**April 2019**



**Responding to Death by Suicide:**

An Administrator’s Guide

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# **SRPSD Traumatic Response Team Deployment**

Who Does What?

1. School Principal contacts superintendent of schools
2. Superintendent of schools contacts superintendent responsible for Emergency Response
3. Emergency Response Superintendent contacts:
   1. School’s psychologist
   2. School’s social worker
   3. School’s SSS consultant
4. Emergency Response superintendent emails Admin Council and all school principals to inform them of the incident and the deployment of a SRPSD Traumatic Response Team.
5. Principal calls in required subs to cover:
   1. anticipated classroom needs the following day;
   2. additional secretarial support for the following day.
6. School social worker contacts school principal to determine anticipated initial amount of counselling supports required at the school.
7. School social worker contacts other social workers to confirm their availability to offer required supports
   1. A minimum of 2 additional social workers will be included in initial SRPSD Traumatic Response Team
   2. School’s social worker informs Emergency Response Superintendent and SSS consultant of other social workers who will be part of the SRPSD Traumatic Response Team
   3. Social workers inform their principal that they have been temporarily reassigned to offer supports
   4. School social workers determine who will be responsible for bringing food and beverages to the school.
8. SSS Consultant contacts school principal to inform of composition of the SRPSD Traumatic Response Team and time of arrival of the team at school.
9. Emergency Response superintendent contacts Prince Albert Compassionate Community Response Team to coordinate supports at the school for SRPSD personnel.
10. Emergency Response Superintendent and SRPSD Traumatic Response Team (SSS consultant, psychologist and social workers) gather at the Education Centre prior to deployment to the school (typically 7:30am) for team briefing
11. School superintendent meets with principal at school prior to arrival of SRPSD Traumatic Response Team at 8am.
12. SRPSD Traumatic response team arrives at school at 8am to meet with principal and school superintendent.
13. SRPSD Traumatic Response Team and school principal prepare initial staff meeting.

**Other Roles and Responsibilities**

Emergency Response Superintendent

* As necessary, connect with community agencies to coordinate access to additional supports
* Be available at the Education Centre throughout the day to coordinate any additional supports
* Maintain regular communication with school principal and superintendent to monitor needs for supports

School Superintendent

* Be available at the school to support the school’s administrative team in the management of regular operations to allow the school’s administrative team to focus on crisis response needs.

School Psychologist

* Lead school staff meetings (beginning and end of day if necessary)
* Print resources for teachers and administrative team
* Monitor the staffing of the community supports room

Social Workers

* Provide counselling supports in classrooms and community support room as necessary
* Communicate any concerns to school principal and other members of the SRPSD Traumatic Response Team.

SSS Consultant

* Resource person for school administration in monitoring and responding to needs.
* Secondary support for staff meetings

Substitute teachers and secretarial support

* Attend initial school staff meeting
* Provide supports as directed by school administration

Prince Albert Compassionate Community Response Team

* If available, have one counsellor on site to be available to support administration, staff and SRPSD counsellors.

# **Death by Suicide: Special School Considerations**

*Suicide in a school community is tremendously sad, often unexpected, and can leave a school with many uncertainties about what to do next. Faced with students struggling to cope and a community struggling to respond, schools need reliable information, practical tools and guidance. Four principles that have guided the development of the special considerations are the following:*

1. An important guideline is that schools should strive to treat all student deaths in the same way. Having one approach for a student who dies of cancer, for example, and another for a student who dies by suicide reinforces the stigma that still surrounds suicide and may be deeply and unfairly painful to the deceased student's family and close friends.
2. At the same time, schools should be aware that adolescents are vulnerable to the **risk of suicide contagion.** It is important not to inadvertently simplify, glamorize, or romanticize the student and his or her death.
3. Schools should emphasize that the student who died by suicide was likely struggling with a mental disorder, such as depression or anxiety, that can cause substantial psychological pain and may not have been apparent to others or that may have shown as behaviour problems or substance abuse.
4. Help is available for any student who may be struggling with mental health issues or suicidal feelings.

# **Get the facts first. Consult with family for permission to share the cause of death.**

In the event of a possible suicide death within a school community, it is critical that the administrator of the school first obtain confirmed and accurate information. While the fact that a student has died may be disclosed, information about the cause of death should not be disclosed to students **until the family has been consulted and grants permission. See Appendix 1 -**  **Getting Information:** **Summary of Facts**

* + If an investigation is ongoing, schools should state that the cause of death is still being determined. Acknowledge that there are rumours, which are often inaccurate, and remind staff and students that rumours can be deeply hurtful and unfair to the deceased or missing person, their family and friends.
  + If a death has been declared a suicide but the family does not want it disclosed, someone from the administration or counselling staff should be designated to contact them to explain that students are already talking about death amongst themselves, and that having adults in the school community talk to students about suicide and its causes can help keep students safe.
  + If the family refuses to permit disclosure, schools can state, "The family has requested that information about the cause of death not be shared at this time" and but can use the opportunity to talk with students about the phenomenon of suicide. Example: "We know there has been a lot of talk about suicide. Since the topic of suicide has been raised, we want to take this opportunity to give you accurate information about suicide in general, ways to prevent it, and how to get help if you or someone you know is feeling depressed or may have thoughts of suicide."

# **Administrator’s Responsibilities Checklist**

**(Consult with Critical Incident Response team members &/or staff)**

* Contact school superintendent to inform them of the death - See checklist on page 8 - and then speak to them throughout the day and upcoming days or weeks.
* Contact the deceased's family to offer condolences, inquire what the school can do to assist, discuss what students should be told, and inquire about funeral arrangements.
* Protect a deceased student’s belongings for the police and family. This is an important act of respect for a grieving family and is critical to the investigation that police or other authorities may undertake. The lockers may need to be secured by padlock so no student enters it. Once police has cleared for release, the administrator should empty the locker or desk (when students have been dismissed) and keep its contents together with the student's other belongings. An inventory should be made of these items and they should be stored securely in the office until collected by the family. An empty locker or desk is particularly distressing symbol of a student death for close friends, so it is appropriate to warn students when this is going to happen.
* Call an immediate meeting of the Critical Incident Response team to assign responsibilities and tasks to be carried out. Conduct meetings as needed.
* Establish a plan to immediately notify staff by email or phone.
* Schedule and conduct an initial staff meeting as soon as possible ideally before school starts in the morning.
* Arrange for students to be notified of the death in small groups (classrooms NOT assembly or intercom) and prepare a death notification statement. Prepare handouts for staff to assist with discussing how to help students to cope.
* Draft and disseminate a death notification statement and informational attachments for parents.
* Arrange for additional counsellors and support rooms, and substitute teachers, as needed.
* Identify vulnerable students, staff, and close friends for personal contact and follow up.
* Display a framed photo (may be provided by Lifetouch free of charge) within the school.
* Monitor activities throughout the school ensuring staff members have adequate supports and resources.
* Plan parent meeting in consultation with division staff and counsellors, if recommended.
* Keep to regular school hours.
* Ensure that students follow established dismissal procedures.
* Call on communications officer, counsellors, superintendent and/or division staff to assist, as needed.
* Provide tissues, water and/or food for staff and students, as needed.
* Pay attention to students who are having difficulty, including those congregating in hallways and bathrooms. Encourage them to talk with counsellors.
* Prepare to track and respond to student and/or family requests for memorialization.
* Communicate with family regarding funeral and/or memorial service wishes including location, time of the funeral, what to expect (open casket), guidance on how to express condolences to other family members, policy for releasing students during school hours to attend the service.
* Be sure students are released to the service only with permission of parent or guardian. Do not take entire classes to the service as a class activity. Have parents or guardians of children in elementary school take their children.
* Arrange to have school counsellors attend funeral or service, as needed.
* Encourage parents of older children (high school) to accompany their children to the funeral.
* Cancel or alter upcoming events and activities **as needed** (e.g., tests, excursions).
* Contact to be made with all staff who were absent at the time or who are on leave.
* Ensure all adults who will have contact with students in the following 24 hours are briefed - regular bus drivers, sports coaches, school support staff, etc.
* Notify students and parents of students who were absent.
* Monitor student well-being and communicate with staff regularly about concerns.
* Monitor staff well-being and post information about counselling services available through employee assistance information in staff room.
* Inform other school principals about the death of the student that may affect students in their school community.
* Liaise with police and protect student belongings (secure student locker or desk).
* Manage all incoming and outgoing information with the assistance of office manager (sympathy cards, donations, etc.)
* Manage inquiries and media contact. Document all critical actions.

