

Healing after a Suicide in Your School Community

Guidelines for Talking with Students

1. Read a brief statement provided to you that acknowledges the death.

Discussion points:

- Do not use the term *committed suicide* because it conveys the stigma associated with committing a crime or being committed to an institution for mental problems. Instead use the terms *died by suicide*, *completed suicide*, or *took his own life*. Also avoid referring to the suicide as “successful,” which speaks as if the suicide is a positive accomplishment.
- Expect a wide range of responses that include rumors and misinformation. If this death received media coverage, the circumstances are public information and many of the students may already be aware of them. You aren’t providing new or privileged information. It is, however, very important to remind students that you can’t always believe what you read in the press or see on television and that, unfortunately, gossip and rumors are often created to fill gaps in information. Facts are also often manufactured to explain things we can’t understand, and suicide is one of those things that is impossible for most of us to imagine.
- Regardless of the amount of information circulating about the death, though, it is always helpful to move the students off discussion about the circumstances of the death to the reality of the loss, for example, “*Truthfully, what matters now is that (name) is no longer here with us and I’m really sad about that.*” The students will review the circumstances outside of the classroom on their own; what they may not do is acknowledge the reality of the loss. A straightforward statement similar to this one can help with that process: “*Rumors can distract us from the sad fact that this person we knew is dead.*”

2. Refocus on the meaning of the loss to the school community. Explain that the feelings of disbelief and loss are shared by faculty, staff, and administrators.

“I know that everyone in the school community is disturbed by what happened. Some people will feel it more than others, but I know what we all have in common is our wish to turn back the clock and change what has happened to one of our students.”

Discussion points:

- Not everyone in the school community will be affected by the death in the same way and it’s just as important to give students permission not to react as it is to give them permission to express their grief. When you comment that everyone shares in the wish that these events had not taken place, you join the school together as that competent and compassionate community.
- In some classes students react by becoming silly or disruptive. As you know from your teaching experience, these are common responses to content that makes students uncomfortable. In these instances, take control of the class by reminding students that care stations will be available if they need to talk in a more private setting about their reactions to the death. *“Hearing unpleasant news about things that scare us—like death—may make some of us really uncomfortable, and joking around is often a way to mask those feelings. It may be easier to talk about how you really feel in a small group, so the school has set up what it calls ‘care stations’ for these more private conversations. Let me know if you would like to go to a care station, and I will arrange for that to happen.”*

3. Reiterate safety concern for entire student body.

“Another thing I know for sure is that everyone in our school is concerned about each other and we want to make sure that no other student is at risk for suicide. It’s important for all of us to watch out for each other. So if you have any worries about yourself or someone you know, please let me or one of the counselors at school know.”

4. If asked, answer questions about suicide honestly.

Students may express disbelief and ask the “why” question—for example, “Why did she do this?” or, more generally, “Why would anyone take their own life?” Use this as a teachable moment to explain that the reasons for any suicide are always very complicated: *“While there may be a lot of speculation about the cause, the only person who could really help us understand what happened is the deceased. All we can really say for sure is that (name) was struggling with some very serious issues, made a very desperate choice, and wasn’t aware that that there were safer solutions.”*

This will provide you with a natural segue into the next important pieces of information to share with students about suicide prevention. Also emphasize that while you and the students all wish you could have done something to prevent the death—and may even think you could have stopped it—the only person who had that responsibility was the person who died.

5. Provide information about suicide prevention.

- a. Suicide is a painful choice made by someone who is not thinking clearly.

“No one can ever know what was going through (name’s) mind when she made that decision. Whatever was going on in her life, there were a lot of other ways to deal with it. She did not have to die.”

- b. A suicide can lead to the presence of suicidal thoughts in others.

“Many of us may feel, at one time or another, that life isn’t worth living, and we may think about dying. Especially when we hear about the suicide of someone we knew or admired, we may find ourselves thinking about suicide. While these thoughts may be normal, they can be frightening and scary, and it is essential that you share them with an adult you trust.”

Remember:

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 Talking about suicide cannot plant
 the idea in someone's mind!

- c. There is a difference between thoughts of suicide and planning to act on those thoughts.

“And while many of us may have thoughts about death, those thoughts become much more serious when we also find ourselves making a plan of how we would take our lives. If you move from thinking about being dead to making a plan to do something about it, you need to talk to an adult right away!”

- d. It is important not to keep these thoughts to yourself but share them with a trusted adult.

“Take a minute to think about the adults in your life to whom you can turn when you have problems or when you feel alone or confused. These are the people with whom you want to share any thoughts, concerns, or questions about suicide.”

- e. It is important not to keep the suicidal confidence of a peer.

“And if you hear a friend talk about dying or suicide or you notice behaviors that concern you, you also want to share these with an adult. Sometimes friends may tell you things and ask you to keep them secret. Thoughts and feelings about suicide, though, are never things to keep secret. Even if your friend gets mad at you for telling someone, it's better to have a friend who's still alive and angry than a friend who's dead.”

6. Identify in-school resources.

Review the people in the school with whom students can talk if they have personal concerns or are worried about friends. Remind students that care stations are located all around the building. Ask them not to leave the building or hide in the restrooms, and, if they need to call their parents, to please let a staff person know.