



## Oregon Youth Suicide Prevention Campaign – Article #7

by Ann Kirkwood, Oregon Health Authority Suicide Intervention Coordinator

### Your Role in Responding to Suicide

Each year, many school communities must deal with the loss of a student to suicide. Faced with the shock of losing someone so young, students, parents and school staff, as well as individuals across communities, must deal with profound grief and trauma. **For youth and young adults, the risk of additional suicides (contagion) is higher than it is for their older counterparts.** This article describes both the school administration and school staff's role in effectively responding to a suicide.

**People at highest risk of attempting suicide in the future include those who witnessed the suicide or its aftermath, had a psychological or social connection to the deceased, have pre-existing vulnerabilities, perceive they helped the suicide occur, or have been exposed to another suicide in the past.** Other factors contributing to increased risk are people who believe they failed to identify warning signs, feel responsible for the death, have a sense of hopelessness/helplessness, have experienced recent losses or stressors, have attempted suicide themselves, have limited social support, or have a mental or substance use disorder.

Post-suicide intervention (postvention) is a set of best practices that helps those left behind with their grief and is designed to contain suicide and the risk of contagion. Schools sometimes have protocols for postvention response. Sometimes they don't and need to work on one. If everyone knows their role and responsibilities when a suicide occurs, the process will run more smoothly for students, families and staff.

When a suicide occurs:

- 1. School administration coordinates external and internal resources for rapid response.**
  - Crisis intervention teams, including behavioral health professionals, should be provided at the school as long as needed.
  - Staff should be informed about the suicide the same day or early the next day so they can respond to youth in crisis.
  - Remember the news of the suicide will spread very quickly (even within the hour) among youth through social media. They may know about it before adults do. Staff should know what your school expects them to say to students.
  - Be honest with students but don't glamorize suicide. If the cause of death hasn't been determined right away, say so, then offer services and support. Be careful with statements like "he/she is in a better place" that may cause students to see suicide as glamorous or heroic. Suicide is always a tragedy.
  - Inform parents as soon as possible through letters home. Letters should include warning signs for youth at risk and information on how parents can access counseling or other supports for their child. If staff are speaking with parents, tell them the warning signs of suicide and how to get counseling for their student or themselves. (warning signs list: <https://afsp.org/about-suicide/risk-factors-and-warning-signs/>)

- Do not hold assemblies or broadcast the news over the announcements. Talk to students in small groups or individually. In talking to classes or teams, have a counselor on hand to watch for signs of distress.

## **2. School administration and staff share information.**

- Make sure the cause of death is officially confirmed as a suicide.
- **Help students understand that suicide is no one's fault. They may be feeling guilt that they didn't do enough and need to understand that they are not responsible. Students dealing with guilt might need counseling support to cope.**
- Do not discuss the means of death or disclose other details. Youth already at risk of suicide can be impressionable.
- If the family does not want the suicide reported publicly, you can discuss it as a traumatic death, without mentioning suicide. Check on the statement the administration is issuing and share it as instructed.
- If reporters contact you, know who your spokesperson is and refer the reporter to them. Reporters may call you directly if the student who died was an athlete. Reporters should be provided best practices for reporting on suicide: [www.reportingonsuicide.org](http://www.reportingonsuicide.org)

## **3. Identify those at risk in order to prevent contagion.**

- As athletic staff, you have a unique perspective on student needs. You may hear students talking or they may come to you as a trusted adult. Be ready to listen non-judgmentally in private, ask open-ended questions, and refer students to school resources as needed.
- Students may be close friends with the student who died and will need intensive help. But remember that other students are impacted and their grief needs to be addressed, too.
- If siblings attend other schools, extend intervention to those schools. Even athletes on a competing school's team can be impacted so staff there should be notified. Know who at your school will notify other schools.

## **4. Commemorate the deceased appropriately and safely.**

- Treat all student deaths the same.
- Don't create permanent or long-term memorials, such as dedicating all games to a youth for the next season, creating a memorial on the field or at the gym, or putting up benches, planting trees, etc. Permanent memorials can become locations for future suicides. At risk youth may be impressionable and see suicide as attractive if they observe special memorials for a classmate.
- Encourage students who want to commemorate their classmate to take on positive activities, such take up a collection for mental health books for the library, participate in a suicide prevention or mental health walk, or do a project on help seeking for depression and anxiety. Focus on mental health and help seeking instead of suicide.

## **5. Address self-care for staff.**

- Remember that staff (including you), especially in a small town, may know the family, belong to the same church, or have social relationships with others who are close to the family. Make sure to address your reactions and the grief and trauma you can experience.

## **6. Link impacted parties to resources.**

- Let students and families know about counseling and other services available through the school. Remember that students may not recognize the need for services right away. Know what services are available over time as people grieve at their own pace.

**7. Know who at your school or district is monitoring social media to ensure a healthy response to the suicide.**

**8. Plan for the future.**

- Think about what you will do to support at-risk students at special holidays, birthdays or anniversaries. Friends and families experience emotional challenges at those times. They can be high risk periods for other students.
- Make plans for contacts with at-risk students over summer or other vacations. Does the school have a plan for reaching out? Are you the person who should be reaching out?
- Suggest community building activities at school that restore a sense of belongingness, connectedness and for students at risk to feel they have a valued role in school and community life (Joiner, T.E. (2005). *Why people die by suicide*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- Take some time for grieving before launching into school-wide prevention activities for students. Address their grieving first, and after some time passes (a few months or more), offer positive trainings or events that focus on mental wellness and help-seeking.
- **Share with students that strength among athletes includes mental wellness, not just physical agility, and asking for help is okay.**

There are groups in Oregon that offer some on site programs to assist in suicide response and grief, such as the Dougy Center (<https://www.dougy.org/>, 866-775-5683) and Lines for Life (<https://www.linesforlife.org/about-us/>, 503.244.5211 or 800.282.7035)

**Make sure students know that crisis services for them are available via the YOUTHLINE**

**Call 877-968-8491**

**Text teen2teen to 839863**

**Chat at [www.oregonyouthline.org](http://www.oregonyouthline.org)**

Teens available to help daily from 4-10pm Pacific Time (off-hour calls answered by Lines for Life).

**For more information on school response to suicide visit:**

- About suicide, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, <https://afsp.org/about-suicide/>
- When death impacts your school, Dougy Center, <https://www.dougy.org/grief-resources/death-impacts-your-school/>
- How a school community heals after a student dies, National Education Association, <http://www.nea.org/home/38144.htm>
- After a suicide: A toolkit for schools, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and Suicide Prevention Resource Center, <http://www.sprc.org/resources-programs/after-suicide-toolkit-schools>
- Memorials after suicide: guidelines for schools and families, Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide, <http://www.sptsusa.org/educators/memorials-after-suicide-guidelines-for-schools-and-families/>
- Mental health for school administrators and staff, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, <https://afsp.org/campaigns/look-ways-mental-health-awareness-month-2017/mental-health-school-administrators-staff/>