# **Crisis Response: Activate the School's Critical Incident Support Team**

See Sample Critical Incident Response School Team Meeting Agenda (meeting with small group prior to staff meeting) Appendix 2

* + Prior to the Critical Incident Response Team meeting, the administrator should contact the deceased family to offer condolences, inquire what the school can do to assist, discuss what students should be told (obtain permission to share details) and to inquire about funeral or service arrangements.
  + Once a death by suicide has been confirmed, the school should immediately implement a coordinated Critical Incident Response Team in order to effectively manage the situation, provide opportunities for grief support, maintain an environment focused on normal educational activities, help students cope with their feelings, and minimize the risk of **suicide contagion. See #5 below for more information about suicide contagion.**

# **Communicate with Staff** (inform as soon as possible after the Critical Incident Team has met)

* See Sample Agenda for Initial All-Staff Meeting Appendix 3
* See Sample Agenda for End of the First Day Meeting Appendix 4

# **Suicide Contagion**

* + Youth suicides or attempted suicides can increase the risk of harm to family members as well as other vulnerable young people.
  + International research confirms the risk of suicide "contagion," where a vulnerable person's knowledge of, or exposure to, a suicide increases the likelihood of them viewing suicide as an option.
  + Contagion is the process by which one suicide death may contribute to another. In fact, suicide(s) can even follow the death of a student from other causes, such as an accident. Although contagion is rare, adolescents appear to be more susceptible to imitative suicide than adults, largely because they may identify more readily with the behaviour and qualities of their peers.
  + Based on this phenomenon, it is important that schools are alerted to any immediate connections between a deceased student and specific members of that Student’s school community and also to the possible influence of suicide information being exchanged across the student population.
  + Given social media, schools need to be notified as soon as possible so that sensitive inquiries can be made between schools and extra monitoring can be put in place for identified vulnerable students.
  + If there appears to be contagion, schools should consider taking additional steps by identifying other students who may be at a risk of suicide and actively collaborate with community partners in a coordinated suicide prevention effort.
  + Identifying other students at possible heightened risk for suicide:
    - Students with history of suicide attempts
    - Students dealing with stressful life events such as a death, accident, catastrophe, family breakdown, or emotional/physical/sexual abuse
    - Students with previous accessing of mental health services for depression/suicide ideation, self-harm, behaviour issues, etc.
    - Students that witnessed the death
    - Family members or close friends of the deceased (including siblings at other schools as well as teammates, friends, and classmates of the deceased)
    - Friends or acquaintances who communicated in some fashion in the last hours before the death by suicide
    - Students who are expressing guilt about "messages" that they were given by the student but did not act or share with an adult
    - Students who may have fought with or bullied the deceased

# **Helping Students Cope**

Students may feel emotionally overwhelmed. This can disrupt the school's ability to return to its primary function of educating students and may increase the risk of prolonged stress responses and even suicide contagion. The following strategies can be used to help students to balance the timing and intensity of their emotional expression and restore the school's ability to function effectively.

* + Most adolescents have mastered basic skills that allow them to handle strong emotions encountered day to day, but these skills may be challenged in the face of a suicide. Young people may not yet have learned how to recognize complex feelings or physical indicators of distress such as stomach upset, restless or insomnia.
* It is important for schools to provide students with appropriate opportunities to express their emotions and identify strategies for managing them. It may also be

useful for school staff to identify and reach out to families of students who are not coming to school.

* All members of the school community can help by modelling a calm response.

See Appendix 12 - Sample Handout for Teachers which may be used as template - Helping Students Cope: Specific Strategies for Schools to Help Students to Cope

# **Informing Parents**

* + Notify parents about the death of the student as soon as possible by email or a phone message. See Samples of Death Notification Email or Letter to Parents Appendix 5.
  + Giving parents immediate and accurate information about the school’s response to a suicide protects the school in a number of ways. It limits misinformation and distress to the parent population, reduces the number of inquiries to be managed, helps parents to take supportive and protective action with their own children, promotes communication with the school about well-being concerns, and promotes confidence in the school's capacity to return to a normal routine.
  + Parents may need guidance in talking about suicide with their children and how best to support them at this difficult time. See Appendix 8: Talking about Suicide and Appendix 10: Dealing with Suicide for Children and Adolescents
  + Parents may need reliable information relating to facts about mental disorders and suicide in adolescents. See Appendix 9: Facts about Suicide and Mental Disorders in Adolescents
  + Keep parents informed via emails or notes home of any significant events or changes to the school's routine relating to the death (e.g., funeral arrangements and consent requirements, changes to previously planned activities or excursions, availability of counselling services in the school, changes to any school procedure).
  + Consider organizing a parent information meeting and/or send home brochures to parents on how to talk to their child and facts about suicide.

# **Memorialization**

* + Plans for Memorialization
    - There is a balance in memorializing vs glamorizing suicide and risking suicide contagion. It may be helpful for schools to proactively suggest a meeting with the student's close friends to talk about the type and timing of any memorialization.

This can provide an opportunity for the students to be heard and for the school to sensitively explain its rationale for permitting certain kinds of activities and not others.

* + Funerals and Liturgies/Memorial Services
    - It is strongly advised that any service be held outside of school and school hours, when possible.
    - If the family does hold the service during school hours, it is recommended that school remain open and that school buses not be used to transport students to and from the service.
    - Students should be permitted to leave school to attend the service only with appropriate parental permission. Parents whose children express an interest in attending the funeral should be strongly encouraged to provide transportation and attend with their child.
    - If possible, arrange to have counsellors to attend the funeral or liturgy.
    - The principal or another senior administrator should attend the funeral.
  + Spontaneous Memorials
    - In the immediate aftermath of a suicide death, it is not unusual for students to create a spontaneous memorial by leaving flowers, cards, poems, pictures, stuffed animals or other items by a locker or classroom seat or at the site where the student died.
    - The school's goal should be to balance the students' need to grieve with the goal of limiting the risk of inadvertently glamorizing the death.
    - Set limits for students with compassion and sensitivity. Offer creative suggestions, whenever possible.
    - The school may wish to make poster board and markers available so that students can gather and write messages. It is advisable to set up the posters in an area in which may be avoided by those who do not wish to participate (e.g., not in a front entrance). After a few days, the posters may be removed and offered to the family.
    - Whenever a spontaneous memorial is created on school grounds, schools are advised to monitor for messages that may be inappropriate or that indicate students who may themselves be at risk.
    - It is recommended that schools can leave such memorials in place until after the funeral (or for up to approximately five days), after which the tribute objects may be offered to the family.
    - Discourage requests to create and distribute t-shirts and buttons bearing images of the deceased by explaining that, while these items may be comforting to some students, they may be quite upsetting to others.
  + Events

Students may wish to dedicate an event to the memory of the deceased student. Encourage the student's friends to consider creative suggestions, such as organizing suicide prevention-awareness or fundraising event.

