

Introduction

When there's a death in the school community, it's important for teachers and administrators to know how to respond.

A **crisis response plan** establishes how to reach out to students and colleagues, communicate with parents, address what happened, and collaborate with both community mental health services and local police. For more information on how the administration can create a crisis response plan, visit the *Implementing a Plan* section, below.

It's also important to consider how to respond if the death was a suicide. It requires a specialized kind of response plan - called a **Postvention**. For more information about postvention, visit the *Supporting Your Students* section, below.

Supporting Your Students

How teachers and staff communicate with students matters. A crisis response plan can make sure everyone is on the same page.

Teachers can help students cope with distress by using a framework called:

- **Identify**
- **Approach**
- **Refer**

First, watch for warning signs and **identify** students who might be experiencing distress. **Approach** those students and encourage them to talk about the death and how it may be affecting them. Help them express how they feel and acknowledge it. This can help them process and heal. Finally, if necessary, **refer** students to support services.

Postvention plan

In 2017, suicide was the **second leading cause** of death for young people. (Youth Research Behavior Surveillance Survey, 2017)

Since suicide affects many schools, a **postvention plan** can help. This is a specific kind of crisis response plan that:

- Helps **facilitate** healing
- **Mitigates** the negative effects of a suicide
- **Prevents** suicide contagion (see below)

Suicide contagion

A suicide is not an isolated event--it affects a lot of people. **Suicide contagion** happens when a suicide is followed by further suicides or an increase in suicidal behavior. When multiple suicides occur in a community over a short period of time, it's known as a **point cluster**. It's rare, but it does happen; an estimated **5%** of suicide deaths are the result of contagion.

Though contagion may sound scary, **4 out of 5** teens who attempt suicide have given clear warning signs. By identifying at-risk students and connecting them to support, everybody on the school campus can play a role in suicide prevention. And effective, open communication with students and the community can ease stigma and reduce the risk of contagion.

Talking about a suicide

There are a few reasons why it can be difficult for people to talk about suicide. Sometimes it's painful for people to think about why it happened, or whether they could've done something. Sometimes people think suicide is shameful or wrong. Some are afraid talking about it can put the idea in students' heads.

But not talking about it gives the impression that people *should* feel guilt, shame, or fear. It makes it harder for students to grieve or ask for help. Talking about it is the safest thing to do. Here are some guidelines:

What to avoid	Example
Sensationalizing the death	✘ "It takes a lot of courage to jump off a bridge."
Romanticizing the victim	✘ "After all she's been through, now she's in a better place."
Providing specific details of the death	✘ "Gary shot himself with his father's 9mm handgun." ✘ "Melanie used a phone cord to hang herself."

What to do	Example
Stick to the facts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✔ "We'll never know, because the answers died with them." ✔ "Suicide is very complex and no one person, no one thing, is ever to blame."
Encourage students to share	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✔ "After all she's been through, now she's in a better place."
If needed, correct any misconceptions or connect the student to support.	

Identifying warning signs

When it comes to warning signs of distress or suicide, identify extreme behaviors and extreme changes in behavior. What that looks like will depend on the age of the student.

Signs of distress for an elementary student

- Sadness, crying, or withdrawing from social contact
- Verbal outbursts
- Poor concentration
- Writing or drawing disturbing things
- Regressing from a developmental milestone, like thumb-sucking or pants-wetting
- Physical symptoms like headaches, stomachaches, sleeping problems, or eating problems

Signs of distress for a middle or high school student

Academic:

- Forgetfulness
- Frequent absences
- Decline in academic performance
- Excessive worry about academic performance

Extreme Moods:

- Feeling overwhelmed
- Loss of interest
- Irritability

Concerning Behavior:

- Withdrawing
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Acting oppositional or aggressive
- Difficulty concentrating
- Recklessness (like substance use, violent behavior, or sexual activity)

Signs of suicide risk

The signs of distress above can also be signs of suicide risk. In addition, here are some warning signs specific to suicide risk:

Talk:

- Saying they feel like a burden, feel hopeless, or want to harm themselves
- Direct statements like: "I want to die," "I'm gonna kill myself," "I'm going to end it all."
- (In)Direct statements like: "Nothing matters," "The world would be better without me," "Nobody would miss me anyway."

