

Tips for Schools: Dealing with Students and Suicide Loss

How adults respond when a loved one dies has a major effect on how students react

Things teachers can do and say

- Be available if a student approaches you to talk, but realize many may not.
- Remind students that there is no “right” way to grieve and they may feel varied emotions, all of which are normal after a tragedy such as suicide. “It’s a normal reaction to an abnormal event.”
- Just listen without judgment.
- Share your own feelings and concerns honestly and encourage children to do so.
- Encourage students to ask questions and answer them with the facts that you know - honesty is the best policy.
- It is okay to tell a student that you don’t know answers to difficult questions.
- Try to re-establish a routine, with appropriate expectations, as soon as possible, for those students who are ready.
- Try not to take anger or irritability personally as it may be directed toward adults.
- Remember that telling students to “be strong” discourages them from grieving.
- Help students understand that the hurt they feel now won’t last forever.
- Help students see that ignoring their own grief may make them feel *more* alone and sad.
- Emphasize the importance of them seeking help when needed.
- Help students realize the importance of looking out for each other and telling adults of peer concerns.
- Help the child find a grief group if they are interested in talking with age-mates.
- Let your student have his/her personal space.
- Be careful not to glamorize, thereby positively reinforcing, suicide as an option.
- Be aware of depression and/or suicidal ideation in your students.
- Be gentle and compassionate in all of your helping efforts.
- Do not give more information than a child asks for as it may be too much. Remember that children do not understand death/suicide the way an adult does.
- Use the words ‘died’ or ‘death’ since terms such as ‘went away,’ ‘they are sleeping’ or ‘God took him’ can be confusing & scary to children.
- Remember that listening means letting children lead in the discussions of what THEY feel is important to discuss.
- Reassure children that death is not their fault.
- Do not act as if nothing has happened.
- It will likely be necessary to adjust the regular academic schedule in order to spend time with students to address their emotional needs. It is preferable to reach out to students in a deliberate and timely way rather than to allow the emotional environment to escalate.

For younger children

- Students often need caring adults to confirm that it is okay to be sad.
- Offer warmth, affection and the assurance of your physical presence, particularly to younger children.
- Try to provide security and stability in the child's life to help them feel safe.
- Be patient as particularly younger children may need to bring up the subject over and over as they process and try to understand it.
- Young children often express feelings through play – monitor their self-directed play for signs of confusion, guilt or anger.
- Children may want to express grief through art, perhaps creating a play-doh design representing a favorite memory.
- Younger children may want to draw out their feelings or create artwork for the family of their deceased classmate.
- Encourage younger students to talk to their parents as well when they are feeling sad, angry or out of control.

For older children

- Ask questions about the person the student has lost.
- Ask adolescents to share their favorite stories, pictures or memories.
- Be inquisitive about the death and how the student feels about it - look for clues regarding what they are confused about or may feel guilt for.
- Make a collage-cut out words, pictures and notes that carry special memories.
- Remember that many students do not like to be singled out, but may need support. Find ways to support them without them feeling 'different' than their peers
- Students often need a means through which to say goodbye to help bring a sense of closure. It could be a card for the family or a goodbye letter.
- Students who are struggling may need to gain a basic understanding of mental illness and why the suicide occurred.
- Be aware of students who SAY they are okay, but may not be. For example, a close friend may indicate they are okay because they are feeling guilt. Peers often know if other peers are not okay, so we rely on them as well for this data.
- Some students need to be able to talk through their loss in order to work their way through their shock and gain an understanding of the event.
- Encourage teens and adolescents to seek support from their school guidance department or to tell another adult if they want to talk more about what they are experiencing.
- Ensure that teens keep an eye out for each other.

Tips for School Mental Health Staff

- Remember the importance of attentive listening and spending time with children. Never underestimate the value of empathy and compassion.
- The child and the family may require some education about the impact of traumatic death. Don't rush to intervene and be careful about strategies too early.
- Keep in mind the vulnerability of the effected child.
- Most children are resilient and will recover with the help of their naturally occurring supports, though we need to recognize when a student is in need of further assistance.
- Identify children who are still exhibiting signs of trauma. As it has been three months, children who have not returned to 'normal' functioning may need more support.
- Students and staff who were directly involved or were witnesses may need special intervention. Help find counselors in the community that have special training in trauma.
- Persons experiencing the effect of psychological trauma can easily be thrown into overwhelming emotion when we do traditional grief counseling with them.
- Always consider brain-based trauma interventions first for these people.
- Stay away from processing emotion: If THEY talk about feelings, that's fine. But don't ask them to go there, because it is just too painful, and some will still be in shock.
- Defuse the emotional memory so cognitive processes can take place.
- Counselors may use the process of THE NARRATIVE to help students organize and interpret the traumatic events into a story to help derive meaning.

Helping Families Cope

- Teach the family stress management skills and effective coping strategies.
- Use the family's previously effective coping skills to build a framework for present and future resiliency.
- Help the family understand that EVERYONE is impacted by the event.
- Understand that each family member may process the trauma differently. Teach them to respect and normalize each way of coping and not try to alter each other.