

# Postvention: A Community Response after a Sudden Death or Suicide *Individual, Family, and Community Healing*

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# *Suicide is a Profound Loss*

[www.theconnectprogram.org](http://www.theconnectprogram.org)



- All of us have been touched by loss at some point in our lives.
- Talking about suicide can bring up personal experiences for us.
- **We need to be sensitive to loss survivors, attempt survivors, or any of us at risk for suicide.**
- Please practice good self-care and seek support that would be helpful to you.





# Suicide, Mental Health, and Stigma

- ❖ About 90% of people who die by suicide have some type of mental health and/or substance use problem.
- ❖ Suicide and mental health problems often have stigma. This can result in:
  - Secrecy about the death and issues prior to the death
  - Isolation and guilt for loss survivors
  - Shame and blame for the death
  - Lack of support from others
  - Facts are replaced by rumors

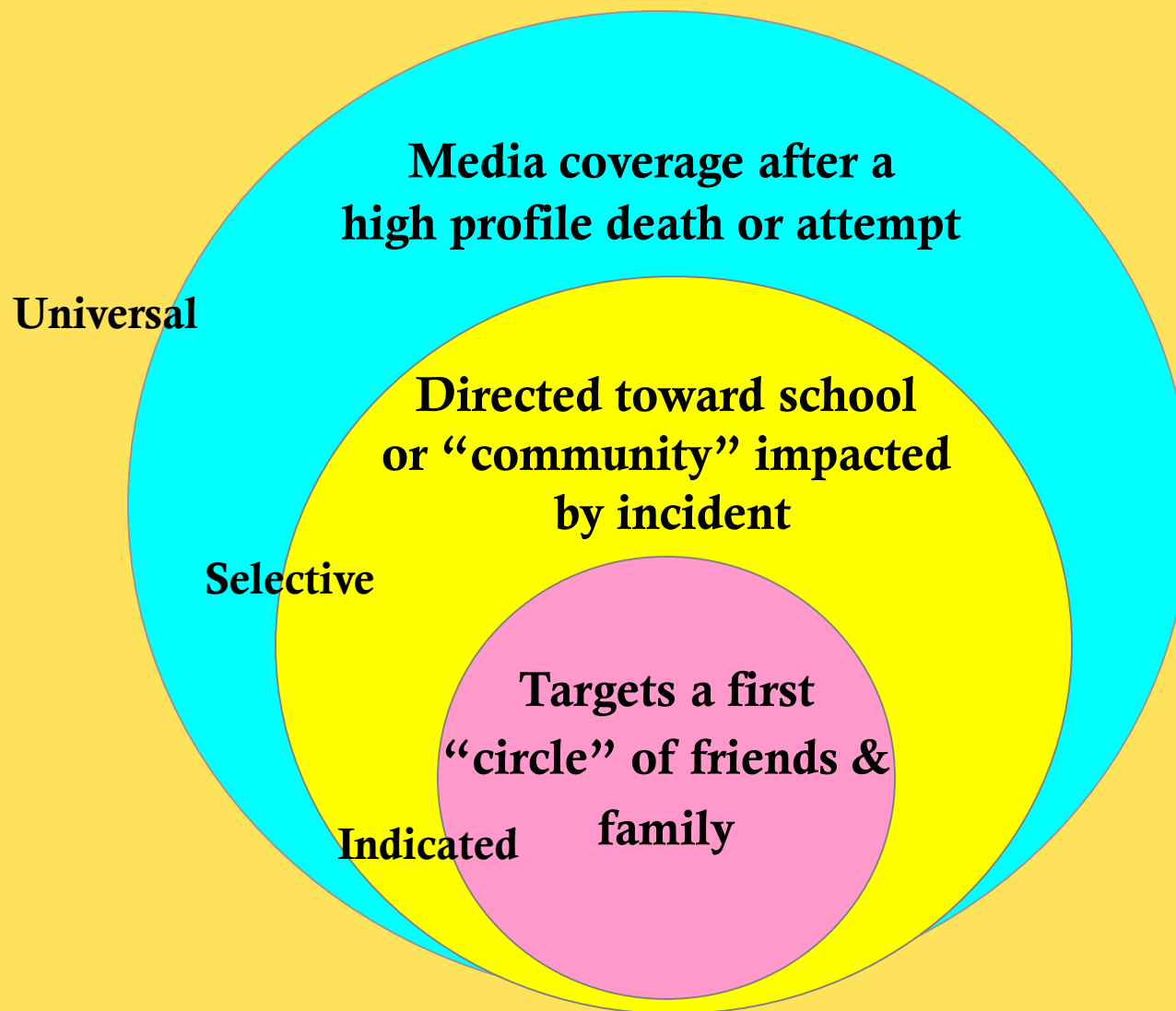


# POSTVENTION

- A **planned response** after a suicide to ***promote healing and reduce risk*** of further suicide incidents.
- *Knowing someone who has died by suicide increases our risk for suicide.*
- How a suicide is handled affects the risk factors for others, especially youth of all ages.



# Postvention Response





# Speaking about the Death in Public

Balance between two important principles:



- ❖ Respect for family's right to privacy
  - When a family is able to be open about a death being a suicide, this may help schools and/or communities **offer resources** to reduce risk.
  
- ❖ Responding to suicide as a public health issue
  - Being open about the suicide can also **guide funeral activities**, which can have a healing effect and help reduce risk.



# CONTAGION

- **Exposure to a suicide may influence others** (who may already be at risk) to take their life or attempt suicide.
- **Having known someone who dies by suicide** is one of the most significant risk factors for suicide.
- **Teens and young adults** are more at risk for contagion.
- **Sensational media reports and inappropriate funeral services** may contribute to contagion.

# The Loss from Suicide

“Suicide is a death like no other...  
