

Postvention Following a Tragic Loss: Guidelines for Schools and Community Behavioral Health Partners

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1

Disclaimers and Context

- Information within this training is drawn from the [STAR-Center Postvention Standards Manual, 5th edition](#)
- The focus of this presentation is on the pre-planning and components of suicide postvention for schools. However, the components can be applied to other tragic losses.
- The information presented does not necessarily apply to larger scale crises, including those with multiple casualties.
- Individual school protocols will vary, as every postvention is different.
- The considerations provided are aligned with research, best practices, and experience.
- The information presented does not replace medical or legal advice.
- During school closures and virtual learning, schools may implement an adapted postvention response. Resource: [Adapted Postvention Considerations for Schools](#)

2

Objectives for Today's Training

Participants will be able to

- Discuss the rationale for a postvention response following a youth suicide as part of comprehensive school-based suicide prevention efforts.
- Describe key components and best practices of a postvention response following a youth suicide or other death in the school community.
- Identify national, state, and local resources to support an effective postvention response.

3

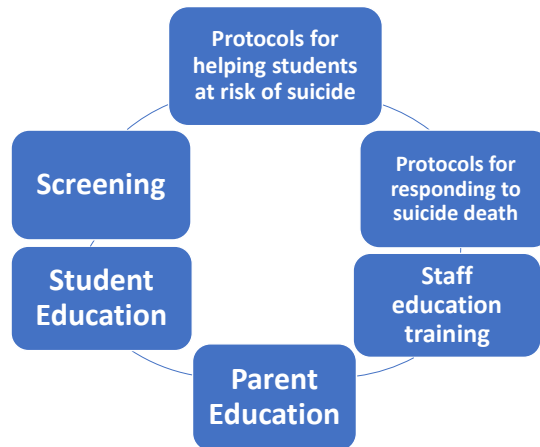
A Comprehensive Suicide Prevention Approach



(Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2020)

4

Comprehensive School-based Suicide Prevention



(SAMHSA, 2012)

5

Overview of Postvention

- Postvention is the array of services we offer following a tragedy.
- The goals of postvention are to
 - support those grieving the loss of a classmate, teacher, or colleague
 - return the school to its “new” normal routines as quickly as possible
 - identify and refer those at risk for unhealthy behaviors and reactions
 - reduce the risk of contagion for those at risk for suicidal behavior, if the death was a suicide

6

A Lesson from Loss

Let us not look behind us in anger or forward in fear but
around us in awareness.


-- James Thurber

7

Research on Postvention

- Systematic reviews of postvention research are inconclusive, but all call for continued research and refinement of postvention activities, especially those related to suicide deaths (Andrueissen & Kryszynska, 2012; Nadeem et al., 2011; Szumilas & Kuthcher, 2011; Cox et al., 2012; Berger & Gelkopf, 2009).
- Postvention following a suicide seeks to stop or reduce contagion in exposed youth, as well as the incidence of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among friends of the suicide victim (Gould et al., 2003).
- Following multiple suicides in their communities, some studies have documented the communications of youth on memorial pages and social networking sites and reported on the challenges of monitoring, assessing, and managing such activity as part of a community postvention response (Hacker et al., 2008; Robertson et al., 2012).

8



Balancing the threat of contagion with the opportunity to get students help.

Talking about suicide does not cause it, but exposure to another's suicide becomes a risk factor for suicide, especially among adolescents.

9

Following a Youth Suicide...

Most youth exposed to a suicide will not become suicidal. However, students at increased risk for suicide may include

- A personal or family history of mental health problems, most notably depression, anxiety disorder, PTSD, and substance abuse
- A history of suicide attempts
- A family history of suicide or suicidal behavior
- Current or previous mental health or drug and alcohol treatment
- Lack of family and peer support for gender identity and/or sexual orientation
- Involvement in bullying behavior (including cyber bullying) as target, aggressor, both, and/or witness
- Non-suicidal self-injurious behavior
- History of physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse.