Parents of the deceased student may express an interest in holding an assembly or other event to address the student body and describe the intense pain the suicide death has caused to their family in the hopes that this will dissuade parents would wish to prevent another suicide.

Schools are strongly advised to explain that this is NOT an effective approach to suicide prevention and may in fact even be risky, because students who are suffering from depression or other mental health issues may hear the message very differently from the way it is intended and may even become more likely to act on their suicidal thoughts.

* + Yearbooks
    - The guiding principle is that all deaths should be treated the same way. If there has been a history of dedicating the yearbook to students who have died, that policy is equally applicable to a student who has died by suicide, provided that final editorial decisions are made by an adult.
    - When possible, the focus should be on mental health and/or suicide prevention (e.g., below the photo, a statement might say, "In your memory, we will work to erase the stigma surrounding mental illness and suicide." The page might also include pictures of classmates engaging in a suicide prevention event that was held at the school).
  + Graduation

If there is a tradition of including a tribute to deceased students who would have graduated with the class, students who have died by suicide should likewise be included. Final decisions about what to include in such tributes should be made by an adult.

* + Permanent Memorials and Scholarships
* Some communities wish to establish a permanent memorial (e.g., planting a tree, installing a bench or plaque). While there is no research to suggest that permanent memorials create a risk of contagion, they can prove to upsetting reminders to bereaved students, and therefore disruptive to the school's goal of maintaining emotional regulation.
* It is recommended that any permanent physical memorial be established *off* school grounds. Also, it is sometimes quite difficult to sustain these over time.
  + Other

It is important for the school to come equipped with specific, constructive suggestions for safe memorialization including:

* Holding a day of community service or creating a school-based community service program in honour of the deceased.
* Hold a local fundraising event to support a local crisis hotline or other suicide prevention program.
* Sponsor a mental health awareness day.
* Putting together a team to participate in an awareness or fundraising event sponsored by one of the national mental health or suicide prevention organizations

# **Media**

* + The division will request that all staff respect privacy of families by **not** participating in any discussions on social media.
  + Any inquiries from the media should be referred to the administrator.
  + Administrator will refer inquiries to the division communications officer.
  + The communications officer, under the direction of the director, will be the media contact person and will address all media requests for information and arranges for the preparation of press releases, as needed. The decision of the family about privacy of information must be respected and possible legal implications related to privacy issues must be considered.
  + Research has shown that graphic, sensationalized, or romanticized descriptions of deaths by suicide in the news or social media can contribute to suicide contagion, particularly among youth.

# **Critical Incident Debriefing Process following a Death by Suicide**

###### After each use of the Responding to Death By Suicide Guide, the school principal and the school team should meet to review the events and the plan while they are still recent, preferably within two weeks, to review what worked to provide support, did not work as planned and what may have been more effective.

# **Moving Forward/Follow-Up**

* + **Anniversary of the Death/Significant Events**

The anniversary of the death and other significant dates, such as the deceased's birthday may stir up emotions and may upset students and staff. Anticipate this response and provide an opportunity to acknowledge the date, particularly with those students who were especially close to the student who died.

###### On-going Counselling

There is evidence that students are more likely to use Internet and telephone crisis and referral services because they are anonymous and do not require fees, transportation or outside appointments. Publicizing these services through posters and wallet cards continuously available throughout the school is recommended.

Refer students that need additional support for counselling at school or outside agency, as needed.

###### Include the postvention plan in staff induction

* + - All new staff (teaching and non-teaching) and volunteers to the school should be made aware of the school's postvention plan with relevant aspects of the schools' support processes for identified students and be given very clear advice about the expectation of referral pathways.
    - The postvention plan should include scheduled meetings to be convened over subsequent years until the population of students completes their schooling.

###### Final Thoughts

* + - Suicide prevention must be thought of as providing insulating factors (i.e.: resiliency, optimism, ability to reach out).
    - Teaching these skills will prevent much more than suicide ideation and coping.
    - Suicide prevention programs that put a greater emphasis on personal growth and positive youth development will likely have a greater relative impact on outcomes such as depressed mood and suicidal ideation and are recommended.

|  |
| --- |
| **Appendices** |

## Appendix 1 Getting Information: Summary of Facts

(Share with Superintendent of Schools and SRPSD Traumatic Response Team

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Individual or Student Name:** | |  | **Grade:** |  |
| **Teachers:** |  | | | |

**Tragic Event Confirmed?** Yes No **\*\*\*Contact Superintendent of Schools**

**Basic Facts:**

|  |
| --- |
|  |

**Family has given permission to communicate loss?** Yes No

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Other schools contacted?** |  |

**School Announcement** (Attach if space is insufficient)

|  |
| --- |
|  |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **School Counsellor/**  **Social Worker:** |  | **Contacted?** |  | **Yes** |  | **No** |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Previous School:** |  |

**Siblings:**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Grade:** |  | **Teacher:** |  | **School:** |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

**Friends:**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Grade:** |  | **Teacher:** |  | **School:** |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

**\*\*\*Staff affected (coaches, classroom teachers, those who worked most closely with student) Contact them first prior to announcement.**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Other Relatives:** |  |
| **Other Schools Affected:** |  |

**Funeral Arrangements**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Date:** |  | **Time:** |  | **Location:** |  |

**Staff planning to attend funeral and arrangements to cover**

|  |
| --- |
|  |

**Other Important Details**

|  |
| --- |
|  |

## Appendix 2 Critical Incident Response School Team Meeting Agenda (Sample)

(Small meeting with principal, counselor(s), and designated five or six staff prior to staff meeting, when possible)

Adapt as needed.

1. **Opening thoughts**
2. **Share information** with the team regarding the facts of the traumatic event. Establish a plan to inform staff of the death (usually phone or email) and share details that are publically available at that time.
3. **Determine the impact** of this particular incident on individual members of the school team to ensure all members can function objectively. Are there staff members who may require assistance in leading classroom discussion? It is important that the affected students’ cooperation is sought in not spreading sensitive information about the student and in following protocols for leaving school grounds. Direct contact should be made with the parents of these students and any others about whom staff have serious concerns so that support at home can be planned. Direct contact should also be made with the principals of schools attended by siblings or known close friends to ensure awareness.

Work with team to identify, support, refer and monitor vulnerable students (and staff) who may be in need of additional supports or need to be informed about the death personally by appropriate staff and provided with immediate support and information about where they can receive continuing assistance at school.

Identify students at possible heightened risk for suicide (see above).