and those who are left behind to struggle with  
it must confront a pain like no other.”

Kay Redfield Jamison, Night Falls Fast, p. 292.





# WHY?????

- For Survivors of Suicide Loss, grief is often combined with a persistent search for an answer or explanation.
- Grieving a suicide can include intense feelings:
  - **Shame**
  - **Anger**
  - **Guilt**
  - **Regret**
  - **Self-Blame**
  - **Rejection**



# Complexity of Grief and Loss

- Length and expression of grief may vary by individual.
- Grief responses and needs may differ depending on the age of the person bereaved by loss.
- How a community responds can help or block the healing process.
- Cultural norms and practices are important to acknowledge when dealing with grief.
- Overlay of COVID-19 uncertainty and restrictions: trauma-informed care



# Providing Support to Survivors of Suicide Loss

- Recognize an **increased risk for suicide** in the days and weeks following the death.
  - Be gentle and non-judgmental. **Don't blame anyone.**
  - **Don't feel like you need to provide an answer.** Your presence alone will be reassuring.
  - Over time, help them connect to a **suicide survivors** group, bereavement group, or other resources if this would be helpful.
- **Positive Action: Respect each individual's own healing process.**





# Sensitive Language



**Some words are more comfortable or easier to hear for survivors of suicide loss.**

## **Words to Use:**

- Died by suicide
- Lost to suicide

## **Words to Avoid:**

- Successful suicide
- Committed suicide
- Completed suicide
- Chose to kill himself





# Promoting Healing

- For at least the first six months, insure that mental health and emergency services are available.
- Validate and normalize grief and loss reactions for all
- Watch out for anyone who is not doing well and connect them with support; ***know the Warning Signs for suicide!***
- Work toward **restoring community spirit, strengths, and sensitivity.**





# Community Response

- ***Taking action to reduce risk for contagion is essential.***
- **Good networking and interface** among impacted community agencies is key to promote healing.
- **Promote Safe Messaging** in individual and public discussion about the death.