10

Postvention – Planning Ahead

- School board policy
- Interagency agreements
- Communication plans
- Deployment plans for key personnel
- Existing crisis response frameworks
- Current evidence-based and best practice supports and intervention resources (e.g., screening, groups, etc.)
- Distribution of information (e.g., district website, parent meeting)
- Logistics (e.g., space allocation, sustenance)
- Memorials
- Strategies for debriefing
- Refresher training
- Ongoing recruitment and training
- Annual review

11

Leading the Postvention Response: Key Personnel

Postvention Coordinator

- School staff member (e.g., administrator, school MH professional) to oversee core postvention activities
- Oversees the following:
 - Postvention team meetings and activities
 - Mental health supports/services
 - Internal and external communication

Mental Health Consultant

- May or may not be a school staff member
- May support the school's postvention efforts in the following ways:
 - Communicating with staff and students about the death
 - Educating on trauma, loss, and grief
 - Providing direct services (e.g., screenings, support groups) and referrals

12

The Postvention Team

Postvention team members may include any of the following staff:

- Administrator (central office and building level)
- School mental health professionals (e.g., counselor, school psychologist, social worker)
- School nurse
- SAP team members
- Teachers
- School Resource Officer
- IT staff
- Other agency/community/county-level personnel

ACTION STEP CHECKLIST

Note: The roles identified in the chart below may vary according to available resources and personnel within each school district/building.

Date	Time	Initials	Responsibility
_____	_____	_____	1. The school is informed of the death <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Postvention coordinator is notified <input type="checkbox"/> Superintendent is notified <input type="checkbox"/> Building administration is notified
_____	_____	_____	2. Factual information is gathered <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Postvention coordinator or school official contacts Coroner or law enforcement agency to confirm the death and identity of the deceased <input type="checkbox"/> Postvention coordinator completes the Coroner's/Law Enforcement Agency's Report (see Attachment 4)
_____	_____	_____	3. Postvention coordinator contacts mental health agency/other community resources for on-site support and/or consultation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Mental health agency states what services will be provided <input type="checkbox"/> Superintendent approves use of mental health services

Postvention
Action Steps

Initial Postvention Team Meeting

- Goal is to plan for the postvention response
 - Triage/set priorities for what needs to be addressed and within what timeframes
 - Review agency providers available to assist with postvention activities
 - Identify where and when postvention/crisis team meetings will occur and any other aspects of communication
 - Document tasks, timelines, person responsible, and any other relevant details

15

Meeting with Faculty and Staff

- Should occur as soon as possible once the school verifies the sudden death
- Agenda may include the following:
 - Introductions and basic information
 - Overview of postvention services
 - Faculty and staff responsibilities with announcements
 - Parent communications
 - Funeral attendance
 - Closing the meeting

16

Announcing the Death to Students and Families

- Goal is to provide information and offer additional supports to those students in need.
- A letter should be mailed and/or e-mailed to parents about the tragedy, describing the postvention services available.
 - Information in the parent letter should match the information provided to students
- The following approaches are **not** recommended:
 - The announcement of a death should not be broadcast over an in-school announcement system or printed solely in a school bulletin.
 - The announcement should not be shared in a large group assembly.

17

Communication with the School Community

- Keeping staff informed on the current facts of a tragedy can help dispel rumors.
- If adults cannot immediately refute the rumor, find an appropriate source to address the rumor as honestly and accurately as possible.
- Providing information in a sensitive and timely fashion may be useful in mitigating any perceptions among those within the school community that negative interactions with peers (e.g., bullying, harassment) caused the deceased's death.
- Sometimes, given limited information, the only answer may be: "To the best of my knowledge, that is not true."

18

Parent Meeting

- If a parent meeting is held, underscore the purpose as **an informational session to support caregivers on how to help their youth cope with the recent tragedy.**
- A structured meeting, as opposed to an open forum, may address the following:
 - Summary of the school's postvention activities.
 - Typical child and adolescent responses to a sudden death.
 - Risk factors and behaviors that indicate a concern.
 - Symptoms of depression and suicidal behavior;
 - Social media concerns (e.g., distressing posts) and opportunities (e.g., to identify students and connect them with appropriate resources).
 - Crisis contacts and support resources available in the school, community, and nationally.

