

SAN FRANCISCO SUICIDE PREVENTION YOUTH RISK REDUCTION PROGRAM

High School Post Suicide Procedures

A student suicide is always a time of great sadness and confusion for students, parents, teachers and school administrators. For schools, it is an especially difficult time, as the school needs to balance the present grief and shock within the school community, with the potential of rumors, anger, guilt and the fear of additional students attempting suicide which may lead to a cluster. A cluster is when additional students complete the act of suicide that are in the same geographical area.

The following guidelines are designed to help a school respond. Of course all suicides are unique, and some of these guidelines may need to be adjusted depending on the situation. Sometimes suicides happen during spring or summer break or sometimes the family does not immediately notify the school of the death. Sometimes a death is unclear, and student rumors are more prevalent than facts.

Our goals are to provide help during the grieving process, prevent imitative suicides, identify and refer at-risk survivors, re-establish a healthy school climate and provide support to students, administrative staff, teachers and counselors.

Please call SF Suicide Prevention any time to schedule immediate post-vention help at your school. Call our business number at 415-984-1900 to speak with a staff member about coming to your school. For immediate emotional support and information on how to support others in crisis call 415-781-0500 twenty-four hours a day.

Student Death Policy: Before a suicide, it is a good idea for a school to think about how to handle a student death. In general, while suicides are a unique situation, it is best to handle all deaths the same way, no matter if suicide, homicide, accident, or disease.

Media: Do not talk to the media about the suicide, ever. Express to the media that this is a private family matter and media stories about youth suicide sometimes leads to additional suicides. While the media does not try to cover all youth suicides, when there is a particularly popular student, or gruesome death, or a cluster of youth suicides, the media will start calling. The school should have one point of contact with the media, and all teachers should be informed that they should not talk to the media.

Family: As soon as possible outreach to the family, and allow the family to set the tone. Contact the family to offer condolences and to find out whether any immediate services are needed from the school, social service or religious community. Find out

how the family would like the death communicated to the school, and how the family would like the school/students involved in any memorial services. Remember that the family is in intense grief and confusion, and may not be ready to communicate with school staff. Also remember that not all suicides are clear. Sometimes a student dies from a reckless behavior that may or may not be a suicide. Sometimes a child suicide is so devastating, a family may not be able to initially accept the death as a suicide, and may instruct the school not to classify the death as a suicide. Sometimes the family's reaction to the death is not helpful to the school, while this is unfortunate, the school will need to respect the family's reaction.

Counseling Office: Usually after a suicide, school administrators often look to the counseling office to organize the school response. But often these counselors have never been through a school suicide before and may be dealing with their own grief. It can be helpful to contact an agency like San Francisco Suicide Prevention, whose staff has been through the process before, to arrange for post-vention and grief services. In San Francisco, San Francisco Suicide Prevention's staff is available at no charge to a school. Our staff usually spends 40-80 hours of staff time at a school after a suicide. Regardless, this is a rough time for the counseling office as the staff needs to organize a response for students, parents, teachers and school administrators. For the week after a suicide, often the counseling office needs more staff than normally available, and may need to call on counselors from other schools or the community mental health centers. And while there is significant emphasis on service for the first two weeks after a suicide, remember that services must be available for months after the suicide, as some student emotions will be much more intense later in the grief process.

Teachers: As soon as possible, call a meeting of teachers and staff to let them know what happened and what the family's preferred message is. This is best done before meeting with students. Allow teachers to express the shock and grief they feel at this time. Let them know what services will be available, when and where they will be taking place. Ask teachers to stay "on message," avoid spreading rumors, and to watch students closely for young people that may be acting differently or are at higher risk. Recognize that after a suicide, in most middle schools and high schools there will be multiple classes that day with "an empty chair." Teachers can open that class by acknowledging it, being "real" with the students and express their feelings, and allowing students to talk about it. Sometimes the discussion is what to do with the empty seat. Sometimes the class decides to leave it open the rest of the year, sometimes a friend wants to sit in the seat, sometimes they re-arrange the chairs, every class tends to be different. Tell the teachers that the first week after will feel strange and encourage them to be available for discussions about emotions with their students.