# Social Media/Internet

- Social networking sites serve as a connected community.
  - Search for information related to the death and monitor postings for warning signs.
  - Sites can often be deactivated or placed on memorial status when requested by next of kin.
- Explore virtual options for connecting with youth/young adults
- **Positive Actions:**
- **Notify others of individuals at risk.**
  - **Validate and normalize grief and loss reactions.**
  - **Post warning signs, NSPL 1-800-273-TALK (8255), and Crisis Text Line: TEXT 741741**
  - **Continue to monitor.**



# Treat all Sudden Deaths the Same

- Permanent memorials glorifying a person who has died by suicide can increase risk of contagion among vulnerable youth.
- **It is recommended that such memorials be avoided for all so they are not conducted selectively.**
- *Have postvention guidelines in place* in advance so that all suicide deaths are responded to in the same way.
- Planned consistency in recognizing deaths publicly can minimize difficulties when any kind of death occurs.





# Recommended Memorial Activities

## ***For the School:***

- Provide a *time-limited place* where **remembrances and expressions of grief** can be placed.
- Inform participants that anything left will be turned over to the family afterwards.
- Consider locations **other than school** (churches, civic halls, other communities) for funeral services.

## ***For COVID-19:***

- ***“Gifting the family with memories”***
- What you’ll miss most about this person in a heartfelt manner
- Sending along poems, songs, video collages





# General Postvention Guidelines

- **Confirm the facts** before disclosing information.
- If openly acknowledged by the family, be truthful and direct about this as a suicide.
- **Do not provide specific details (e.g. means used) about the death.**
- Avoid glorifying the person's life or death.
- Recognize the impact is over *months and years* (not days and weeks).



# Contact with Family

- The principal or designee should contact family to express condolences and gather information about funeral arrangements.
- Grieving families may not wish to share the manner of death.
- This creates a dilemma between respecting the family's wishes and reducing risk of contagion by being open.





# Contact with Staff

- Inform staff of the situation/facts as you know them.
- Ask them what they need for support.
- Offer sick/leave time off (when indicated).
- Consider temporarily moving staff from a high stress job.
- Encourage self-referral to an EAP.
- Role model good self-care skills.
- Consider using a crisis debriefing for staff.
- Review protocols for agency response to other clients.
- Provide check in/support in upcoming weeks/months.

20





# Conveying Information

- **How the school handles the initial announcement is important in the critical process of maintaining credibility and trust.**
- Be honest and direct without discussion of means.
- Announcements should be made to small groups of students by a person familiar with the students.
- Small meetings should occur with all students at the same time and allow time for follow-up discussion.
- Make the announcement early in the day and provide for follow-up supports.
- **Do not use large assemblies or the public announcement system** for communicating information about the suicide.





# For Youth of all Ages

**If a young person has been affected by suicide loss, encourage them to remember:**

- ❖ No matter what happened, this person's death was **not** your fault.
- ❖ There is **always** someone you can go to for help.
- ❖ Talking to a **trusted adult** can help.
- ❖ Be gentle with yourself.





# Communication with Providers

- Notifying local organizations will give advance opportunity for provision of additional supports:  
police departments, mental health centers,  
clergy, and social service/community organizations
- You may wish to ask for crisis assistance/support for staff and students from neighboring schools/agencies.





# Self-Care Skills are Essential for all

- Promote self-care skills with students and staff.
  - Remember that the healing process will take *months and years*, and that people grieve in different ways.
- **Positive Action: Make a commitment to stay with the process for the long run.**



# Working with Individuals, Families, and Communities can Reduce Risk and Promote Healing

## Postvention Becomes Prevention



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# Suicide Warning Signs

Seek help as soon as possible by contacting a mental health professional or by calling the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK if you or someone you know exhibits any of the following signs:

- Threatening to hurt or kill oneself or talking about wanting to hurt or kill oneself
- Looking for ways to kill oneself by seeking access to firearms, available pills, or other means
- Talking or writing about death, dying, or suicide when these actions are out of the ordinary for the person
- Feeling hopeless
- Feeling rage or uncontrolled anger or seeking revenge
- Acting reckless or engaging in risky activities—seemingly without thinking
- Feeling trapped—like there's no way out
- Increasing alcohol or drug use
- Withdrawing from friends, family, and society
- Feeling anxious, agitated, or unable to sleep or sleeping all the time
- Experiencing dramatic mood changes
- Seeing no reason for living or having no sense of purpose in life





# Hope for these Times



27



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