

# Suicide Postvention Guide for Schools in Washington State

October 2021

# Introduction

This guide was created in partnership with Forefront Suicide Prevention, OSPI and Washington State's ESD Behavioral Health Navigators.

This resource is one that gathers from best practice across the field of suicide prevention, intervention and postvention. This guide synthesizes information from exemplars in this area of practice, including:

- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention's (AFSP) After a Suicide
- Hazelden's Lifelines Postvention
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) Preventing Suicide

Forefront Suicide Prevention has also contributed resources

# Using Model Guidance

- Postvention activities commonly take place within school settings, yet very few school staff are aware of suggested guidelines on ways to safely conduct them (Wei, Szumilas, Kutcher, 2009).
- It is important that schools prepare for postvention before a suicide. This includes training your school staff, students and parents. Community members also need training. i.e., funeral directors, faith leaders, emergency departments, law enforcement, health professionals, media and journalists.
- Schools should incorporate postvention as a component of an overall comprehensive plan, which should form and identify a school-based crisis team.



# What is Suicide Postvention?

# Suicide Postvention is...

*An organized response in the aftermath of a suicide attempt or death that:*

- Provides opportunities to start healing from the grief and distress of suicide loss. These healing activities can mitigate future risks of suicide and other negative effects
- Recognizes that suicide can present a unique form of trauma exposure
- Ensures that individuals/families who have experienced a suicide and/or suicide attempt are offered support and a path to recovery
- Almost all of the principles of suicide postvention apply to traumatic deaths under any circumstance

# Crisis Team Formation and Roles

**Crisis Team Leader/Coordinator:** This person is essentially the project and team manager. They should remain the consistent and central point of contact throughout the response.

**Information Coordinator:** Gathers information, monitors media coverage, and social media.

**Parent/Guardian Liaison:** Responds to parent/guardian inquiries and needs, develops parental letters or informational meetings, and may communicate with the family of the deceased.

**Administrative Liaison:** Manages the removal of student belongings, distributes information to staff, and coordinates the logistics of the staffing and protocol for care stations.

**Community Liaison:** Informs agencies of the school's plans, arranges volunteers and support from local mental health resources.

**Operations Coordinator:** Addresses all issues that affect the physical school building i.e. for any meetings, transportation, or coordinates law enforcement if needed.

**Faculty Support Staff:** At least two members who follow the daily schedule of the deceased and siblings who can also provide support to faculty.

**Crisis Assessment of Vulnerable Students Team:** Two or more members of the team who can coordinate crisis contacts for vulnerable students.

# Safe Messaging

Talking about suicide is critical and we have a responsibility to balance being truthful with the school community and the need to be sensitive to the family.

Follow guidelines on safe messaging about suicide. Talk should center around the fact that the school has lost a valuable member of its school community, not on the circumstances of the death. Remember:

- It is particularly important to avoid idealizing the person and glorifying suicide
- Talk about the person in a balanced manner
- Don't be afraid to include struggles that were known - especially in individual conversations about the death. If the student's struggles are not mentioned, it can cause confusion and give the impression that suicide is an effective way of addressing one's distress - especially among the other students

# Addressing Cultural Diversity

Postvention efforts need to take into consideration the cultural diversity of everyone affected by a suicide, including the family, school, and community. This diversity may include differences in race, ethnicity, language, religion, sexual orientation, and disability. Culture may significantly affect the way people view and respond to suicide and death. Key points involving cultural differences include the following:

- Be aware that the extent to which people are able to talk about suicide varies greatly, and in some cultures, suicide is still seen as a moral failing
- Be sensitive to the beliefs and customs regarding the family and community, including rituals, funerals, the appropriate person to contact, etc.
- Be sensitive to how the family or community may need to respond to the death before individuals outside of the family or community intervene to provide support
- Engage a “cultural broker” to act as a liaison between the family, community, and school if key members of school staff are not from the same racial, ethnic, or religious group as the person who died by suicide
- Bring in interpreters and translators if there are language differences. If possible, have resource materials in different languages available for parents



# Initial Steps in Postvention

*When a young person dies by suicide, it affects the entire community. Knowing where to find resources is essential.*

*If your school has not navigated this kind of loss and are not sure where to look for support, reaching out to your district or local ESD can link to resources. Support can also come from local mental health service providers.*

- 1. Verify the Death, Determine Facts**
  - As soon as a school receives news that a community member has died by suicide, the first step is to verify the news and confirm the death
- 2. Make Contact with Family**
  - The school should assign a point of contact with the family. Schools may find they establish better rapport with a family in crisis when communication is done in person (this is not always possible)
- 3. Call an immediate meeting of the Crisis Response Team to initiate the postvention process**

# Getting Ready for Day 1

## Inform Staff & Connect with Community Supports

- Notify staff of death and staff meeting (phone tree, email, crisis alert system, other method)
  - If possible, those that worked directly with the student should get a more personal notification
- Contact appropriate community support resources
- Notify other administrators at sibling and/or "feeder" schools

