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A SUICIDE PREVENTION  
TOOLKIT

# After a student suicide



centre for  
suicide prevention



**IN THIS TOOLKIT**

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following a suicide*

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the suicide*

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A suicide in a school community is devastating to staff, students, and families. Some individuals may be unable to cope and the community as a whole may struggle with how to respond.

In a state of shock, school administrators may be uncertain of what steps to take.

This toolkit provides practical information to schools for after a student has died by suicide.

**This toolkit is accompanied by an online Appendix which can be found at [suicideinfo.ca/resource/after-a-student-suicide/](https://suicideinfo.ca/resource/after-a-student-suicide/).**

# What to do immediately following a suicide

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## 1

Contact the family of the student who died.

- Offer condolences on behalf of the school community.
- Determine if parents of the deceased student want the suicide disclosed.
- Recommend that the cause of death (suicide) be acknowledged, without releasing specific details: rumours and stories about the death will dissipate in light of accurate information and disclosing the suicide may also allow everyone impacted to fully grieve.
- Maintain a culturally sensitive approach; being aware of the background of the family of the deceased student and their beliefs and attitudes toward suicide will help foster open conversation (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention [AFSP] & Suicide Prevention Resource Center [SPRC], 2018).

## 2

Inform school staff, school district administration and board. See online Appendix for items to consider when developing a communications plan.

# 3

Inform all school families that there has been a student death with an official communication from the principal including:

- Recognition of the death as a suicide (if permission is given by the deceased student's parents);
- Reassurance that the school is returning to a normal routine;
- Assurance that counselling services will be made available for the school community and that more information on how to access these services will follow (Centre for Suicide Prevention, 2014; AFSP & SPRC, 2018).

# 4

Endeavour to operate the school as normally as possible - maintaining a stable environment is key.

# 5

Consult any existing school policies or protocols re: crisis management, student deaths, suicide deaths and work with your district to implement them. See online Appendix for a sample crisis management plan.

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# In the days following the suicide

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## GRIEF MANAGEMENT

Ensuring people receive the proper care after a suicide is critical. Those who have been exposed to suicide are at greater risk of suicide themselves. In order to help people affected by the suicide work through their grief:

- Arrange for group-based grief and loss counselling and make these services available to the entire school community. Clearly communicate session availability to students, staff, and the families of all students, including the deceased student (Erbacher et al., 2015; AFSP & SPRC, 2018; Centre for Suicide Prevention, 2014; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2012).
- Immediately identify students at risk of suicide (see warning signs) and monitor them; a suicide death can be triggering (Erbacher et al., 2015).

- Meet with the deceased student's closest friends and emphasize to them that they are not responsible for the student's death (Brock, 2002; Erbacher et al., 2015).

*Postvention is key to prevention!*

## PREVENTING SUICIDE CONTAGION

Suicide contagion is when multiple suicides occur in a short period of time or defined location. Contagion is rare, but adolescents are more vulnerable to it than any other age group. Those who may be at risk include:

- Close friends of the person who died;
  - Witnesses of the death;
  - Students who had contact with the person shortly before they died;
  - Those who are already experiencing thoughts of suicide; and
  - Those who have experienced suicide loss in the past.
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### TYPICAL SUICIDE GRIEF RESPONSES

- Shock and numbness
- Profound sadness
- Anger and blame
- Guilt
- Shame
- Relief
- Denial

(Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention, 2018)

*More responses can be found in Normal Reactions to Suicide Loss by the Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention.*

Grief for death is an expected and typical response in any context. Grief toward a death by suicide, however, can be a far more intense and complex experience. Family members and those close to the deceased student may be at risk for suicide themselves; studies show them to be at increased risk for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), complicated grief, and suicidal ideation.

Research indicates that up to 135 people are impacted by a given suicide, ranging from the more seriously affected to those more simply exposed (they knew the person) (Cerel et al., 2018).

Therefore, in work or school settings, it is critical to make counselling opportunities available for those affected (Erbacher et al., 2015; Carson J. Spencer Foundation et al., 2013).

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## MEMORIALIZATION

Memorialization involves a sensitive balancing act of both honouring the deceased student and not promoting suicide, thereby protecting people currently at risk. Here are some recommended practices:

- Respond to grief in a way that considers other students' vulnerabilities as a result of the suicide;
- Treat all deaths the same way so as not to glamorize or romanticize a suicide death;
- Plan temporary grieving opportunities;
- Recommend funeral services be held outside of school hours so everyone can attend;
- Discourage official, school-wide memorials as they have the potential to glamorize the death; and
- Construct any physical memorial off school grounds (Centre for Suicide Prevention, 2004; AFSP & SPRC, 2018; Kerr et al., 2010).



## WARNING SIGNS OF PEOPLE AT RISK

People who are suicidal typically exhibit warning signs. At school, these may be identified as:

- Loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities
- Decline in academic performance
- Self-harm
- Talk of being a burden to others
- Changes in behaviour
- Withdrawal from social media activity (AFSP & SPRC, 2018)

Some warning signs require more immediate action than others. If someone is exhibiting the following warning signs, call 9-1-1:

- Talking about wanting to die or kill oneself
  - Looking for a way to kill oneself or already having a plan (American Association of Suicidology, 2017)
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# In the weeks following the suicide

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## SUICIDE AWARENESS EDUCATION

- Discuss mental illness and its connection to suicide with students: not all people who consider suicide have a mental illness, anyone can be at risk of suicide.
- Outline typical behaviours or 'warning signs' of suicide risk to students so they are more aware.
- Offer mental health information sessions for parents to inform them of suicide 'warning signs' and protective and risk factors.
- Use sensitive language (non-sensational, non-judgmental) to describe suicide and suicidal behaviour (see online Appendix for language guidelines).
- Connect students who are still struggling to community mental health supports.

## RESOURCES

- **After a suicide: A toolkit for schools.** American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and Suicide Prevention Resource Center. <http://bit.ly/2E5wzK1>
- **Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA).** CMHA has regional and provincial offices across Canada and offers mental health resources and services. [www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca)
- **Kids Help Phone.** Kids Help Phone is anonymous, confidential phone and web counselling, available 24/7 for youth ages 20 and younger. Phone: 1 (800) 668-6868 [www.kidshelpphone.ca](http://www.kidshelpphone.ca)
- **Preventing suicide: A toolkit for high schools.** Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services. <https://bit.ly/2yKZ2kE>
- **Centre for Suicide Prevention workshops.** Suicide prevention workshops help inform and prepare school staff to identify a student at risk of suicide and effectively intervene with them. [www.suicideinfo.ca/workshops](http://www.suicideinfo.ca/workshops)

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We are the Centre for  
Suicide Prevention, a branch  
of the Canadian Mental  
Health Association. For  
35+ years we have been  
equipping Canadians with  
knowledge and skills to  
respond to people at risk  
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