Concerning Behavior:

- Giving away prized possessions
- Increased absences
- Dangerous or thrill-seeking behavior

Making a referral

If a student shows any of these warnings signs:

- Approach the student and learn more about what's causing the warning signs
- If there's any cause for concern, talk to them about a referral
- Stay with the student until they can get help
- Escort the student to a mental health specialist, when available
- Provide any information you have to the crisis team

How to start a conversation about a student death

Talking to a student about a serious topic like death can feel difficult or awkward. Here are two ways to help start the conversation:

1. **Make specific, neutral observations.** A statement like *"I noticed you didn't talk to your project team today"* sticks to the facts. It also shows you're listening and doesn't exaggerate or judge.

2. **Ask open-ended questions.** This can encourage students to open up and share what they're going through. These type of questions can't be answered by a simple "yes" or "no." For example, saying "*What's on your mind?*" invites a thoughtful response.

Supporting students' emotions

When a student is distressed, a supportive conversation can go a long way. Here are three techniques that can help:

1. **Acknowledge what the student is going through.** Saying "*Sounds like you're feeling regret*" can help them know they're being heard and that the emotions they're having are accepted. This can encourage them to open up.
2. **Normalize the student's feelings.** A statement like "*It's okay to feel angry; It doesn't mean you didn't care about that person*" can help a student accept and process what they're feeling.
3. **Help younger students find words to express their feelings.** This can make it easier for them to understand their reaction and heal. Help them process concepts like *death* or *loss* by asking what those terms mean to them and suggesting words to help. For example:
 - a. Teacher: "*When someone says the word 'loss', what do you think they mean?*"
 - b. Student: "*...Maybe it means that I don't have something I used to have?*"
 - c. Teacher: "*Good thinking! How do you think people feel when that happens?*"

Drawing pictures or picking images out of a magazine can also help them express their thoughts.

Supporting Your Colleagues

It's challenging for staff to support students when they're burned out or overwhelmed. Fortunately, there are ways to recognize signs of distress in colleagues and encourage them to take care of themselves:

1. **Identify the signs of compassion fatigue.** This is a specific kind of distress that happens when colleagues feels worn out or overwhelmed when caring for others. Here are some signs:
 - Irritability and impatience
 - Difficulty planning lessons and activities
 - Decreased concentration
 - Denial and detachment
 - Intense feelings and intrusive thoughts
 - Recurring bad dreams
2. **Promote self-care habits.** Encourage colleagues to eat well, take breaks, pursue recreational activities, talk with friends and family, and get enough sleep and exercise.

3. **Connect to support.** 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.

A lot of people need some kind of help; it's very common. And the sooner people find the help they need, the better they can support students.

Implementing a Plan

If a death impacts a school community, the staff will be faced with a lot of challenges. A crisis response plan can help restore order, make sure students feel safe, make counselors available, and communicate with parents and the media.

The Crisis Response Team

Your school's crisis response 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. 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** for the family of the student who died.
- **A protective measure.** The liaison makes sure other people don't contact the family until they have the family's permission.

Reach out to a **cultural broker** if the family of the student who died comes from a different racial, ethnic, or religious group from the liaison.

Sharing Information

Before sharing the news of a student death, verify the death and consider the impact on your students and staff.

- **Communicating with staff.** The crisis response team uses a calling tree or email list to inform the staff to of 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 reactions, offer support to teachers, and share procedures about talking about the death and referring distressed students.
- **Communicating with students.** Teachers should share the news about the student death in classrooms. School support staff, such as counselors, should go to classrooms where it's believed students are the most affected.
- **Communicating via social media.** Monitor social media to share accurate information, address misconceptions, and gauge students' reactions and mental health.

Expectations

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

- **Keep some routines in place** like the school's class schedule.
- **Make academic adjustments** like postponing critical exams and assignments.
- **Set consistent policies** to make sure every student and teacher are on the same page.

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 to support the school.
- **Identify students.** The school staff identifies people close to the student who died and students who have prior trauma history or previously known to be suicidal. Reach out and connect them with support.
- **Memorializing students.** Have one standard policy to memorialize all student and staff deaths. This policy can avoid stigmatizing or romanticizing any kind of death, especially suicide.

Conclusion

As a school supports it's students and staff, further questions may come up. In those moments, a postvention or crisis response plan can give some guidance.

Everyone responds to a death differently, and everyone heals at their own pace. People can't "fix" what happened, but they can be there for each other and get through it together.