

Helping Students Cope

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In the aftermath of a suicide, students and others in the school community may feel emotionally overwhelmed. This can make it difficult for the school to return to its primary function of educating students and can also increase the risk of prolonged stress responses and even suicide contagion. A school's approach to supporting students after a suicide loss is most effective when it provides different levels of support depending on the students' needs. It is critical that an opportunity to meet in smaller groups be given to students in need of more in-depth support, augmenting the support given to all students.

Key Considerations

Adolescence is a time of increased risk for difficulties with emotional regulation given the intensification of responses that come with puberty and the structural changes in the brain that occur during this developmental period. Most adolescents have mastered basic skills that allow them to handle strong emotions encountered day to day. But these skills may be challenged in the face of a suicide. Young people may not yet have learned how to recognize complex feelings or physical indicators of distress, such as stomach upset, restlessness, or insomnia.

It is therefore important for schools to provide students with appropriate opportunities to express their emotions and identify strategies for managing them, such as in group and individual counseling sessions. Schools can also help students balance the timing and intensity of their emotional expression. Staff can use the information in the tool [Tips for Talking about Suicide](#) to help students understand and manage their emotions.

If there are concerns about a student's emotional or mental health, the parent(s) or guardian(s) should be notified, and a referral should be made to a mental health professional for assessment, diagnosis, and possible treatment. Mental health resources that may be available in addition to school-based mental health professionals (e.g., school psychologists, counselors, social workers) include community mental health agencies, emergency psychiatric screening centers, and children's mobile response programs. Pediatricians and primary care providers can also be a source of mental health referrals. In addition, it may be useful for school staff to identify and reach out to families of students who are not coming to school.

When implementing these strategies, leadership will most likely be provided by the school psychologist, counselor, social worker, school nurse, and/or possibly a community mental health partner, all of whom may be members of the school's Crisis Response Team and likely trained in culturally competent counseling strategies. However, all adults in the school community can help by modeling calm, caring, and thoughtful behavior.

Schedule Meetings with Students in Small Groups

Schools will likely need to adjust the regular academic schedule to allow time for helping students address their emotional needs. It is preferable to reach out to students in a deliberate and timely way, rather than allow the emotional environment to escalate, and to do so in homerooms and small group meetings.

All students should be provided with the opportunity to go to a small group meeting where they can express their feelings about the death of their classmate and obtain support. This type of group would be optional for students and should take place outside their classroom in private offices within the school. Ideally, these groups would be facilitated by a school mental health professional or another person experienced in postvention. However, if that is not possible, it is important that the staff who meet with students are comfortable with students' grief and know the school's

procedure for addressing a student who is in distress and the importance of referring the student for help. Such small groups also provide a chance for adults to identify youth who appear in need of additional support.

These group meetings can either have a structured agenda and keep to a time limit or be open-ended and focus more on addressing the students' specific needs. It is important to provide each student with an opportunity to speak. The groups should focus on helping students identify and express their feelings and discuss practical coping strategies (including appropriate ways to memorialize the loss) so that they can return their focus to their regular routines and activities.

In addition to the small groups, it might be helpful to have mental health professionals visit classrooms to:

- Give all students accurate information about suicide
- Prepare students for the kinds of reactions that can be expected after hearing about a peer's suicide death
- Provide them with safe coping strategies they can use to help them in the coming days and weeks
- Answer questions students may have and dispel any rumors

If the deceased student participated in sports, clubs, or other school activities, the first practice, game, rehearsal, or meeting after the death may be difficult for the other students. These events can provide further opportunities for the adults in the school community to help the students appropriately acknowledge the loss.

Help Students Identify and Express Their Emotions

Youth will vary widely in terms of emotional expression. Some may become openly emotional, others may be reluctant to talk at all, and still others may use humor. How they express their emotions may also be influenced by their cultural background. Acknowledge the diversity of experiences and the wide range of feelings and reactions to a crisis that students may have, and emphasize the importance of being respectful of others.

Some students may need help identifying emotions beyond simply sad, angry, or happy, and they may need reassurance that a wide range of feelings and experiences are to be expected. They may also need to be reminded that emotions may be experienced as physical symptoms, including butterflies in the stomach, shortness of breath, insomnia, fatigue, or irritability. To facilitate this discussion, ask students questions, such as:

- What is your biggest concern about the immediate future?
- What would help you feel safer right now?

It may help establish rapport to open a conversation by asking students what their favorite memories are of the student.

Practical Coping Strategies

Encourage students to think about specific things they can do when intense emotions, such as worry or sadness, begin to well up, for example:

- Use simple relaxation and distraction skills, such as taking three deep, slow breaths; counting to 10; or picturing themselves in a favorite calm and relaxing place
- Engage in favorite activities or hobbies, such as music, talking with a friend, reading, or going to a movie

- Exercise
- Think about how they have coped with difficulties in the past and remind themselves that they can use those same coping skills now
- Write a list of people they can turn to for support
- Write a list of things they are looking forward to
- Focus on personal goals, such as returning to a shared class or spending time with mutual friends

Often, youth will express guilt about having fun or thinking about other things. They may feel that they somehow need permission to engage in activities that will help them feel better and take their mind off the stressful situation.

Encourage students to think about how they want to remember their friend. Ideas may include writing a personal note to the family, attending the memorial service, creating a memory book, or doing something kind for another person in honor of their friend. Be sure to educate students about the school's guidelines regarding memorialization. Acknowledging their need to express their feelings while helping them identify appropriate ways to do so can begin the process of returning their focus to their daily lives and responsibilities.

Schools, in partnership with community mental health resources, might also consider creating drop-in centers that provide a safe and comfortable place for youth to be together after school hours. These can be staffed by volunteer counselors and clinicians from the community who can provide grief counseling, as well as identify and refer youth who may need additional mental health or substance abuse services. These centers can also be used during times of particularly heightened emotion, such as graduation or the anniversary of a student's death.

Reach Out to Parents

Parents may need guidance on how to talk about suicide with their children and how best to support them at this difficult time. They may also need reliable information such as that found in [Facts about Suicide in Adolescents, Youth Warning Signs and What to Do in a Crisis](#), and [Tips for Talking about Suicide](#). Encourage parents to contact school mental health staff if they are concerned about their children or other students.

Anniversary of the Death

The anniversary of the death (and other significant dates, such as the deceased's birthday) may stir up emotions and can be an upsetting time for some students and staff. It is helpful to anticipate this and provide an opportunity to acknowledge the date, particularly with those students who were especially close to the student who died. These students may also need additional support since mourning can be a long-term process, and an anniversary of a loss can trigger the grief and trauma they experienced at the time of the death.

For more resources on helping students cope, see [Appendix B: Additional Resources](#).