

Responding to Grief and Loss in Schools and Communities

Waheeda Saif
Program Coordinator, Riverside Trauma Center



MindWise INNOVATIONS
Riverside Trauma Center
A SERVICE OF RIVERSIDE COMMUNITY CARE

Copyright © 2022 MindWise Innovations®, a service of Riverside Community Care.

1

General Housekeeping Items

Questions
Feel free to ask questions throughout the training – we'll also have time at the end.

Slides and materials
You will be getting the slides after the training.

Cameras on
To help build our learning community, please keep your camera on if you are comfortable.

Take care of yourself!
If strong emotions arise or you feel distressed at any point, please take a break

2

Introductions

Please share

- > Your name
- > Your role
- > What is your experience with losses in your work?

3

Why Grief Following Suicide Can be More Complicated

Adapted from Underwood (1997) & Cnaan et al. (2015)

Shock	Anger
Stigma/shame	Abandonment
Self-blame/guilt	Fear of impulses
Search for "why?"	Trauma of death
Was it preventable?	Delays in reports
Did he mean to die?	Police/media

4

Domains Affected by Trauma / Acute Grief

Reactions across continuums

- Emotional
- Cognitive
- Behavioral
- Physiological
- Spiritual

5

Grief versus Trauma

Grief

- > Sadness is the most common emotion
- > Acute grief runs its course over time
- > Pain acknowledges the loss
- > Does not distort the self-image of bereaved
- > Does not involve trauma reactions (flashbacks, hypervigilance, numbing, etc.)

Trauma

- > Terror/fear is most common emotion
- > Lack of treatment can worsen Post-Traumatic Stress
- > Pain can trigger powerlessness, terror
- > Distorts self-image of bereaved
- > Involves trauma reactions (flashbacks, hypervigilance, numbing, etc.)

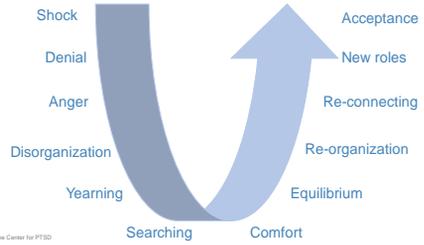
6

Common Myths About Grief

- Grief happens in stages
- Reactions are the same for everyone
- Time heals all wounds
- It should take about a year
- Grief involves saying goodbye
- The process results in closure

7

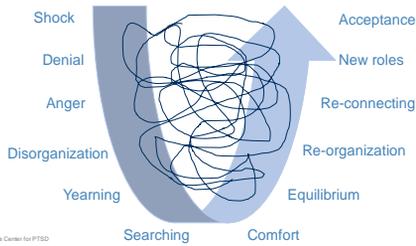
Textbook Stages of Grief



Adapted from the Center for PTSD

8

How Grief Really Works



Adapted from the Center for PTSD

9

Postvention Goals

- › Promote healthy grieving
- › Stabilize the individual & environment
- › Commemorate the deceased
- › Comfort the distressed
- › Reduce risk of contagion
- › Minimize adverse personal outcomes
- › Create a "teachable moment"
- › Increase empowerment and support

10

Postvention Guiding Principles

- › Avoid oversimplifying causes
- › Avoid romanticizing/glorifying
- › Discourage focus on method
- › Provide structure for ongoing suicide prevention efforts

11

Postvention Dilemmas

- › Family not acknowledging suicide
- › The empty chair/desk
- › Social media
- › The diploma, yearbook
- › Funeral/ memorial service
- › Community impact

12

Timeframe of a Response

Today	This week	Weekend	Services
After funeral	One week out	Two weeks out	Moving forward

13



Case Study

- › You receive a call from your principal on Friday afternoon at 3:00. She has learned that a 16-year-old male, who was a junior in your school, has died suddenly. It appears he may have died by suicide, but this has not been confirmed by the family.
- › The principal asks if you can attend a school crisis team meeting at 8:00am tomorrow.

