

Confronting Death In the School Family

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How to Use This Manual

This manual deals with four aspects of adding a tragedy component to your Crisis Response Team; Preparation, Implementation, Education, and Prevention. It covers issues you will face including grief lessons for both staff and students, and a curriculum plan dedicated to Suicide Prevention. The authors of this program recommend that each building in the school district have a manual on site, as every school building will need to establish its own Crisis Response Team.

Section 1: Developing Your Tragedy Component: Planning and Team Preparation

Discusses the need for crisis response planning and the roles of the Crisis Response Team members. It contains the information and gives reference to the forms your team will need to establish a Crisis Response Plan (see Section 5 pages 119-152). Team members should complete all forms referred to in this section.

Section 2: Implementing Your Tragedy Component: Guidelines and Tools for Specific Situations

Guides your Team through the seven crises that schools most often experience:

1. Student death due to an accident or illness
2. Student death by suicide
3. Student death due to homicide
4. HIV crisis in the school family
5. Staff death due to accident or illness
6. Staff death by suicide
7. Catastrophic death involving several students or staff members

Section 3: Suicide Education and Prevention

Centers on education and prevention of crisis-related issues including grief management, suicide and memorials.

Section 4: Suicide Prevention Curriculum

Helps educators and students realize that suicide is an unacceptable, tragic, irreversible act, get assistance for potential suicidal youth, and get in touch with their own feelings on death. It contains lesson ideas for particular subjects that relate to suicide education and prevention.

Section 5: Crisis Response Planning Worksheets

Contains 20 worksheets originally presented in Sections 2 and 3. These pages may be used as master copies during actual crisis situations.

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Student Funeral Home Visitation

After the tragic death of a classmate or staff member at school, many students may wish (and are encouraged) to go to the funeral home visitation, funeral, or wake service. The crisis team needs to take into consideration that students will need comfort and support at these functions and have an organized system of staff volunteers ready to serve.

NOTE: Some cultures and religions may be very unfamiliar to students. The crisis team should prepare students for the unfamiliar customs and practices of these cultures and/or religions and instruct about appropriate behavior at these functions.

The following is a sample form for a funeral home visitation:

Funeral Home Visitation Sign-up		
Name of Funeral Home: _____		
Date: _____	Date: _____	
Time: ____:____ ^{AM} / _{PM} - ____:____ ^{AM} / _{PM}	Time: ____:____ ^{AM} / _{PM} - ____:____ ^{AM} / _{PM}	
Date	Time	Staff Members
_____	____:____ ^{AM} / _{PM} to ____:____ ^{AM} / _{PM}	_____
_____	____:____ ^{AM} / _{PM} to ____:____ ^{AM} / _{PM}	_____
_____	____:____ ^{AM} / _{PM} to ____:____ ^{AM} / _{PM}	_____
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_____	____:____ ^{AM} / _{PM} to ____:____ ^{AM} / _{PM}	_____
_____	____:____ ^{AM} / _{PM} to ____:____ ^{AM} / _{PM}	_____

Guidelines for Schools After Suicide

When a student commits suicide, there is sometimes a fear that other students will follow the example and also attempt suicide. Given that such copycat suicides have occurred at several schools across the country, these concerns are justified. Schools should be concerned about their role in preventing such copycat behavior. The following is a list of suggestions for school personnel to consider:

- Consider how to respond to the death of a student or staff member before a suicide occurs. The Crisis Response Team should develop plans for different situations.
- If a suicide does occur, activate the Crisis Response Team's plan immediately.
- Give friends who were closest to the deceased additional time and help to process the suicide. Try to bring as many of them together to share what they know of the deceased and to help explain why he/she would do such a thing. This may help relieve guilt and build a sense of support for one another. Stress that the deceased would have been better off if he/she had talked about his/her problems. Encourage them not to make the same mistake.
- Plan a presentation about general suicide information for teachers and students.
- Provide an opportunity in the classroom for students and teachers to discuss their feelings about suicide. Make sure that everyone knows that what they are feeling is normal. It is important to create an environment that is open to, but not critical of, the feelings of others.
- Remember that it is not only the friends of the deceased who may be at high risk for copycat behavior. For students who have been troubled and depressed, suicide sometimes can reinforce feelings that the world consists only of problems and pain.
- Schedule a meeting with parents to discuss the suicide. They will likely want to ask questions, talk about their feelings and be advised about what to say to and watch for in their children. Inform parents about community resources that are available to them and their children.
- Inform teachers to watch students' stories, reports and drawings for clues of depression and suicidal thoughts.
- Provide opportunities in course offerings (e.g., Health Education, Social Studies, Home Economics) to teach positive problem-solving skills.
- Inform students that while guilt can be a natural feeling following a suicide, the suicide was the choice of the person who committed the act. No one else is responsible.