1. Discuss and plan for **student's desk and belongings.** Since the emptiness of the deceased student's desk can be unsettling, after approximately **5 days** (**or after the funeral),** seating assignments should be rearranged to create a new learning environment. Teachers should explain in advance that the intention is to strike a balance between compassionately honouring the student who has died while at the same time, returning the focus back to the classroom curriculum. Students may be involved in planning how to respectfully remove the desk (e.g., read a prepared statement about the importance of their friendship and their commitment to work to eradicate suicide from his or her memory). Request that all student work be forwarded to the office to be kept with belongings to be later provided to the family.
2. **Schedule an initial all-staff meeting** as soon as possible (ideally before school starts in the morning).
3. Arrange for students to be notified of the death in small groups such as homerooms or classrooms not by intercom or large assembly and **prepare a death notification statement for students to homeroom or classroom teacher, or** others leading those groups.
4. Draft and disseminate a **death notification statement for parents** and/or attachments to be included (e.g., information about talking about suicide and helping their child).
5. Prepare **resources for homeroom/classroom teacher.**

Determine whether resources are needed and who is responsible for putting together resources - books, stories, handouts, student activity and student booklets, etc. for teachers to borrow.

Consult with school counsellors, as needed. See Section 6: Helping Students Cope - **Specific Strategies for Schools to Help Students to Cope.**

Prepare handouts for teachers using the following sample documents:

* Appendix 5 - Sample Death Notification Statements for Parents
* Appendix 6 - Sample Death Notification Statements for Students
* Appendix 7 – Classroom Meeting Discussion Guide
* Appendix 8 - Sample Documents: Talking About Suicide Handout
* Appendix 9 - Sample Documents: Facts about SuicideHandout
* Appendix 10 - Sample Information Document: Dealing with Suicide for Children & Adolescents
* Appendix 11 - Sample Information Document: Students Helping Students

1. **Request support,** as needed.
2. If possible, arrange for **substitute teachers or "floaters"** to be on hand in case teachers need to take time out of their classrooms.

###### Brainstorm upcoming events and activities which might need to altered or cancelled.

1. Arrange for the **counselling support rooms** for students and tracking system for students that use them. Provide tissues, water, food, etc. for staff and/or students, as needed.
2. Conduct **periodic meetings** for the Critical Incident Response Team, as needed.

###### Plan how to inform absent students and staff.

1. Prepare to **track and respond to student and family requests for** memorialization.
2. Advise Critical Incident Response team the importance of referring **all media inquiries to school division Communications Officer and/or administrator.**
3. Consider convening a small group of the deceased friend's to work with school administration to **monitor social networking sites** and other social media, as needed.
4. Plan **parent meeting** if necessary.
5. Critical Incident Response Team to meet again to discuss plans and details regarding **funeral arrangements and/or memorialization** and what needs to be considered as it relates to students and the school.

## Appendix 3 Initial All Staff Meeting (Sample)

Adapt as needed

1. Opening thoughts
2. Inform staff of the tragic event and accurate information about the death. Information about the cause of the death should be withheld until the family has been consulted. Brief staff about the facts of the situation including any parent wishes about what information they want to be shared/withheld. If a death is not confirmed as suicide and/or parents have asked that the term suicide is not used, then refer to it as a student “death" at this stage.
3. Introduce the members of the Critical Incident Team including counsellors or other school division staff, if present.
4. Allow staff an opportunity to express their own reactions and grief. Identify any staff who may need additional support and refer to them to appropriate resources.
5. Briefly review the school response plan goals with staff:

* Prepare teachers to deal effectively with informing their students by distributing a written statement containing facts to classroom/homeroom teachers to be used as a script to follow in informing students. See Sample Death Notification Statement for Students Appendix 6
* Arrange coverage for any staff who are unable to manage reading the statement.
* Inform teachers of counselling supports available at the school and the locations of the counselling rooms.
* Introduce counselling staff available and how students may access the support room and the appropriate procedure for sending students to the support room.
* Provide staff information on how to offer support, how to manage discussion about death by suicide, signs to watch out for and additional information. Resources include:
  + Appendix 7 Sample Discussion Guide for Teachers
  + Appendix 8 - Sample Handout for Teachers
  + Helping Students Cope: Specific Strategies for Schools to Help Students to Cope
  + Talking About Suicide script Appendix 12
* References to assist the teacher with classroom discussion, as needed:
  + Facts about Suicide Appendix 9
  + Dealing with Suicide for Children and Adolescents reference Appendix 10
  + Students Helping Students reference Appendix 11
* Remind all staff of the important role they may play in identifying changes in behaviour among the students they know and see every day, and discuss plans for handling students who are having difficulty. Ask for staff to help to identify students who may be at-risk (experienced past loss) or may be in need of extra support.
* Clarify procedures for handling students who want to leave the classroom.
* Students who wish to leave the school should only be released to a parent, guardian or their designate once arrangements have been made.
* Explain to the staff the importance of not asking students for information relating to the death by suicide but passing on what they are told or observe.
* Clarify the process to access counselling assistance for staff members (include reference to their STF benefits and other available services).
* Instruct staff that the Communications Officer is the media spokesperson and to refer all media inquiries to him/her or to the principal.
* Inform staff that substitute teachers will be made available, if necessary. Ensure that substitute teachers are informed of the incident, the plans for students and their role with the media (no interviews).
* Brief staff about following up immediately all unexplained student absences.
* Ask staff to forward items of student work to the office to be held with personal belongings for the family.
* Outline the principles of postvention work to prevent further harm to others by identifying people at-risk and by managing the school's responses so that the death by suicide is neither glamorized nor made secret which could contribute to contagion. See principles about contagion page 102.

1. Set the date and time of a follow-up meeting at the end of the school day. Assure staff that they will be kept informed of any relevant information in this meeting.
2. Emergency response team actions:
   1. What has been planned for funeral attendance, parent consent requirements, etc.?
   2. The presence of additional support staff
   3. When staff can expect that a deceased student's name will be removed from the class list or other place in the school so that it is easier for staff to cope with if it is anticipated rather than a surprise
   4. Media involvement
   5. Any new requirements in school procedures as a result of the incident

## Appendix 4 End of the Day Staff Meeting (Sample)

Adapt as needed

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Procedure** | **Notes** |
| Offer verbal appreciation of the staff. Review the day's challenges and successes (administrator and response team). |  |
| Provide update related to the critical incident and/or funeral arrangements, as applicable. |  |
| Ask staff to identify students who may be in need of close on-going monitoring or supports and also absent students that will need to be told when they return to school. |  |
| Arrange for notification of parents/guardians of students deemed at-risk due to their reactions/behaviors. |  |
| Debrief, share experiences, express concerns and allow staff the opportunity to ask questions and express their need for any help with any aspect for the upcoming day(s). |  |
| Check **in** with staff to assess whether any of them need additional supports, and refer accordingly. |  |
| Discuss plans for the next day, including the role of resource personnel, support rooms, etc. |  |
| Discuss plans for school memorial service, if appropriate. |  |
| Discuss importance of self-care for staff members and hand out ways to promote self- care handout. |  |

## Appendix 5 Sample email or letters

#### Death Notification Statements for Parents

###### OPTION 1 - When the death has been ruled a suicide and family has given permission to share cause.

Dear Parents/Guardians:

I am writing with great sadness to inform you that one our students, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, has died. Our thoughts and sympathies are with his/her family and friends.