What are the tasks and considerations for the coming week?

14

01

Postvention Task Verify death and facts

- › Identify main contact
- › Establish “who” and “when”
- › Confirm with family, police, or medical examiner
- › Assume widespread rumors
- › Reach out to family as soon as possible

15

Talking with a grieving family

- Be a compassionate presence
- Representative from school should visit family as soon as possible
- Ask the family what their understanding is of the death
- Gently encourage the family to acknowledge it as a suicide. Enlist the family in prevention efforts



16

02

Postvention Task Coordinate internal and external resources

- › School crisis team
- › Local mental health partners/HR/EAP
- › Clergy/funeral home directors
- › Other school districts
- › External resources support those implementing postvention plan

17

03

Postvention Task Disseminate accurate information

- › Factual, written information acknowledging suicide
- › Condolences to family and friends
- › Plans for support
- › Funeral plans
- › Changes in schedule
- › Announce in small groups (no public address)

18

School Response to Bereavement

- › **Encourage** atmosphere open to all reactions
- › **Communicate** facts clearly...then repeat
- › **Initiate** conversations about deceased: consider facilitation through artwork, collages, journaling
- › **Encourage** physical activity and peer activity
- › **Provide** structured flexibility
- › **Support** rituals for deceased
- › **Utilize** relief staff, consider temporary reduction in academic load
- › **Expect** an increase in physical complaints



19

Supporting Young Children in School

- › **What** is their understanding of death?
- › **Address** fear ("Is my parent going to die?" "Am I going to die?" "Is this contagious?")
- › **Consider** a teacher-led conversation
- › **Use** developmentally appropriate language
- › **Answer** questions...but first, coordinate with parents
- › **Build** support network
- › **Ensure** emotional and physical safety



20

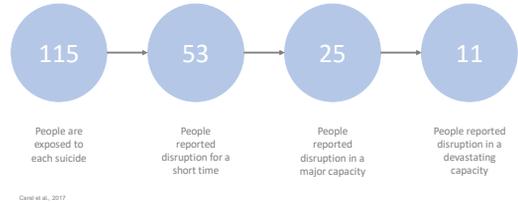
04

Postvention Task Support for those most impacted

- › **Follow** schedule of deceased
- › **Friends, family, conflicted relationships**
- › **Consider others in sphere (administrative staff, clients, neighbors)**
- › **Emphasis on mourning the loss**

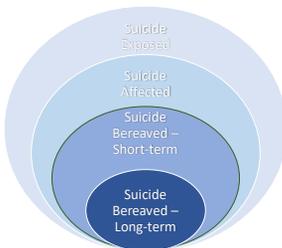
21

Impact for Survivors One study found:



22

Impact for Survivors



Carel et al., 2017

23

Traumatic Loss

Two Phases of Grief



Ryanston, 2001

24

Prominent Themes for Survivors

- Why?**
 - Making sense of the death
- Responsibility**
 - Guilt and blame, the tyranny of hindsight
- Social disruption**
 - Isolation
- Anger**
 - Rejection and abandonment
- Trauma**
 - Shock and horror
- Relief**
 - End of suffering
- Suicidality**
 - Why go on?

Adapted from John Jordan, 2021

25

Prominent Themes for Survivors: Family

- Information management**
 - Who to tell and when
- Communication shutdown**
 - Trying not to upset others or manage conflict
- Disruption**
 - Family rituals/routines
- Loss**
 - Family cohesion, availability
- Asynchronous coping**
 - Differences in grieving styles, timelines
- Burden**
 - Taking care of others
- The supermarket aisle**
 - Interacting with the community

Adapted from John Jordan, 2021

26

Prominent Themes for Survivors: How to Survive

- Self-care**
 - Make sure to take care of yourself
- Educate yourself**
 - Learn about suicide and suicide loss
- Be with people who "get it" and get you**
 - Choose who you spend your time with
- Experiment with healing**
 - There are many pathways for grieving
- Don't waste your grief**
 - Engage in activities that honor your loved one
- Have faith in your resilience**
 - Be patient with yourself