19

Communication with Media

- The school media spokesperson should develop a **safe and effective** message to be shared
- Any statement should be brief and may include the following:
 - Expression of the school's sympathy to survivors of the deceased
 - Information about the school's postvention policy/program
 - Summary of positive action that the school is taking to support students and staff
 - References to responsible media reporting in a postvention situation
 - Information about available school and community resources for students and their families

20

Guidelines for Classroom Announcement

- The general classroom announcement should be brief and factual.
- Classroom discussion that follows can
 - **Ask** students what additional questions they may have and dispel any rumors.
 - **Inform** students that their parents will be getting a letter regarding the death and that their parents will be encouraged to talk with them.
 - **Remind** students that there is no one way to react or grieve.
 - **Encourage** students to utilize their natural supports
 - **Emphasize** the importance of seeking adult consultation when worried about a friend or themselves. Remind all again of local and national crisis numbers.
 - **Advise** students about how to respond to media representatives in person or online.
 - **Caution** students with respect to use of their social media during this difficult time.

21

One-time Structured Educational Support Group

- **Consult and confirm** district policies regarding the need for parental consent for student involvement in crisis response activities.
- **Limit** each group to 20 students due to the intensity of emotion that is often conveyed in these support groups.
- **Co-facilitate** groups with trained individuals from the postvention team and/or a mental health agency.
- **Conduct** the group in a private area in the school to facilitate discussion and ensure privacy.
- **Review** limits of confidentiality—and concerns about safety to self, others, abuse, and/or other at-risk behaviors and information may be reported.
- **Consider** limiting the meeting to no longer than 50 minutes and offering nourishment (e.g., water, snacks) to model self-care.

22

Structured Educational Support Group

Sample Objectives

- Students will identify common grief and stress reactions following a sudden death, including suicide.
- Students will discuss ways to cope with grief and stress reactions following a sudden death.
- Participants will identify a trusted adult to turn to when in crisis and describe the importance of seeking help for themselves and their peers.

Sample Topics to Explore

- Each student's relationship with the deceased
- Individual reactions to the death and with whom they were shared
- Address students' questions and clarify misinformation and rumors about the death
- Typical reactions to grief and symptoms associated with depression
- Resiliency
- Discussion about natural supports
- Expectations about the funeral and ways of expressing sympathy and condolences to the family
- Local, state, and/or national emergency and crisis resources

23

Individual Referral and Screening

- There will be a finite number of students whose reactions put them at risk and who will come to the attention of the postvention team during the course of the postvention.
- The following students should be referred for individual screening:
 - Students who have previously been referred for or identified as at-risk for psychiatric disorders, drug or alcohol abuse, and/or who have experienced a recent loss
 - Students who witnessed the suicide and/or had recent communication with the deceased
 - Students who are otherwise seen as highly vulnerable and in need of more personalized attention than the group format can provide

24

Individual Screening Considerations

- Which staff members (or outside agency mental health partners) are responsible for conducting screenings
- Referral procedures for staff, family members, peers, and self-referrals
- Confidentiality and consent
- Selecting an appropriate screening tool
- Establishing follow-up protocols for
 - Referrals
 - Safety planning
 - Resource sharing
 - Parent communication
 - Record-keeping
 - Monitoring

25

Considerations for Memorials

- **Proportion:** The memorial should be in proportion to past activities and with consideration to the amount of time and involvement from the school and community at large.
- **Expression:** Ideas for memorials are often influenced by current fads and trends (e.g., social media page for the deceased, hashtags). While memorial requests may incorporate unique means of expression, review all memorials for cultural sensitivity to the deceased, his or her family, and the community as a whole.
- **Outlook:** Adopting a theme of looking to the future with a sense of hopefulness is an important element in any memorial service, writing, or activity.
- **Family Wishes:** Honor the surviving family's wishes and preferences when possible.