All of the students were given the news of the death by their teachers in the classroom/ homeroom this morning. I have included a copy of the announcement that was read to them.

The cause of death was suicide. We want to take this opportunity to remind our community that suicide is a very complicated act. It is usually caused by a mental disorder such as depression, which can prevent a person from thinking clearly about his or her problems and how to solve them. Sometimes these disorders are not identified or noticed; other times, a person with a disorder will show obvious symptoms or signs. I am including some information that may be helpful to you in discussing suicide with your child.

School counsellors are available to meet with students individually or in groups today as well as over the coming days and weeks. Please contact the school office if you feel your child is in need of additional support.

Information about the funeral service will be made available as soon as we have it. If your child wishes to attend, we strongly encourage you to accompany him or her to the service. If the funeral is scheduled during school hours, students who wish to attend will need parental permission to be released from school.

The school will be hosting a meeting for parents and others in the community at (date/time/location). Counsellors will be present to provide information about common reactions following a suicide and how adults can help youth cope. They will also provide information about suicide and mental illness in adolescents, including risk factors and warning signs of suicide, and will address attendees’ questions and concerns.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns. Sincerely,

[Principal]

###### OPTION 2 - When the cause of death is unconfirmed

Dear Parents/Guardians,

I am writing with great sadness to inform you that one of our students, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, has died. Our thoughts and sympathies are with his/her family and friends.

All of the students were given the news of the death by their teacher in the classroom/homeroom this morning. I have included a copy of the announcement that was read to them.

School counsellors are available to meet with students individually or in groups today as well as over the coming days and weeks. Please contact the school office if you feel your child is in need of additional support.

Information about the funeral service will be made available as soon as we have it. If your child wishes to attend, we strongly encourage you to accompany him or her to the service. If the funeral is scheduled during school hours, students who wish to attend will need parental permission to be released from school.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Principal

###### OPTION 3

###### When the death has been ruled a suicide and family has given permission to share cause - Parent letter-sample template only

**Consent must be obtained from the family to name the student**

**and share cause of death**

Dear Parent or Guardian:

I am writing to you with some sad news about a member of our school community.

One of our grade \_\_\_ students, (***name student if consent provided***), died by suicide yesterday/today/Saturday/during the holidays. We remember especially, his/her family and friends.

Today and over the coming weeks, you may be concerned about your child's reaction, or expressions of feelings about this unexpected loss. These reactions and feelings may be part of the grieving process.

Your child's behaviour may be different from normal. They may find it hard to concentrate and complete their schoolwork. They may be unusually quiet, or show displays of anger, or they may show very few reactions at all, particularly if they did not know him/her. Following the suicide of a friend, the normal grief reactions can be very intense, for children/adolescents. Each person experiences and copes with grief and trauma in different ways and with different intensities.

Your child may want to share his/her feelings with you. If your child shares his/her emotions and feelings with you, try to listen and positively support them, even though this may be uncomfortable for you. If your child prefers to talk about this situation with friends, this is normal and is more likely to occur with young people.

School counselling has been made available at the school. If your child or you would like to request counselling support for your son or daughter, please contact the office and arrangements will be made. The school routine will continue as normally as possible.

Such a loss can heighten a young person's emotions. The length of grieving can vary for each person. If you have any concerns, please contact your child's class teacher or myself and we will arrange support.

Yours sincerely,

Principal

## Appendix 6 Sample Death Notification Statements for Students

*The following are templates for administrators to select and customize the most appropriate Death Notification Statement or script to be read to students in small groups such as homerooms or a classroom, NOT in assemblies or over the intercom.*

###### OPTION 1 - When the death has been ruled a suicide and family has given permission to share cause.

It is with great sadness that I have to tell you that one of our students, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, has taken his/her own life. We want you to know that we are here to help you in any way we can.

A suicide death presents us with many questions that we may not be able to answer right away. Rumours may begin to circulate, and we ask that you not spread rumours you may hear. We'll do our best to give you accurate information as it becomes known to us.

Suicide is a very complicated act. It is usually caused by a mental disorder such as depression, which can prevent a person from thinking clearly about his or her problems and how to solve them. Sometimes these disorders are not identified or noticed; in other cases, a person with a disorder will show symptoms or signs. One thing is certain: there are treatments that can help. Suicide should never be an option.

Each of us will react to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_’s death in our own way, and we need to be respectful of each other. Feeling sad is a normal response to any loss. Some of you may not have known \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_very well and may not be as affected, while others may experience a great deal of sadness. Some of you may find you're having difficulty concentrating on your school work, and others may find that diving into your work is a good distraction. It is important for students to look out for one another. If you are concerned about another student or a friend, please share your concern with a trusted adult such as your parent, teacher or counsellor.

We have counsellors available to help our school community deal with this sad loss and to enable us to understand more about suicide. If you’d like to talk to a counsellor, just let your teacher know.

Please remember we are all here for you.

**OPTION 2 - When the cause of the death is unconfirmed**

It is with great sadness that I have to tell you that one of our students, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ has died. All of us want you to know that we are here to help you in any way we can.

The cause of death has not yet been determined by the authorities. We are aware that there has been some talk about the possibility that this was a suicide death. Rumours may begin to circulate, and we ask that you not spread rumours since they may turn out to be inaccurate and can be deeply hurtful and unfair to his/her family and friends. We'll do our best to give you accurate information as it becomes known to us.

Each of us will react to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_’s death in our own way, and we need to be respectful of each other. Feeling sad is a normal response to any loss. Some of you may not have known \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ very well and may not be as affected, while others may experience a great deal of sadness. Some of you may find you're having difficulty concentrating on your school work, and others may find that diving into your work is a good distraction. It is important for students to look out for one another. If you are concerned about another student or a friend, please share your concern with a trusted adult such as your parent, teacher or counsellor.

We have counsellors available to help our school community deal with this sad loss and to enable us to understand more about suicide. If you’d like to talk to a counsellor, just let your teacher know.

Please remember we are all here for you.

**OPTION 3 - When the family has requested that the cause of death not be disclosed**

It is with great sadness that I have to tell you that one of our students, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_has died. All of us want you to know that we are here to help you in any way we can.

The family has requested that information about the cause of death not be shared at this time. We are aware that there has been some talk about the possibility that this was a suicide death. Rumours may begin to circulate, and we ask that you not spread rumours since they may turn out to be inaccurate and can be deeply hurtful and unfair to as well as his/her family and friends. We’ll do our best to give you accurate information as it becomes known to us.

Since the subject has been raised, we do want to take this opportunity to remind you that suicide, when it does occur, is a very complicated act. It is usually caused by a mental disorder such as depression, which can prevent a person from thinking clearly about his or her problems and how to solve them. Sometimes these disorders are not identified or noticed; in other cases, a person with a disorder will show symptoms or signs. One thing is certain: there are treatments that can help. Suicide should never, ever be an option.

Each of us will react to death in our own way, and we need to be respectful of each other. Feeling sad is a normal response to any loss. Some of you may not have known very well and may not be as affected, while others may experience a great deal of sadness. Some of you may find you're having difficulty concentrating on your school work, and others may find that diving into your work is a good distraction. It is important for students to look out for one another. If you are concerned about another student or a friend, please share your concern with a trusted adult such as your parent, teacher or counsellor.

We have counsellors available to help our school community deal with this sad loss and to help us understand more about suicide. If you’d like to talk to a counsellor, just let your teacher know.