Reduced Pressure / Expectations: Reduce class loads and expectations for the week after a suicide. It is not business as usual at the school. Give the young people the ability to be under less stress for the week after a suicide.

Students: It will be important to inform students about the suicide as soon as possible. Waiting often leads to students feeling that the school does not care, or does not give confidence in the student body about the school's response. Some schools hold an assembly to tell students. This can be fine, but it should not seem like a memorial service. Instead the tone should be more to inform the student body, express some grief, take a moment of silence, and inform students of the resources available at the school that week. Some schools take the approach of each teacher informing all students during the first period of the day. Smaller groups can be better than an assembly as it lets students express initial feelings. Usually students are numb, shocked and quiet (and typically all the students already know). Some students of course can become very emotional. Regardless of the approach of informing students, counseling resources must be available to students for at least the next week. Often counselors from other schools will make themselves available after a suicide. It is possible that the death may be under investigation as a suicide, or the family is not ready to accept the death as a suicide. In this case, the student body should still be informed of the death, and all the details are not clear, and the loss within the community is more important than the way the student died.

At-Risk Students: It is important for the counseling staff, teachers, administrators and parents to identify and watch for warning signs of specific students post suicide. These students include those who may have witnessed the suicide or its aftermath, that have a personal connection to the deceased, students who have attempted or shown signs of severe depression or suicidal ideation in the past and students who have a family history of suicide or have experienced any kind of recent loss. Students who do not have many friends, who do not have very much support at home, or tend to isolate from their peers are also at risk.

Warning Signs: Accompany or ask another student to accompany any student to the school counseling center if they have an intense emotional response in the classroom. Be sure to acknowledge that a student had an intense emotional response to the class and let them talk about how they feel. Students who draw, write, or create art that shows a fixation or fascination with death or suicide may be hinting at how they feel inside. Students who suddenly disappear from school or have a lengthy absence from class after a suicide may be isolating by themselves and in need of support. Students who have extreme shifts in mood such as quitting clubs or sports they have always attended or fighting or crying uncontrollably may need extra support.

Method: Students often become obsessed with the "method" of suicide, especially if that method was especially gruesome. In general, avoid talking about the method of suicide. The death is more important than the "way" the suicide occurred.

Rumors and De-escalating: School staff should be encouraged not to participate in spreading rumors or acting in ways that escalate volatile situations. This might seem obvious, but it is a normal human reaction to stress. Within the professional

environment of a school, teachers need to be reminded to stay calm and be helpful to the situations.

Avoid the Alter: Often students want to create an altar at the school, especially at the student's locker. It's better to avoid this and select a place where messages and objects can be left, such as a table outside the counseling office. Emphasize that the purpose of the table is to express grief and to comfort the family. However, do not allow it to become an ongoing altar. Instead let students know that items will be removed every couple days to be given to the family, and allow items to continue to be placed until items organically stop being placed on the table. If students start placing objects at the locker, just move them to the "official" table at the end of the day and place a little note on the locker telling students where the items were moved. Regardless, review and read everything that was left on the table. This can be a key place where students express their own suicidal thoughts. Also avoid long-term expressions that memorialize suicide, like planting a tree on campus that associates the school with suicide. Creating altars or having a permanent memorial may give other students who are struggling with suicidal ideation the idea that the deceased is getting extra attention. Students struggling with pain and showing their pain may think that a suicide attempt will alleviate their pain or get them extra attention when they are in crisis.

Social Networking & The Internet: Students may decide to post something on facebook or write on the deceased's facebook page expressing their emotion. They may create a website or be contacting each other via twitter or other messaging sites. Parents, teachers and counselors should monitor these sites. Students may be posting their own suicidal thoughts on these sites. These students need to be identified. Facebook and other companies may be contacted and these companies will take down sites if there is any harmful or dangerous messaging posted. In some cases, these sites have been used as a way of discussing rumors, methods and posting inappropriate messages. Please encourage parents to find out what sites their kids are using.