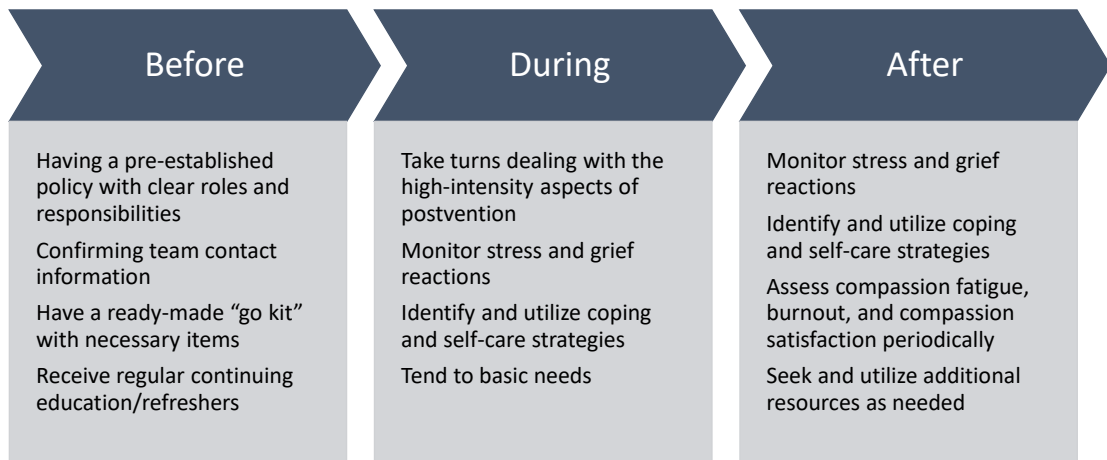
26

Memorials: Additional Considerations

- Focus on the person, **not** on the manner/method of death.
- Encourage living memorials (e.g., scholarships, donations to support/treatment organizations, annual walks to raise money for charity).
- Discourage large, unmonitored gatherings of students.
- Monitor online memorials and social media for any comments of concern.
- Discuss policies for yearbook memorials and other events like graduation.
- Note anniversary dates and discuss the appropriateness of follow-up activities and supports that may be needed at these times.

27

Supporting the Postvention Team throughout the Response



28

Evaluating the Postvention

- Documentation of postvention activities and services can help provide a factual representation of the events surrounding the suicide and the school's response
- Daily debriefing with team members throughout the postvention response may include the following:
 - Service delivery
 - Individual student screenings and recommendations
 - Identify/recommend other interventions and need for further postvention activities
- Annually, review the postvention policy and procedures and make necessary revisions

29

Transitioning from Postvention to Prevention

- Opportunity to revisit prevention and intervention efforts
 - Policies and procedures
 - Staff education and training
 - Student education
 - Parent education
 - Screening
- Moving toward “upstream approaches” that reduce risk factors and build protective factors
 - Building resilience and coping skills

30

Select Resources

- After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools, 2nd Edition: <https://afsp.org/after-a-suicide-a-toolkit-for-schools>
- AFSP Survivors of Suicide Resources: <https://afsp.org/ive-lost-someone>
- Prevent Suicide PA: <https://www.preventsuicidepa.org/>
- Preventing Suicide: A Toolkit for High Schools: <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/Preventing-Suicide-A-Toolkit-for-High-Schools/SMA12-4669>
- Rocky Mountain MIRECC for Suicide Prevention – Postvention Practices for Schools Podcast: https://www.mirecc.va.gov/vsn19/education/media/podcasts/7_16_20_19.asp
- Safe and Effective Messaging for Suicide Prevention: <http://www.sprc.org/sites/default/files/migrate/library/SafeMessagingrevised.pdf>
- STAR Center-University of Pittsburgh: <https://www.starcenter.pitt.edu/>

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LGBTQ CRISIS HOTLINE
CALL 1-866-488-7386

988 SUICIDE & CRISIS LIFELINE
24/7 CALL, TEXT, CHAT


31

A Final Note

Life isn't the way it is supposed to be. Life is the way it is. It is how we cope that makes the difference.

- Anonymous Student

32



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