Please remember we are all here for you.

## Appendix 7 Classroom/Homeroom Meeting Discussion Guide

Sample Discussion Guide for Teachers - may be used as template

1. **Opening thoughts**
2. **Inform Students of Death by Suicide** by scheduling meetings with students in small groups. Read Death Notification Statements for Students Appendix 6 - Select most appropriate option of sample templates provided
3. **Discussion with Students:** Use Talking about Suicide script as template for discussion. See Appendix 8

Additional questions about helping students identify and express their emotions:

-What is your biggest concern about the immediate future?

-What would help you feel safer right now?

1. **Brainstorm Practical Coping Strategies** (see section above on coping)

###### Inform Students How to Access the (Temporary) Support Rooms

1. **References to assist Teacher with classroom discussion, as needed.**
   * Facts About Suicide - Appendix 9
   * Dealing with Suicide for Children and Adolescents - Appendix 10
   * Students Helping Students - Appendix 12- This is a very useful tool to remind students how to be a caring friend if they are concerned about a classmate or friend including how to recognize the signs, what they can do to support and seek help for them.

## Appendix 8 Talking about Suicide (Parent Letter attachment or Staff Handout)

**Script for Discussion**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1. **Give accurate information about suicide.** | **By saying…** (Refer to information provided by principal to assist) |
| * Suicide is a complicated behaviour. It is not caused by a single event such as bad grade, an argument with parents, or the breakup of a relationship. * In most cases, suicide is caused by an underlying mental disorder like depression or substance abuse. Mental disorders affect the way people feel and prevent them from thinking clearly and rationally. Having a mental disorder is nothing to be ashamed of, and help is available. * Talking about suicide in a calm, straight forward manner does not put ideas into kid's minds. | "The cause of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_'s death was suicide. Suicide is most often caused by serious mental disorders like depression, combined with other complications."  "\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ may have been struggling with a mental health issue like depression or anxiety, even though it may not have been obvious to other people."  "Since 90 % of people who die by suicide have a mental disorder at the time of their death, it is possible that \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_suffered from a mental disorder that affected his/her feelings, thoughts, and ability to think clearly and solve problems in a better way."  "Mental disorders are not something to be ashamed of, and there are very good treatments to help the symptoms go away." |
| 1. **Address blaming and scapegoating** | **By saying…** |
| It is common to try to answer the question "WHY?" after a death by suicide. Sometimes this turns into blaming others for the death. | "The reasons that someone dies by suicide are not simple, and are related to mental disorders that get in the way of the person thinking clearly. Blaming others or blaming the person who died does not acknowledge the reality that the person was battling a mental disorder." |

Continued on next page

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1. **Do not focus on the method or graphic details** | **By saying…** |
| Talking in graphic detail about the method may create images that are upsetting and may increase the risk of imitative behaviour by vulnerable youth.  -If asked, it is okay to give basic facts about the method, but don't go into graphic detail or talk at length about it. The focus should be not on how someone died by suicide but rather on how to cope with feelings of sadness, loss, anger, etc. | "It is tragic that he died by suicide. Let's talk about how 's death has affected you and ways for you to handle it."  "How can we figure out the best ways to deal with our loss and grief? |
| 1. **Address feelings of anger or guilt** | **By saying…** |
| Accept expressions of anger at the deceased and explain that these feelings are normal. | It is okay to feel angry. These feelings are normal and it doesn’t mean that you didn’t care about \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. You can be angry at someone’s behaviour and still care deeply about that person. |
| 1. **Address feelings of responsibility** | **By saying…** |
| Reassure those who feel responsible or think they could have done something to save the deceased. | "This death is not your fault."  "We can't always predict someone else's behaviour."  "We can't control someone else’s behaviour." |
| 1. **Encourage help-seeking** | **By saying…** |
| Encourage students to seek help from a trusted adult or a professional if they or a friend are feeling depressed or having suicidal thoughts. | "We are always here to help you through any problem, no matter what. Who are the people you would go to if you or a friend were feeling worried or depressed or had thoughts of suicide?"  "There are effective treatments from professionals to help people who have mental disorders or substance abuse problems. Suicide is never an answer."  "This is an important time for all in our (school, team, etc.) community to support and look out for one another. If you are concerned about a friend, you need to be sure you tell a trusted adult or a professional." |

## Appendix 9 Facts about Suicide (Parent Letter attachment or Staff Handout)

DID YOU KNOW...Suicide is not inexplicable and is not simply the result of stress or difficult life circumstances? The key suicide risk factor is an undiagnosed, untreated, or ineffectively treated mental disorder. Research shows that over 90 percent of people who die by suicide have a mental disorder at the time of their death.

DID YOU KNOW...In youth, the mental disorders most closely linked to suicide risk are major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, conduct disorder, substance use disorder and eating disorders. While in some cases these disorders may be precipitated by environmental stressors, they can also occur as a result of changes in brain chemistry, even in the absent of an identifiable or obvious reason.

DID YOU KNOW...Suicide is almost always complicated? In addition to the underlying disorders listed above, suicide risk can be affected by personality factors such as impulsivity, aggression, and hopelessness. Suicide risk can also be exacerbated by stressful life circumstances such as a history of childhood physical and/or sexual abuse, death, divorce, or other trauma in the family, persistent serious family conflict, traumatic breakups of romantic relationships, trouble with the law, school failures and other major disappointments and bullying, harassment, or victimization by peers.

DID YOU KNOW...It is important to remember that the vast majority of youth who experience even very stressful life events do not become suicidal? In some cases, such experiences can be a catalyst for suicidal behaviour in youth who are already struggling with depression or other mental health problems. In others, traumatic experiences (e.g., prolonged bullying) can precipitate depression, anxiety, abuse of alcohol or drugs, or another mental disorder, which can increase suicide risk. Existing mental disorders may also lead to stressful life experiences such as family conflict, social isolation, relationship breakups or school failures, which may exacerbate the underlying illness and in turn increase suicide risk.

**Warning Signs of Suicide**

The following signs may indicate a person is at-risk for suicide. The risk is greater if behaviour is new or has recently increased in frequency or intensity, and if it seems related to a painful event, loss or change.

* + Talking about wanting to die or kill oneself
  + Looking for ways to kill oneself (e.g., searching online or purchasing a gun)
  + Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live
  + Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
  + Talking about being a burden to others
  + Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs
  + Acting anxious or agitated, or behaving recklessly
  + Sleeping too little or too much
  + Withdrawing or feeling isolated
  + Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge
  + Displaying extreme mood swings

**What does it look like?**

When people are feeling suicidal, they often shut themselves off from the rest of the world. They feel too badly to do anything they used to enjoy, or be around the people who love them. They might seem angry or tired all of the time, or stop taking care of themselves for weeks or even months. They might obsess over dying or act like they don't care about what happens to them. A person who is suicidal might say things like:

* “No one cares about me."
* "It's just not worth it anymore."
* "The world would be better off without me."
* "I have no hope."
* “I can't take it anymore.

It's important to remember that someone who talks about ending their life probably doesn't want to die. Talking about it is a major warning sign, but there is still hope. It's very important to get help when someone starts talking about killing themselves.

**What to Do in a Crisis**

Take any threat or talk about suicide seriously.

Start by telling the person that you are concerned.

