

## ***Responding to Suicide- Tips for Teachers***

### **General Grief Support Skills for Staff to Utilize:**

- Give time for others' reactions. Do not try to change or fix their feelings.
- Be respectful; do not react to cultural differences.
- Help with physical comfort- have them sit, give water, tissue
- Ask if there is a friend or someone that can help and support them.
- Teens are often scared or confused and hide their feelings, so don't be afraid to ask them how they're doing.
- Sometimes, people ask, "What do we do now?" Assist in making a plan for the student for after they leave your room or office if they seem particularly upset. For example, help them to a counselor or to find family/friends to support them.
- If you are concerned about a student's reaction, please notify their counselor.

### **When Talking with Students:**

- Minimize identification and glorification of suicide victim: Don't say death was unexplainable, for example "He had everything going for him"; instead say, "There must have been serious things troubling him that we may never know about."
- Avoid glorifying the act: Don't make the suicide seem exciting or the suicide victim admirable by only emphasizing their good qualities. Point out that suicide is a choice.
- Actively participate in suicide postvention: Postvention activities will work to reduce the risk of suicide contagion, provide the support needed to help survivors cope with the death, address the social stigma associated with suicide, and disseminate factual information.

### **Teacher-Directed Classroom Discussion Should Address Main Points:**

- Provide the student with only facts- avoid speculation.
- Discuss grief reaction and normalize it. For example, "This loss is hard for everyone, and it is normal to experience a range of emotions, including sadness, anger, fear, guilt, confusion, and disbelief. During times such as this, it is critical we look to family and friends for guidance and support. For many of us, the process of grieving this loss will be difficult and time consuming. With time and talk, the pain associated with this loss will lessen.
- Have "*Request for Crisis Intervention-Grief Counseling*" available for students
- Emphasize suicide prevention (have "*Suicide Prevention Handout for Students: What to Do if a Friend is Suicidal*" and/or "*Save A Friend: Tips for Teens to Prevent Suicide*" available in your classroom)
- Discuss warning signs of suicidal behavior
- Provide students with resources at school and in community (have "*Resource List for Students*" available in your classroom)

### **Ideas for Classroom Activities:**

- Make and wear yellow ribbons, a national symbol of suicide prevention.
- For classes where the student was well-known, teachers can have students share stories about the student as a way to express their grief in a healthy manner.
- Provide time and supplies for those who want to write poems, prose, draw, or compose music to express their feelings of grief and loss.
- Have students brainstorm ways to increase suicide prevention efforts in our school, community, and as a nation.
- Make a class donation/fundraiser to a suicide prevention organization, not "in the name of..." but rather "to prevent this from happening to others".

## **Some Commonly Asked Questions by Teens and Ideas for Appropriate Responses:**

**Why did he /she die by suicide?** We are never going to know the answer to that question as the answer has died with him/her. The focus needs to be on helping you with your thoughts and feelings and everyone working together to prevent future suicides rather than explaining "why".

**What method did they use to end their life?** Answer specifically with information as to the method if publicly known but do not go into explicit detail.

**Why didn't God stop him/her?** There are varying religious beliefs about suicide and you are all free to have your own beliefs.

**What should I say about him/her now that they have made the choice to die by suicide?** It is important that we remember the positive things about them and to respect their privacy and that of their family. Please be sensitive to the needs of their close friends and family members.

**Didn't he/she make a poor choice and is it okay to be angry with them?** They did make a very poor choice and research has found that many young people who survived a suicide attempt are very glad to be alive and never attempted suicide again. You have permission for any and all your feelings in the aftermath of suicide and it is okay to be angry with them.

**Isn't someone or something to blame for this suicide?** The suicide victim made a very poor choice and there is no one to blame. The decision to die by suicide involved every interaction and experience throughout the young person's entire life up until the moment they died and yet it did not have to happen. It is the fault of no one.

**How can I cope with this suicide?** It is important to remember what or who has helped you cope when you have had to deal with sad things in your life before. Please turn to the important adults in your life for help and share your feelings with them. It is important to maintain normal routines, proper sleeping and eating habits and to engage in regular exercise. Please avoid drugs and alcohol. Resiliency which is the ability to bounce back from adversity is a learned behavior. Everyone does the best when surrounded by friends and family who care about us and by viewing the future in a positive manner.

**What is an appropriate memorial to a suicide victim?** The most appropriate memorial is a living one such as contributions to support suicide prevention. The American Association of Suicidology cautions that permanent markers or memorials such as plaques or trees planted in memory of the deceased dramatize and glorify their actions. Special pages in yearbooks or school activities dedicated to the suicide victim are also not recommended as anything that glorifies the suicide victim will contribute to other teenagers considering suicide.

**How serious is the problem of youth suicide?** It is the third leading cause of death for teenagers and the eighth leading cause of death for all Americans.

**What are the warning signs of suicide?** The most common signs are the following: making a suicide attempt, verbal and written statements about death and suicide, fascination and preoccupation with death, giving away of prized possessions, saying goodbye to friends and family, making out wills, and dramatic changes in behavior and personality.

**What should I do if I believe someone to be suicidal?** Listen to them, support them and let them know that they are not the first person to feel this way. There is help available and mental health professionals such as counselors and psychologists have special training to help young people who are suicidal. Do not keep a secret about suicidal behavior and save a life by getting adult help as that is what a good friend does and someday your friend will thank you.

**How does the crisis hotline work?** We are very fortunate in to have a crisis hotline that is available 24 hours a day and manned by trained volunteers. The Marin Suicide Prevention Hotline number is 499-1100. There is also a national suicide hotline and that can be reached via 1-800-Suicide (800-784-2433) or 1-800 273-Talk (800-273-8255).

**How can I make a difference in suicide prevention?** Know the warnings signs, listen to your friends carefully, do not hesitate to get adult help and, remember that most youth suicides can be prevented. One person can make the difference and prevent a suicide!

**Where can I go for more information about preventing suicide?** Contact the American Association of Suicidology at [www.suicidology.org](http://www.suicidology.org) or the Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention Program at [www.yellowribbon.org](http://www.yellowribbon.org)