## Prepare for Day 1

- Set up care stations and staffing
- Remove students name from automated call system
- Arrange to remove the student's belongings from his or her locker and/or desk(s)



Day 1

# Staff Meeting Before School Begins

*Conducting a staff meeting before school is **CRITICAL** to supporting your staff in appropriate response.*

- Review roles and responsibilities of the crisis team and others supporting postvention.
- Share verifiable facts of student's death (method should not be shared)
- Review procedure for responding to impromptu memorials
- Offer time for questions and sharing feelings
- Identify staff who will be following student's schedule
- Identify and generate list of students of concern; including how students can access care stations—including information about referral process, locations and staffing
- Review announcement to be read by teachers in classrooms or small groups (advisory, homeroom, etc.). Ensure the classroom of the deceased has more support beyond the teacher (i.e. school based mental health professional)

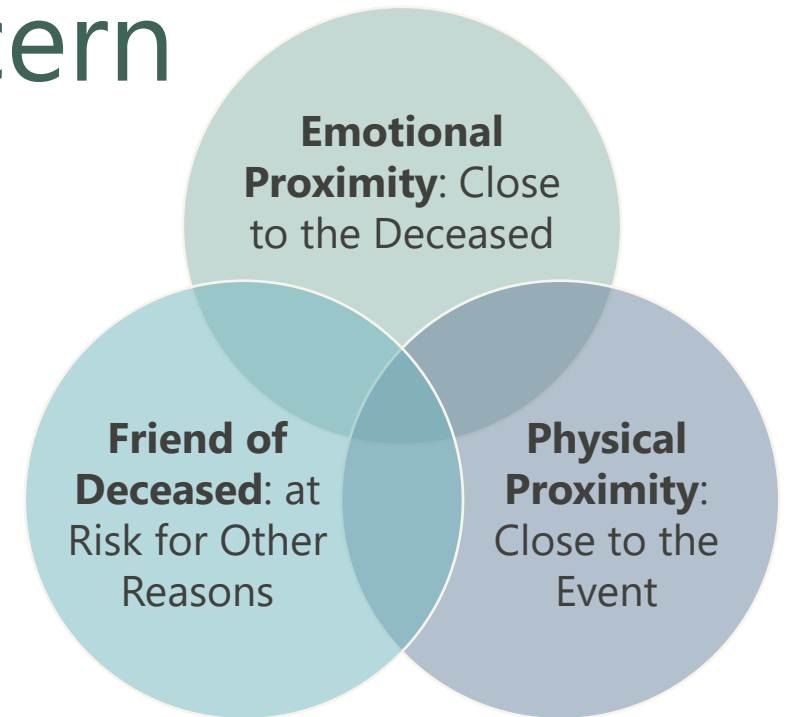
# Identifying Students of Concern

Use safety planning for students who...

- Were close friends, siblings, and/or romantic relationships
- Have a known history of substance use/abuse or mental health treatment
- Had the same classes or activities i.e., athletics, clubs, church
- Experienced a similar loss
- New to the district/school and for whom little may be known
- Feel responsible for recent negative interaction(s) with the deceased

All students and staff should be made aware of how students can access care stations, including information about referral process, locations and staffing.

Resources should also be provided for those who wish to seek support in the surrounding community instead of at school.



# Additional Day 1 Tasks

Additionally, day 1 tasks will include:

- Monitoring care stations
- Communicating with staff, families, students
- Hosting a voluntary end of day staff meeting
- Debriefing with the crisis team at the end of day 1



Day 2–5

# Day 2–5 Tasks

- Communicate plans for Funeral and/or Memorial Services
- Assess the school's readiness to return to a regular routine. This should be done as soon as possible with accommodations available for students and staff of concern
- Care Stations are typically open 4-5 days, announce closure 1 day in advance (with additional resources on what to do if more support is needed)
- Contact all absentees to determine if their absence is related to the death
- Update faculty/staff on postvention activities including a review of how they can identify students of concern
- Offer longer term grief support to students through school and/or community resources
- Remove deceased student's personal items from the locker and desk/chair from classroom(s) -- this should be done quickly and with sensitivity
- Monitor student online tributes





# Sources

# Sources

This guide was developed by corroborating the following resources:

- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, American School Counselor Association, National Association of School Psychologists & The Trevor Project (2019). *Model School District Policy on Suicide Prevention: Model Language, Commentary, and Resources* (2nd ed.). New York: American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.
- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, & Suicide Prevention Resource Center. (2018). *After a suicide: A toolkit for schools* (2nd ed.). Waltham, MA: Education Development Center.
- Drescher, Alissa. (2021). *Grief Work in Virtual Settings: New Tools to Create Support and Connection*. PESI Education April 2021. Retrieved from:
  - [https://f.hubspotusercontent40.net/hubfs/6951996/001460-Grief%20Summit/GriefWorkInVirtualSettings\\_ZNM058000.pdf](https://f.hubspotusercontent40.net/hubfs/6951996/001460-Grief%20Summit/GriefWorkInVirtualSettings_ZNM058000.pdf)
- National Association of School Psychologists (2020). Comprehensive suicide prevention in a time of distance learning (Handout). Retrieved from:
  - <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/covid-19-resource-center/crisis-and-mental-health-resources/comprehensive-school-suicide-prevention-in-a-time-of-distance-learning>
- National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement. (n.d.) *Guidelines for responding to the death of a student or school staff*. Retrieved from:
  - <https://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Guidelines-Death-Student-or-Staff-Booklet-Format.pdf>
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. *Preventing Suicide: A Toolkit for High Schools*. HHS Publication No. SMA-12-4669. Rockville, MD: Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2012.
- Underwood, M.M., Fell, F.T., & Spinazzola, N.A. (2018). *Lifelines Postvention: Responding to Suicide and Other Traumatic Death*. Hazelden.



Additional Slides

The following slides can be used interchangeably during a presentation dependent on timing and needs.

# Care Stations

\*Also known as safe rooms.

Care Stations are designated areas open to students and staff in need of assistance or support during postvention. These areas are a short term support to a grieving community.

Sign in and out procedures are important pieces of documentation that will help identify students in need of support

Care Stations are typically open approximately three (3) days, announce closure one (1) day in advance (with additional resources on what to do if more support is needed)

Consider establishing a care station for parents/guardians who arrive at the school for early dismissal of their children

# Community Debrief and Response

Meeting with the parent community, as described by [After a Scuiicide](#) (page 53), can provide a forum for sharing accurate information and resources in the aftermath of a suicide. The meeting should be attended by the crisis response team, school administration, and include representatives from community-based resources.

Great care and planning should be taken when moving forward with a postvention activity of this size, and it is important to note that a community meeting is not always recommended. Lifelines does not recommend this practice in postvention.

# School Crisis Team Debrief

Debrief is essential for Crisis Teams as well; it allows for important process and procedural refinement and allows the Crisis team members to identify limitations to their ability to respond.

Time at the end of each day should be made to debrief, document and process. This is taxing work and this provides an opportunity for the team to care for itself.

A team meeting should also be scheduled once the immediate need to respond has passed. This provides opportunities to discuss the lessons learned and opportunities for change.

# Funerals and Memorial Services

Schools can share information about funeral and memorial services with students, families and staff. This should be done in a consistent manner, no matter the cause of death.

Best practice in suicide postvention can inform plans for funerals and memorial services after a suicide.



# Anniversaries and Rites of Passage

Special consideration should be given to the following dates:

- Graduation of the Student's Class
- Birthday(s)
- Anniversary of Death
- Sports or Activity Seasons

What other rites of passage might be unique to your school building that would require special consideration in the event of a suicide?

# Memorials and Tributes

When a student's death is experienced by a school, there often is a request for some kind of a memorial to remember or commemorate the loss. Memorials and tributes, whether spontaneous or those to be included in the yearbook, school newspaper, or at graduation, should follow [best practice](#). Be prepared to deal with the media, especially in high profile situations. [Media Reporting Toolkit - AAS](#). Exposure to suicide in person or through social media presents risk for suicide; read [SPRC's Online Manual](#) for more information.

## Further Resources:

- [Guidelines for Memorials after a Suicide](#)
- [Special Considerations for Memorials](#)
- [Memorials after Suicide - Helpful or Harmful](#)

# Bereavement Support

Remember, people who have experienced a suicide loss including parents, siblings, close friends, and staff colleagues often need compassionate support from people who can listen with empathy and withhold any judgement. Many find it helpful to read books, seek out counseling and/or participate in suicide loss survivor groups.

## Further Resources:

- [Books for Loss Survivors](#)
- [Tips for Teachers & Recommended Books](#)
- [Find a Therapist](#)
- [Find a Support Group](#)
- Adults in Washington state can [Receive a Care Package & Ask for a Grief Mentor](#)

The following slides can be used as discussion prompts, role play, or team planning.

# Postvention

You've learned that one of your students has died suddenly. This information has come from a friend of the deceased student's family.

1. Who will call the family of the deceased student
2. What is said to the family

Family reveals that their child died by a drug overdose. They don't believe it was an accident - they found a "goodbye" note. They are not comfortable calling it a suicide.

1. How do you respond
2. How do students and their families learn of the death
3. Who writes messages, who delivers them, what can/can't be shared

# Long-Term Planning

Are you in reaction mode or is your school actively working toward long-term prevention planning?

What is your school doing to...

- Address risk factors for suicide
- Implement a prevention framework
- Initiate dedicated staff/budget to crisis planning and prevention work