Adapted from John Jordan, 2021

27

Supporting teens

- › **Lead** with honesty
- › **Psychoeducation** is therapeutic
- › **Anticipate** guilt and anger
- › **Remember** the five domains
- › **Fear** of forgetting is prominent in younger children
- › **Rehearse** anxiety-provoking events
- › **Fear** of own self-destructive impulses may arise
- › **Talk** about social media



28

Advice for Youth Supporting Friends

- › **Show** up, act normal
- › **Listen**...really listen
- › **Don't** give advice
- › **Don't** compare losses
- › **Help** with specific tasks
- › **Give** examples of things to say:
 - › "I'm sorry about your friend."
 - › "What would be the most helpful thing right now?"



29

Advice for Adults Supporting Friends

- › **Manage** your own anxiety
- › **Be** a compassionate presence
- › **Remember** how our friend lived, not how they died
- › **Share** positive memories
- › **Use** their name
- › **It's** not about closure, but about another way to stay connected
- › **Stay** in touch in the weeks and months ahead



30

“ If you're about to open your mouth to say something to make the family, feel better – **don't.** ”

Doreen Schuman, The Doozy Center for Growing Children & Families

31

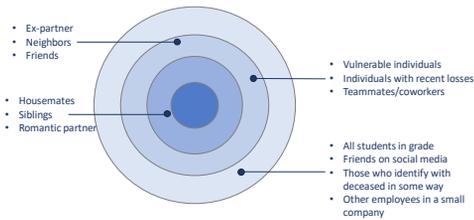
05

Postvention Task
Identify those most at risk

- › Identify with the deceased (even if remote)
- › **Feeling responsible**
- › **Recent losses**
- › **Impressionable students**
- › **History of suicidal behavior**

32

Individuals at Risk



Adapted from Urdemwood and Curran-Matlin, 1997

33

06

Postvention Task
Provide opportunities for commemoration

- › **Policy for all deaths**
- › **Ideally held off-site**
- › **Encourage family to participate**
- › **Discourage permanent memorials**
- › **Encourage prevention activities**
- › **Encourage simple activities (meals, transportation)**
- › **Emphasized deceased's life**

34

Memorials

Suicidologists worry that permanent memorials may cause contagion

- Healthy** grieving is important
- Promote** life-affirming causes
- Encourage** pro-social activities



35

07

Postvention Task
Provide psychoeducation on grief and suicide

- › **Educate on depression, grief, mental illness, the "perfect storm"**
- › **Encourage adaptive coping strategies**
- › **Encourage questions**
- › **Advocate for evidence-based prevention curricula...but not immediately**

36

10

Postvention Task
Develop linkages to resources

- › Need for clinical follow-up/ongoing support
- › List of local resources
- › Funding opportunities
- › Designated school counselor/ assigned EAP staff
- › Suicide-specific postvention supports (ie.Samaritans/ LOSS teams)

43

11

Postvention Task
Evaluate postvention response

- › Lessons learned
- › Review/revise crisis plans and protocols
- › Address unfinished business
- › Plan for milestones
 - › Anniversary
 - › Graduation
 - › Workplace holiday party

44

12

Postvention Task
Develop community or system-wide prevention plan

- › Community coalition/task force
- › Resource map of community leaders, and programs
- › Proactive use of media
- › Address risk and protective factors
- › Resilience curriculum
- › Means reduction
- › Sustainability
- › Advocacy

45

Elements of a Suicide Prevention Strategy

- ① Train all school/workplace community members annually
- ② Provide ongoing support for at-risk students
- ③ Designate a suicide prevention counselor
- ④ Develop protocol for assessing/referring students
- ⑤ Create protocol for student reentry
- ⑥ Create postvention policies and protocols

