

Welcome

Thank you for choosing Kognito's *Resilient Together: Coping with Loss at School* as a part of your school's crisis response planning. Whether a death happened in your school or you want to be prepared, this document is intended to guide school administrators and teachers as they establish a crisis response plan.

A crisis response plan establishes how to reach out to students and colleagues, communicate with parents and the media, address what happened, and collaborate with community mental health services. A team of school community members, called a **crisis response team**, creates the plan and puts it into effect.

If the death was a suicide, it requires a special kind of response plan called a **postvention**. This plan facilitates healing, mitigates the negative effects of a suicide, and reduces the risk of related suicides.

Crisis Response and Postvention Checklist

When a death occurs, a crisis response or postvention should follow these steps. These will help you support your students and staff. See below for information about how to plan for these steps.

- Verify that a death has occurred and confirm cause.
- Mobilize the crisis response team.
- Assess the death's impact on the school and estimate the level of response.
- Notify other involved school personnel.
- Contact the family of the victim.
- Determine what information to share about the death to the school community.
- Determine how to share information about the death.
- Identify students significantly affected by the death and initiate a referral process.
- Conduct a faculty planning session.
- Initiate school-wide crisis intervention services.
- Conduct daily planning sessions.
- Follow a standard policy to memorialize the person who died.
- Follow a standard policy to monitor social media.
- If the death was a suicide, train your staff in prevention messaging.
- Debrief the crisis response or postvention.

The Crisis Response Team

Assemble a crisis response team immediately. It's recommended for schools to have a team ready to respond to a crisis before one occurs. This team should be selected from school community members and may include:

- Principal
- Mental Health Professional
- School Resource Officer
- Custodian
- Office Manager
- Teacher(s)
- Parent(s)

This team establishes the plan by focusing on addressing three categories of crisis response: **communication**, **expectations**, and **support**.

Communication

The crisis response team picks a liaison to handle communication and decides *how* information should be shared.

The Role of the Liaison

The liaison handles communication between the school and community. Although anyone from the crisis response team can take on this role, the principal would be ideal. Since principals already direct the school faculty and handle policy, they're in a better position to coordinate the crisis response plan. The liaison can serve as:

- **The single point of contact.** The liaison keeps messages clear and consistent to prevent confusion. They can also field questions for students, staff, parents, and media.
- **A supportive presence.** The liaison visits the family of the student who died, offers the school's condolences, finds out their needs, agrees on what information to share with the community, and discusses how much contact the family wants with people from the school involved in a memorial or funeral, if at all.
- **A protective measure.** The liaison makes sure other people don't contact the family until they have the family's permission. This prevents the family from receiving unwanted attention.

If the family of the student who died comes from a different racial, ethnic, or religious group from the liaison, it's also recommended to reach out to a **cultural broker**. This specialist advises the team and covers some of the liaison's duties. They can be especially helpful if the death is a suicide -- some cultures treat suicide differently from other deaths.

Sharing Information

Before sharing the news of a student death, verify the death and consider the impact on your students and staff. Keep messages factual and accurate to minimize confusion and gossip.

- **Communicating with staff.** The crisis response team uses a calling tree or email list to quickly inform the staff and tell them to come to a staff meeting before school the next day. If the death happened during the school day, then this meeting needs to happen immediately. The purpose of the meeting is to:
 - Address staff reactions.
 - Offer support to teachers and connect them to counselors if needed. See “Support” for more information.
 - Provide subs to cover classes.
 - Share procedures to talk about the death and refer distressed students.
 - Point to employee assistance programs that connect staff to support and other resources.
- **Training the staff.** Train teachers how to properly talk about death with students by having them study sample conversation guidelines. You can find sample guidelines by reading *After a Suicide: Toolkit for Schools* and playing *Resilient Together: Coping with Loss at School*.
- **Communicating with students.** The crisis response team should avoid making a public announcement or holding an assembly, since it’s harder to gauge students’ emotional reactions and give them the support they need. Instead, teachers should share the news about the student death in classrooms. This allows teachers to observe students’ reactions more closely and be in a good position to support them. Teachers trained in crisis response and school support staff, such as counselors, should go to classrooms where it’s believed students are the most affected.
- **Communicating via social media.** Students may turn to social media to share their thoughts and feelings. It’s important not to censor students, especially as they grieve. Instead, a school can use social media to:
 - Share accurate information with the school community.
 - Share resources for grief support and mental health care.
 - Gauge students’ reactions.
 - Address misconceptions and rumors.

You can find more tips on talking about a death and social media usage in [*After a Suicide: Toolkit for Schools*](#).

Expectations

The crisis response team decides how to balance the community's needs with academic needs.

- **Keep some routines in place.** Students and staff may find routines reassuring during a time of crisis. Keep certain routines in place, like your school's class schedule, to maintain an environment where students can learn.
- **Make academic adjustments.** Even though it's important to keep classes running, consider making some modifications to support your students and staff. Some recommendations include: adjusting academic expectations for a week across all classes and grades, postponing critical exams and assignments, and allowing students to go to the funeral if it's during school hours and if the family permits it.
- **Set consistent policies.** Make sure every student and teacher are on the same page. It can be frustrating or confusing if some teachers are making exceptions for students while others aren't.

Support

The crisis response team decides how to identify and connect people to the counseling and emotional aid they need.

- **Reach out to the community.** The team invites local crisis groups, counselors, and faith-based communities. Make sure they're accessible to everyone in your school.
- **Support staff.** It's challenging to help support students when the school staff is burned out or overwhelmed. Fortunately, there are ways to recognize signs of distress in colleagues and encourage them to take care of themselves:
 - Identify the signs of *compassion fatigue*. This is a specific kind of distress that happens when colleagues feel worn out when caring for others. Signs include impatience, difficulty planning, decreased concentration, detachment, intensive feelings, and recurring bad dreams.
 - Encourage colleagues to practice self-care habits like eating well, taking breaks, pursuing recreational activities, talking with friends and family, and getting enough sleep and exercise.
 - Recommend counseling and support groups which can help colleagues cope with their grief in healthy ways. The school's employee assistance program can also connect members to mental health professionals and other resources.
- **Identify students.** The school staff identifies people close to the student who died, students who have prior trauma history, or students who previously attempted suicide or had thoughts about suicide. Reach out and connect them with support. If those people are in *other* schools, like a sibling or relative of the person who died, collaborate with those schools to find the best way to support them.

- **Support suicide survivors.** Support is even more vital in the case of a death by suicide. Suicide can cause a greater level of distress and unrest for the student body. It also carries some risk of *contagion*, or subsequent, related suicides. Suicide also has a lot of stigma around it. Here are some ways you can fight against that stigma:
 - Have one standard policy to memorialize all student and staff deaths.
 - Avoid romanticizing or sensationalizing the death.
 - Don't give detailed descriptions about the death.
 - Provide support to students previously known to have attempted suicide or have thoughts about suicide
 - If a student asks about the suicide, stick to the facts, encourage them to share what they know, and gently correct any misconceptions. Many times, this kind of conversation reveals how they feel and whether they need support.

Appendix

For further information:

[Preventing Suicide: Toolkit for High Schools \(SAMHSA\)](#)

A model for a prevention plan that assists high schools and school districts in designing and implementing strategies to prevent suicide and promote behavioral health. It also has helpful tools like a program guide that responds to the needs and cultures of students.

[After a Suicide: Toolkit for Schools \(SPRC/AFSP\)](#)

A model for a postvention plan that contains information on suicide, response planning, communication, and memorializing. It also has helpful tools like sample letters and social media guidelines.