Don't be afraid to ask whether he or she is considering suicide, having suicide thoughts or has a plan or method in mind.

Resist the temptation to argue the person out of suicide by saying, "You have so much to live for," or "Your suicide will hurt your family and friends."

Instead, seek professional help (see TAKE ACTION below).

**TAKE ACTION...In an acute crisis:**

* Call 911.
* Do not leave the person alone.
* If safe to do so, remove any firearms, alcohol, drugs, or sharp objects that could be used.
* Take the person to the emergency room to be assessed by a psychiatrist.
* Call to speak to a counsellor at Kidshelpphone.ca 1-800-668-6868
* Call Suicide Prevention Crisis Line (Mobile Crisis Services) Phone: (306) 525-5333

**Symptoms of Mental Disorders Associated with Suicide Risk**

Most adults are not trained to recognize signs of serious mental disorders in youth, and symptoms are therefore often misinterpreted or attributed to normal adolescent mood swings, laziness, poor attitude, or immaturity. Diagnosis of a mental disorder should always be made by a qualified mental health professional.

The key symptoms of major depressive disorder in youth are sad, depressed, angry, or irritable mood and lack of interest or pleasure in activities the youth used to enjoy, lasting at least two weeks.

Symptoms represent a clear change from the person's normal behaviour and may include changes in appetite or sleep, feelings of worthlessness/guilt, inability to concentrate, slowed or agitated movement, recurrent thoughts of death or suicide, fatigue/loss of energy, and self-harm behaviour.

## Appendix 10 Dealing with Suicide for Children and Adolescents (Parent Letter Attachment or Staff Handout)

**Each child’s or adolescent’s response will be unique and** a **wide range of reactions are possible.** Their reaction will be influenced by their personality, their past relationship with the deceased or injured person, what is happening in their life now and their ability to adjust to change. Your child, whatever age, needs to find safe ways to express their feelings. They may feel confusion, anger, aggression, withdrawal, fear, guilt, denial, blame, betrayal, abandonment, hurt and sadness. Parental understanding, reassurance and attention are very important at this time. Be guided by your child's need to talk but make it clear to them that you will be available whenever they need you.

**Children and adolescents who have experienced other concerns or losses in their lives may find it** **harder to cope.** Children and adolescents who have experienced other concerns or losses (e.g., separation/divorce of parents, death of a relative or pet, moving house/school) may find it harder to cope. They may become upset and need to express their feelings about these other concerns, even though they may have appeared to be coping before the event. If your son/daughter is already using the services of a psychologist or psychiatrist for wellbeing concerns, you should ensure they are made aware of this event.

**Children and adolescents may have many questions. They may want to know exactly what happened.** The school will have provided your son/daughter with consistent information about the incident. Details about the way a suicide or attempted suicide occurred aren't provided to students as this information is generally considered to be potentially harmful to students' wellbeing. As parents, it is important to steer discussion towards the positive "help seeking" actions young people can take, such as talking to a trusted adult (e.g., parent, counsellor, teacher, relative or friend), or using the agencies or websites listed in another attachment.

**"Tell an adult if you are worried about a friend."** This is an important message to share with your son/daughter in any discussion about suicide. Adolescents sometimes share their feelings about death with friends-in conversations, letters, emails, text messages, on the internet, etc. If young people are aware of friends who they fear may hurt themselves they should tell an adult immediately. Nothing is more important than protecting a life.

**Be aware that you or your child may be affected by possible media responses to the event.**

You may decide to protect against certain coverage or watch television news coverage together so that you can discuss any reactions or concerns and ensure your son/daughter feels supported. Hopefully, media reporting of specific youth suicides will not occur. However, if it does, be aware that it can contribute to young people's vulnerability.

**Some adolescents may show reactions weeks, months or even a year after an event.** If you are concerned about your child's reactions, for example, if there are changes to their behaviour such as their socializing or schoolwork patterns-it is important to speak to the principal or school counsellor at the school. This may result in a referral to other counseling agencies.

**Respond to community concern with respect.** If speaking with other members in the community, try to reinforce that the approach is to respect the bereaved/affected family, to avoid romanticising or sensationalising suicide and to encourage help seeking actions in young people-for their own wellbeing and when they have concerns about their friends.

## Appendix 11 Students Helping Students (Sample Information Document)

**Helping a Friend**

It hurts to see someone you care about suffer. If someone you know is talking about dying, you can help by being a good friend.

**How do I know?**

You might notice a sudden change in the way your friend acts. They might seem annoyed or irritated all of the time, or act like they don't care about anything. You might hear excuses about why your friend can't hang out with you. You might notice that your friend is not taking care of themselves; they might stop showering or seem tired all of the time. Your friend might start taking risks, or giving away things that you know are important to them. You might also hear your friend say things like:

* "The world would be better off without me."
* “No one cares."
* "I can't take it anymore."
* "It's not worth it."
* "I don't care."
* “You'll be rid of me soon."

In some cases, you might notice that your friend seems suddenly over energetic or happy (possibly because they are considering or have plans to end their life).

It's important to remember that someone who talks about ending their life probably doesn't want to die, but wants to express that they're suffering. Talking about it is a warning sign, but there is hope.

**What can I do?**

You can't control what happens to your friend, but you can show that you care by reaching out.

###### Talk

Tell your friend that you're worried. Here are some things you can say:

* + "You seem really down lately. Do you want to talk about it?"
  + "I'm worried about you. What's going on?"
  + "I want to help you. Let's talk about it."
  + "Have you thought about killing yourself?"

1. **Find Help**

If your friend tells you that they're feeling suicidal and tells you not to tell anyone, don't listen. Offer to go with your friend to speak to a guidance counsellor at school. You can also give your friend the number for Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868. If you’re worried that your friend is in danger, tell someone. Talk to a counsellor at school, or tell a parent that you're worried.

Remember, your friend might get mad at you for telling someone, but at least your friend will still be alive.

1. **Get Support**

It can be frustrating to see someone you care about struggle. It can be tempting to give your friend ultimatums, like: "I'm not going to be your friend anymore if you don't get help." It's important to talk about how you feel, but don't take it out on your friend. Talk to a counsellor, friend, teacher, or parent to work through your feelings.

It's an emergency if you're worried that your friend might do something to hurt themselves. Don't wait. Call for help and explain the situation.

1. **Remember**

It's natural to want to help a friend who is hurting, but there are limits to how much you can do. Try to be there for your friend by encouraging them to get the help they need, but don't make yourself responsible for your friend's actions. You can't control what happens, but you can be proud of yourself for being a caring friend.

## Appendix 12 Helping Students Cope Additional Information (Sample Handout for Teachers)

**IMPORTANT**

**Student Desk (Deceased)**

\*Since the emptiness of the deceased student's desk may be unsettling, after approximately **5 days (or**

**After the funeral),** seating assignments should be rearranged to create a new learning environment.

Teachers should explain in advance that the intention is to strike a balance between compassionately honouring the student who has died while at the same time, returning the focus back to the classroom curriculum.

Students may be involved in planning how to respectfully remove the desk.