Based on AFSP Model School Policy on Suicide Prevention

46

Examples of Risk & Protective Factors in a Social Ecological Model



47

Postvention Tasks

- | | |
|---|--|
| 01 Verify death and facts | 07 Provide psychoeducation |
| 02 Coordinate internal and external resources | 08 Screen for depression or suicide |
| 03 Disseminate accurate information | 09 Implement trauma response |
| 04 Support for those most impacted | 10 Develop linkages to resources |
| 05 Identify those most at risk | 11 Evaluation postvention response |
| 06 Provide opportunities for commemoration | 12 Develop community or system-wide plan |

48

Clinicians as loss survivors

What about us?

Disenfranchised grief

Clinician Coalition of Clinician Survivors



49

Lessons learned

- ✓ Exposure to suicide is more important (and complicated...and confusing) than contagion
- ✓ Plan for cohorts
- ✓ The use of outside resources after a suicide death is essential
 - ✓ Who is taking care of the caretakers? (others are watching,)
 - ✓ Expertise
 - ✓ Reducing the stigma with an open response
- ✓ Suicide is political and often engenders blame, guilt, and anger
- ✓ Social media will greatly complicate your postvention response
 - ✓ Immediacy
 - ✓ Rumors
 - ✓ Geography



50

“ Don't take it personally, but there is **no way** these guys are going to talk to you...”

51



Group Exercise

- › What components of good postvention plans does your organization have now?
- › What is missing?
- › How can you share the information from today with your team?
- › Do you have resources you can share with others?

52



Postvention and Social Media

Social media following the suicide death of a student

Riverside and Samaritans Social Networking Project

53

Key Takeaways

Online memorials offer an ongoing relationship with deceased.	Web memorials are often easier, logistically, than a physical memorial.	Social networking sites are a key information source for youth.	Little is known about the impact of internet news sources on contagion.
---	---	---	---

54

Managing a Deceased Person's Account

If Facebook is made aware that a person has passed away, it's our policy to memorialize the account. Memorialized accounts are a place for friends and family to gather and share memories after a person has passed away. Memorializing an account also helps keep it secure by preventing anyone from logging into it.

If you're a legacy contact, learn how to manage a memorialized account. If you'd like to report a deceased person's account to be memorialized, please contact us.

Memorialized Accounts on Facebook

55

Tip Sheet

REMINDERS: GRIEF AFTER A SUICIDE LOSS

- Losing someone to suicide is a terribly painful event
- Teens and children may experience a lot of emotions at once
- There is no one way of grieving the loss of a loved one
- Grief may never be entirely finished, but it can become more manageable
- Grief often softens with time, but it is important not to set time limits or compare one's grief to others

56

Own Your Piece/Peace: Needham High School

57

Questions?

Thank you.

Presenter name, degree
Title
Email address

Copyright © 2021 MindWise Innovations®, a service of Riverside Community Care.

MindWise | Riverside Trauma Center
A SERVICE OF RIVERSIDE COMMUNITY CARE

58

Postvention Models and Resources

- Underwood and Dunne-Maxim, 1997
- Connect (www.theconnectprogram.org), NAMI, NH 2010
- Brock, 2003
- Kerr, Brent et al., 2003
- "After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools," SPRC.org
- "Postvention: A Guide for Response to Suicide on College Campuses," HEMHA.org
- "A Manager's Guide for Suicide Postvention in the Workplace," Suicidology.org
- Riverside Trauma Center's Postvention Guidelines (www.riversidetraumacenter.org)
- The LOSS Project (www.suicidefindinghope.com)
- National Strategy for Suicide Prevention

59

Support for Loss Survivors

- American Association for Suicidology (www.suicidology.org)
- International Association for Suicide Prevention (www.iasp.info)
- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (www.AFSP.org)
- Suicide Prevention Resource Center (www.SPRC.com)
- Alliance of Hope (www.allianceofhope.org)
- Coalition of Clinician Survivors (cinnamon-begonia-rsxy.squarespace.com)

60