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#### 6. Protective Factors:

- Positive connections with family, peers, and school, religious involvement, limited access to means for suicide, and awareness of mental health resources are crucial protective factors identified by the World Health Organization.

#### Supporting Youth After a Peer's Suicide

- Consider starting the conversation by saying:
  - *"I heard about the suicide of your friend. I am so sorry this this happened. You shouldn't have to say goodbye to a friend and not in this way."*
- Initiate discussions about the suicide with sensitivity and openness. Express condolences and acknowledge the challenging nature of losing a friend in this way.
  - *"I heard about the suicide of your friend. I am so sorry this this happened. You shouldn't have to say goodbye to a friend and not in this way."*
- Ask students how they and their friends are coping, acknowledging the complexity and intensity of grief reactions based on their relationship with the deceased and current life circumstances.
  - *How are your friends dealing with this? How are you dealing with this?*
- Normalize common reactions to suicide, such as confusion, anger, anxiety, guilt, and numbness. Highlight physical manifestations like sleep disturbances, appetite changes, headaches, and difficulty concentrating as normal responses in the aftermath.
  - *Suicide is shocking and it can make grief feel more complicated. The way that people react is also connected with how close they were to the person or even what they are going through in their lives at that time.*
  - *Suicide is very complicated and can feel very confusing.*
- Encourage students to share their feelings and experiences openly and seek help if these emotions persist or worsen over time. Discuss thoughts of suicide directly, emphasizing the importance of seeking support from trusted adults or mental health professionals.
  - *I know that people can have lots of feelings after someone takes their life. We can feel confusion, anger, anxiety, sadness, guilt, or even just feel numb. We can have trouble getting our mind off of the person and we may not be able to stop thinking about the way they died. Sometimes our bodies express our feelings and we could have trouble sleeping or have nightmares, not feel like eating, have headaches or stomachaches or just feel tired all the time. We can have trouble concentrating and focusing and we may not feel like being with anyone or doing the things we usually like to do. After a suicide we can even begin to worry that someone else we care about will take their life. These thoughts and experiences are normal right after the death and even for some weeks. However, if these*



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*feelings don't begin to lessen as time goes on or they feel even worse it is time to tell someone that can help you.*

- *Since the suicide, have you or any of your friends had any of these experiences that I have described?*
  - *Have you or any of your friends had thoughts of suicide? What kind of thoughts?*
  - *If you ever did begin to have those kinds of thoughts it would be important to tell me or another adult that you trust about them so you can get help. Depression can trick people into believing that the bad way they feel now will never go away and that the only way to stop the pain is to kill yourself. Depression and thoughts of suicide can be treated like any other illness and the person can get better.*
- Clarify misconceptions about suicide causes, emphasizing that while mental health problems are prevalent among suicide victims, suicide is a multifaceted issue with complex contributing factors.
    - *While many people who die by suicide live with a mental health problem, suicide is complex and there is generally no single cause.*
  - Address questions sensitively, such as inquiries about the method of suicide, emphasizing brief, factual information without graphic details to respect privacy and avoid triggering vulnerable individuals.
    - *It's clear you have many questions about the circumstances of how your friend died. All we know at this time is that the family has confirmed that they died by suicide. We will let you know of more information if it becomes available.*
  - Provide support for religious beliefs about suicide, recognizing diverse perspectives and encouraging respectful discussion and understanding.
    - *Would it be helpful for you to connect with your faith leader as you begin to navigate this loss?*
  - Validate feelings of anger while emphasizing that blame is not productive. Guide students in processing these emotions constructively and seeking support from trusted adults.
    - *Any reactions or feelings that you experience at this time are valid.*
  - Promote healthy coping strategies such as maintaining routines, seeking social support, and avoiding harmful behaviors like substance use, which can exacerbate grief and depression.
    - *What has helped you in the past when you've been faced with a difficult time?*
    - *I hear that you want to feel better. Would you be interested in hearing about some strategies that could help you to do that?*



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- Encourage involvement in suicide prevention efforts as a meaningful way to honor the deceased and positively impact the community.
  - *The school has a support room set up today and I think it could be a place where you can both get support and honor your friend. May I get someone to walk you down?*
- Educate students on recognizing warning signs of suicide and the importance of seeking help promptly for themselves or friends who may be at risk.
  - Consider implementing a program like “Hope Squad”, the Lifelines Curriculum or bringing in suicide prevention training the year after the loss.
- Provide updated contact information for local and national crisis hotlines, emphasizing their availability and confidentiality to support those in crisis.
  - **Crisis Text Line:** Text HOME to 741-741
  - **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline:** Call or text 988. Chat available at [988lifeline.org](https://988lifeline.org)
  - **2NDFLOOR:** The Youth Helpline of New Jersey. Call or text 888-222-2228
  - **The Trevor Project:** Text START to 678-678 or call 1-866-488-7386
  - **Prevent Suicide New Jersey:** Resources are available at [preventsuicidenj.org](https://preventsuicidenj.org)

By integrating these guidelines, we aim to provide comprehensive support for students and communities navigating the aftermath of a youth suicide, fostering resilience and promoting prevention efforts effectively.