(e.g., read a prepared statement about the importance of their friendship and their commitment to work to eradicate suicide)

###### Inform students by scheduling meetings with students in small groups

###### (classroom/ homeroom, NOT large groups assembly/intercom)

* Have the classroom/homeroom teacher meet with their students **in** small groups. This enables adults to identify those youth who appear in need of additional attention.
* If a staff member is not comfortable notifying students about the death by suicide, arrangements can be made for another staff member or counsellor to carry out this task. Administration will provide a scripted Death Notification Statement to be read - See Appendix 6.
* All students should be notified at approximately the same time of the day, preferably first thing in the morning.
* Friends closest to the student should be spoken to individually or in a smaller group by a counsellor or staff member. Depending on their responses, they should be offered the opportunity to use the support room or arrangements should be made for them to be collected by their parents. No students significantly affected by the news should be allowed to leave the school unaccompanied, unless by direct arrangement with parents.
* Students in the same class as a sibling: this group should be given additional assistance in understanding how to support their classmate after a return to school. It would be appropriate to have the counsellor speak to this group as well as the classroom teacher.
* If possible, have counsellors go into classrooms/homerooms for follow-up to give accurate information about suicide, the kinds of reactions that can be expected after hearing about a peer's death by suicide, and safe coping strategies to help them in the coming days and weeks.
* Students in the same year level: small group meetings may also be held in the classroom/homeroom a few times, as needed for follow-up, but should follow a structured outline, kept to a time limit, and provide each student with an opportunity to speak, if they wish to. Meetings should focus on helping students identify and express their feelings and discuss practical coping strategies including appropriate ways to memorialize the loss, so they may return their focus to their regular routines and activities.
* If the deceased student participated in sports, clubs or other school activities, the first practice, game, rehearsal, or meeting after the death may be difficult for other students. These events may provide further opportunities for the adults in the school community to help the students appropriately acknowledge the loss.

###### Discuss helping students identify and express their emotions

* Youth will vary widely in terms of emotional expression. Some may become openly emotional, others may be reluctant to talk at all, and still others may use humor.

Acknowledge the breadth of feelings and diversity of experiences and emphasize the importance of being respectful of others.

* Some students may need help to identify emotions beyond simply sad, angry, or happy and may need reassurance that a wide range of feelings and experiences are to be expected.
* They may also need to be reminded that emotions may be experienced as physical symptoms, including butterflies in the stomach, shortness of breath, insomnia, fatigue, or irritability.
* To facilitate this discussion, students may be asked:

***What is your biggest concern about the immediate future? What would help you feel safer right now?***

###### Brainstorm Practical Coping Strategies

Encourage students to think about specific things they can do when intense emotions such as worry or sadness begin including:

* Simple relaxation and distraction skills (e.g., take 3 deep breaths, count to 10, visualize themselves in a calm and relaxing place)
* Exercise
* Recall how they have coped effectively with difficulties in the past and remind them to use same coping skills now
* Write a list of supportive people they can turn to now
* Write a list of things they are looking forward to
* Focus on individual goals such as spending time with friends

They often need permission to engage in activities that will help them feel better and take their minds off the stressful situation. They may feel guilty about having fun or thinking about other things.

Acknowledge students' needs to express their feelings while helping them to encourage them to think about how they want to remember their friend (e.g., writing a personal note to the family, attending the memorial service, doing something kind for another person in honour of their friend).

###### Inform Students How to Access the Support Rooms

* Setting up temporary support rooms following a death by suicide is an effective way to support distressed students, particularly those considered vulnerable and/or high risk for several days after the incident.
* The value of a support room is that it provides a safe, supervised location where students' grief and needs can be expressed, responded to and monitored by a counsellor.
* An on-going record (sign in sheet) of the students who have accessed the room is recommended.
* Suggestions for planning such a service for students to access counsellors may be found in the following sections of this guide. See Step 5

###### E. Refer students to school counsellor for individual counselling

Some behaviour could result in a referral to the school counsellor for additional supports, as needed, after the support rooms are no longer available. **See Appendix 13**

## Appendix 13 Information to Help Staff Identify Students for Referral

The following chart is to remind staff of the kinds of behaviour that should result in a referral to the School Counsellor for individuals that may require additional supports, as needed after the support rooms are no longer available.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Changes in academic performance | Unexplained significant drop in subject performance, unexplained absences, loss of interest and commitment |
| Changes in relationships with others | Friendships are lost or broken, sport or extracurricular commitments are dropped, chooses to be alone, engages in high risk behaviours with cars, drugs, alcohol, weapons or misconduct |
| Changes in mood | Demonstrates intense unhappiness, hopelessness, increased anger, irritability, tearfulness, emotional instability |
| Grieving a significant loss | Loss of a significant person through illness/accident/suicide, family break up, relationship break up |
| Expressing ideas of suicide / depression | Video, film, or a novel choice, personal writing, art work, conversation has a focus on suicide, death or depression  Makes statements suggesting that have imagined being dead and the impact this will have on others |
| Physical changes | Headaches, extreme weight gain or loss, fatigue/exhaustion, sleeplessness, changes to hygiene and self-care standards |

## Appendix 14 Considerations Specific to Attempted Suicide

**Communication with staff, students and the community**

The following are guidelines to some immediate considerations that are specific to an attempted suicide. It is assumed that the School Division office has been contacted, the SRPSD Support Team members have met and mental health agencies have already been contacted.

If the school is informed of an attempted suicide that took place away from the school or the attempt occurred without other students being aware, there is a small possibility that the spread of information may be contained. If complete containment of information is a real possibility it should be discussed with the family as soon as possible. In such circumstances, any communication with staff, students and parents will be on a "need to know" basis. The student, the mental health professional, the family and the administrator must determine who will be included in a "need to know" group. The major consideration is how many individuals need to be informed in order to keep the student safe and supported in the school environment.

Complete containment is likely to be a very rare situation and the Critical Incident Team and Administrator will need to discuss a plan to follow if information about the suicide attempt begins to circulate across the school community.

While a support room would normally be established following a student death, it may be the case that a very public suicide attempt may also warrant the provision of a support room.

###### Critical areas for sensitive discussion with the family include:

* + What information will be provided to the school community
  + Support plan for their child to return to school. It is essential that a support plan is developed and agreed to by the School Counsellor or other Staff member, the student, the family and the mental health professionals before the student returns to school.
  + Support needed for siblings **in** school
  + Guidance Counsellor or School Counsellor involvement for liaison with mental health professional
  + Identify, monitor and support other vulnerable students is just as important in the case of attempted suicide as it is with completed suicide to prevent contagion.

# **References**

**After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools.** Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC). American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. 2011.

[**http://www.sprc.org/sites/default/files/resource-program/AfteraSuicideToolkitforSchools.pdf**](http://www.sprc.org/sites/default/files/resource-program/AfteraSuicideToolkitforSchools.pdf)

**Suicide Postvention Guidelines: A Framework to Assist Staff** in **Supporting their School Communities** in **Responding to Suspected, Attempted or Completed Suicide.** Department of Education and Children’s Services, Catholic Education South Australia Association of Independent Schools. <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/sites/g/files/net691/f/suicide-postvention-guidelines.pdf>

**Kids Help Phone** Phone: 1-800-668-6868 Website: [**www.kidshelpphone.ca**](http://www.kidshelpphone.ca/)

Canada's only toll-free bilingual, anonymous, and confidential phone counselling, referral, and Internet service for children and youth. Every day, professional counsellors provide immediate, caring support to young people in urban and rural communities across Canada. Kids Help Phone does not trace calls, use call display, track **IP** addresses, and kids do not have to share their names.