How to Help When a Student Dies By Suicide: Tips for educators

Schools are on the front lines of student social and emotional wellness and play a critical role in the days (and sometimes months or years) after a student dies by suicide. Administrators, counselors, teachers and all caring adults play a vital role in helping to stabilize the school environment AND promote healthy grieving. The tips below are formulated using the most updated information about suicide postvention, or the actions taken after there has been a death by suicide

1. **Release clear information, with verified facts only, as soon as possible**, and repeatedly. Be aware that rumors often contain graphic details that can be harmful to students. Demonstrate that you can be trusted to share according to the family's wishes and be trusted in a time of high stress and sadness with transparency about the facts.

2. **Identify those at most risk using a model of concentric circles** A public health model presumes that there is an increased risk to the population. The center of the circle includes those closest to the student who died: family, close friends, partners, and enemies. The next circle would include peers and adults who shared an interest or activity or worked with the student. The third circle should include students with mental health vulnerabilities or suicidal ideation/attempts, or loss. The larger school community would be in the outer circle. Use these circles, starting in the center and working out, to prioritize checking in with community members to offer support and see what they might need. Repeatedly.

3. **Teachers can facilitate healthy grief processing in the classroom.** This could start with a share about how "students are doing today" or an activity which helps regulate. Ask what students are doing to take care of themselves? Ask what would help you with how you are feeling right now? Teachers can use course materials, such as books or plays to initiate conversation about loss and suicide prevention. Emphasis choice points, "What could the character do to get help?"

4. **Support adults in the building.** The death of a student is always impactful for educators. It can activate existing mental health concerns and add to an already toxic stress load. It can bring up previous losses and traumatic experiences. All of which deserve support and care.

5. **You cannot put the thought of suicide into someone's mind** by talking about it. Be open to kids sharing how it makes them feel. Don't glamorize suicide and don't avoid, both extremes reinforce stigma around mental health and prevent healthy grieving.

6. **Know local and national resources** to share with kids and their parents (nowmattersnow.com; trevorproject.org, national suicide prevention hotline)

7. **Resume routine with flexibility**. Cognitive function is often impacted by traumatic grief and that means students may have difficulty getting assignments done, paying attention, reading, taking tests etc. This is a normal reaction and educators can help students by staying in communication and offering flexibility in assignments and assessments.

8. **Engage the class in conversation about the empty chair**. Chances are students have feelings about the chair once occupied by their classmate. Avoid turning the seat into a shrine which can both glamorize the death and serve as a painful reminder. Instead, ask the class what they want to do with the chair, what it means to them. Let them know that you will need to change the seating plan at a point and decide together when that makes most sense.

9. **Let students know that their reactions are common and include both grief and a stress response.** Healthy grieving is a priority in helping students with suicide loss. Giving them opportunities to connect to each other and talk about grieving in the company of a trusted adult helps. It also lowers risk of contagion, because students' sense of belonging is increased when they feel the support of the school, friends, and family

10. **Change the narrative about suicide.** The understandable tendency is to tell a story about the loss and details of what happened; this can unintentionally reinforce a sense of powerlessness and hopelessness. Help students remember how their friend lived and not how they died. Instead of a fixed memorial (like a bench), how about getting active around an issue or a cause that the student cared about? Participation in suicide prevention activities brings hope and mobilization to students who can feel like there is nothing they can do.

11. **Take care of your own reactions with compassion.** Stress and trauma is cumulative and being an educator is demanding. Reflect on your reactions and become aware of how stress impacts you. Find ways to allow yourself to feel what you feel AND bring calm and balance to your daily life.

Dial **988** for immediate mental health support
Other resources include:
www.trevorproject.org
https://afsp.org/

*This tip sheet was created in collaboration with Marlene Kenney, MA, LICSW Marlene is a former Wendt Center clinician who now specializes in traumatic grief and suicide loss in Arlington, MA. Marlene is an EMDRIA certified clinician and consultant and centers EMDR Therapy in her trauma focused practice. She is available for organizational consultation and critical incident response following suicide loss or other critical incidents.

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