Responding to Grief and Loss in Schools and Communities

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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.

General

Introductions
Please share
› Your name
› Your role
› What is your experience with losses in your work?

Why Grief Following Suicide Can be More Complicated

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

Domains Affected by Trauma / Acute Grief

Reactions across continuums

Emotional

Grief versus Trauma

Shock
Stigma/shame
Self-blame/guilt

Anger
Abandonment
Fear of impulses

Search for “why?”
Was it preventable?
Did he mean to die?

Trauma of death
Delays in reports
Police/media

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.)

Grief

Pain acknowledges the loss
Does not distort the self-image of bereaved
Does not involve trauma reactions (flashbacks, hypervigilance, numbing, etc.)

Sadness is the most common emotion
Acute grief runs its course over time
Pain

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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

Common Myths About Grief

Textbook Stages of Grief

Shock
Denial
Anger
Disorganization
Yearning
Comfort
Equilibrium
Re-organization
Acceptance
New roles
Re-connecting
Re-organization
Equilibrium
Searching
Comfort

How Grief Really Works

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

Postvention Guiding Principles

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

Postvention Dilemmas

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

### 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

### 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

### 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)

### 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*
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

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

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

Impact for Survivors

One study found:

- 115 People are exposed to each suicide
- 53 People reported disruption for a short time
- 25 People reported disruption in a major capacity
- 11 People reported disruption in a devastating capacity

Impact for Survivors

Traumatic Loss
Two Phases of Grief
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

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

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

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

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?”

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
If you’re about to open your mouth to say something to make the family feel better – don’t.

Donna Schurman, The Dougy Center for Grieving Children & Families

Postvention Task
Identify those most at risk

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

Individuals at Risk

- Ex-partner
- Neighbors
- Friends
- Housemates
- Siblings
- Romantic partner
- Vulnerable individuals
- Individuals with recent losses
- Teammates/coworkers
- All students in grade
- Friends on social media
- Those who identify with deceased in some way
- Other employees in a small company

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

Memorials

Suicidologists worry that permanent memorials may cause contagion

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

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
Role of Community Forums

Shifting the Narrative
How does a community change the way it addresses mental health?
- Reduce stigma of mental illness
- Promote asking for help as a sign of strength
- Remind community members that help is available and that treatment can make you better
- Create messages of authentic hope
- Let everyone know that no one suffers alone
- Build social cohesion
- Communicate that talk of suicide is always taken seriously
- Remind everyone that suicidal feelings are temporary

Postvention Task
Screen for depression or suicide
- Consistent with public health approach
- Brief Screen for Adolescent Depression
- Online screenings for adults
- Exposed versus unexposed
- Prepare teachers, parents, students for screening
- Workplace screenings available
- Enhanced mental health resources in place
- Behavioral health literacy workplace programs

Screening Students
Validated Screening Tool: BSAD
- Seven questions
  - Two questions (4 and 5) ask directly about suicide, immediately screen in
  - Four or more "yes" responses screen in
- Form can be identified or anonymous
- Option to screen in students unable to identify trusted adults

Postvention Task
Implement trauma response for subsequent suicide
- Increased risk of a cluster
- Trauma focus (more than one death, witness, homicide-suicide, extended publicity, blame)
- Psychoeducation around self-care
- Coping groups

Responding to Grief versus Trauma
- Grief
  - Facilitate healthy grieving
  - Provide opportunity for expression of feelings
  - Acknowledge the loss
- Trauma
  - Minimize contagion
  - Identity and support distressed students
  - Provide structure and control
### Elements of a Suicide Prevention Strategy

#### Designate a suicide prevention counselor

1. Train all school/workplace community members annually

2. Provide ongoing support for at-risk students

3. Develop protocol for accessing/referring students

4. Create protocol for student reentry

5. Create postvention policies and protocols

### Examples of Risk & Protective Factors in a Social Ecological Model

#### Risk Factors
- Mental illness
- Substance abuse
- Previous attempt
- Impulsivity
- Aggression
- Coping/problem solving skills
- Reasons for living
- Moral objections to suicide

#### Protective Factors
- Few supportive relationships
- Barriers to healthcare
- Connections (to individuals, family, community)
- Supportive relationships with providers
- Safe & supportive school/community environments
- Continuum of care after hospitalization
- Access to physical and mental healthcare
- Restrictions on lethal means

#### Protective Factors
- Availability of lethal means
- Unsafe media portrayals of suicide
- High conflict or violent relationships
- Family history of suicide
- Few supportive relationships
- Barriers to healthcare
- Connections (to individuals, family, community)
- Supportive relationships with providers

### Postvention Tasks

1. Verify death and facts
2. Coordinate internal and external resources
3. Disseminate accurate information
4. Support for those most impacted
5. Identify those most at risk
6. Provide opportunities for commemoration

7. 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 (i.e. Samaritans’ LOSS teams)

8. Postvention Task

   Evaluate postvention response

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

9. 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

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Clinicians as loss survivors

What about us?
Disenfranchised grief
Clinician Coalition of Clinician Survivors

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.

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?

Don’t take it personally, but there is no way these guys are going to talk to you…"
Memorialized Accounts on Facebook

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.

Tip Sheet

REMAINDERS: 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

Questions?

Thank you.

Presenter name, degree

Email address

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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,” HEMNA.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

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.alliancethehopes.org)
- Coalition of Clinician Survivors (cinnamon-begonia-ssxy.squarespace.com)