Parents: Select a person to respond with a consistent message to parents who call in for information. Schedule a parents' night meeting with outside facilitation if possible. Beyond expressing grief, parents tend to want education on how to recognize signs of suicide in their own children, and communication techniques in working with their adolescents. You might call other neighboring school counselors to see if they are available to attend. If you send a letter or e-mail to the parents, be sure to encourage them to talk with their kids or have another adult that is important in their kids' lives speak with them. Encourage the parents to monitor social media websites and activities of their students to look for warning signs.

Anger: Often after a couple of days, numbness begins to wear off and expressions of anger or blame may begin. Sometimes this anger is directed at the school, parents, other students, or the student who died. It is a good idea to talk about this as a

normal reaction after a suicide. Sometimes anger is expressed physically, where students are expressing their grief through fighting, etc.

Guilt: This is one place where suicide can be different than other deaths. Guilt is a common reaction after a suicide. Counselors, teachers, parents and other students often feel that they should have noticed the signs of the impending suicide. Often there were in fact signs, and people did not react fast enough. When this is true, it can lead to even more intense feelings of guilt. Often staff from the school's counseling department feels like they have failed the student, are in intense personal and professional pain, and yet are the staff charged with the organizing the post-vention. Teachers often feel the same way. Parents are often in intense grief, feel like failures as parents, and are charged with organizing memorial services and making decisions to help the school when they are barely able to get out of bed. Often counselors and parents saw few signs of depression, but other students were aware of reckless behavior and isolation, and these students feel intense guilt and responsibility. This needs to be talked about gently. We need to acknowledge that feeling guilt almost always occurs after a suicide. This is normal.

Supervision: Supervision is key after a suicide. Developing programs and activities where students are not left alone to deal with their grief is critical. At-risk students are at a higher risk of attempting suicide if they are left alone at this time. Parents and teachers should spend the next week being with their young people, and allowing young people to be together in supervised ways. This is especially important for students that are at high risk for depression, recklessness, or suicide. People who make suicide attempts often isolate themselves right before an attempt.

Listen and Look: To avoid clusters of youth suicide, every one, adults and young people need to really listen and look for signs of depression, suicidal feeling, isolation and reckless behavior. If you see it, talk about it. If someone is hurting, try not to leave them alone. Post suicide is a time of increased emotions, and watch for signs of pain.

Encourage Self Care: Everyone needs eight hours of sleep a night (and adolescents need nine hours). Encourage good sleep, avoid late afternoon / evening caffeine intake, try to eat right, and get moderate exercise (walking together is a great exercise right now). This is the time to be the most gentle and tender with oneself. Caregivers cannot provide healthy emotional support to others if they are not managing their own self-care in a health way and monitoring their own emotions.

Alcohol and Drugs: It needs to be mentioned that alcohol and other drugs are not helpful when working through feeling after a suicide. We like to think of teens not using drugs or alcohol, but the reality is that many teens model what they see in adults and respond to a death by getting together and drinking. These substances lead to increased depression, and increased recklessness. Parents and teachers should look for substance abuse behaviors and concerns within the school community.

Channeling Expression into Good: Developing a tone and activities that allow the school community to channel feelings of sadness and anger into actions that comfort each other and making a better world help move towards a more positive school space.

Longer Term Support: For some students, the grief process will be more long term and individual counseling and/or grief groups may be needed. These resources should be explored for students and families.

Memorial Service: In general the family, not the school, conducts memorial services. Ideally, the family will allow students close to the deceased to attend the memorial service. However this does not always happen. Sometimes families hold the service out of the area, or prefer the memorial service to be small and private. Sometimes this creates pressure for the school to hold a service of some kind. In general, this is not encouraged. Instead, develop ways for smaller groups of students to express their grief and get counseling. Sometimes an initial assembly as expressed earlier can act as a substitute for a “school service” and allow the school to meet as a community. We want to avoid the students associating the school or school grounds with suicide because of the danger of having a cluster. We encourage schools to brainstorm with students on how to create impermanent expressions of grief and representations of how much the deceased meant to the student body such as a large card, artwork or some other symbolic piece that can be given to the family.

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San Francisco Suicide Prevention (www.sfsuicide.org)

Business Line to request help from staff to come to your school:
415-984-1900

24-Hour Crisis Line
Emotional support and information on supporting someone else in crisis.
415-781-0500