Classroom Suicide Discussion

In the event of a student suicide, shock will certainly be apparent. Students and staff may be unable to say anything about the event at all. They may show no outward emotion or appear overwhelmed with sorrow. The following guidelines will assist students and staff in being able to talk about the tragic event:

- Have teachers calmly read the announcement provided by the Crisis Response Team at the set time.
- Allow a minute for the news to sink in, then ask if anyone has any statements or questions. If questions cannot be answered, they will need to be written down and answered later.

Student Violence Advisory Committee

If your district does not have a Student Violence Advisory Committee, the Crisis Response Team should recommend that one be formed. Typically, these committees are commissioned by the board of education. They should include law enforcement professionals, members of the Crisis Response Team, parents, teachers, attorneys and students. The purpose of this committee is to:

1. Recommend that specific policies to deter violence be considered for adoption by the school board. These policies could be included in the parent/student handbook.
2. Develop an in-service training for all school personnel (including members of the board of education) concerning issues of safety, prevention of violence, death and bereavement. This training should be specifically geared toward establishing and maintaining a safe environment and allaying fears of the students, staff and community.

Special Action Plans Following a Homicide

The following suggested activities are aimed at helping school administrators handle the major concerns of students, staff and the community. It is suggested that these action plans be implemented if the homicide occurs on school property. In situations where fear and hysteria are high within the community, the following plans would also be appropriate.

Staff and Student Body

Emergency Staff Meeting – Before students arrive for school.

1. Explain the plan of action to staff.
2. Answer any pertinent questions.
3. Adjust time schedules due to student assembly.
4. Review the worksheet and directions for teachers to use in homeroom following the assembly.
5. Outline procedures for dismissing classes from homeroom for an abbreviated school day.

Student Assembly – Attended by the whole student body, if possible.

1. Clarify the situation.
2. Include presentations by law enforcement professionals on how to maintain a safe environment and lifestyle.
3. Begin discussion, led by school official or principal, on policies to ensure the safety of the school family.
4. Answer any pertinent questions from the student body that will not be covered in homeroom.
5. Announce rules and procedures that will be, or have been, implemented that are geared to ensuring safety. Such rules and procedures might include the following:
 - Zero tolerance for fighting.
 - A ban on gang signs, colors, jackets, etc.
 - School-wide dress code or uniforms.
 - Drive-by shooting drills (similar to tornado and fire drills).

Additional Situations and Scenarios

Tragedy Occurring on Campus

Imagine this – classes are changing and a student collapses suddenly in the hallway and dies. Or, perhaps a student collapses in Physical Education class and cannot be revived. In cases such as these and others like them, you may wish to consider the following procedures. *Whatever procedures you develop, it is extremely important that every adult staff member in the building be aware of and follow the procedure established by the Crisis Response Team.*

- Send/call for help (main office, passers by, etc.).
- Call EMS.
- The staff is to help move all students into their next class.
- Crisis Team reports immediately to main office.
- All staff on prep period are to report to the main office. Be prepared to sub for Crisis Team members or help with other tasks.
- Locate siblings and walk them to the office. Do not leave them alone without an adult.
- Keep students in classrooms until student or staff member in crisis is removed from premises.
- A prepared statement will be delivered to classrooms to inform staff and students and supply discussion guidelines.
- Log all procedures taken in order to make an accurate report to the school district attorney. This log will help you evaluate your response and better respond to a situation such as this if it occurs in the future. It may also help a neighboring school district experiencing this same type of crisis.
- Have a staff informational meeting immediately after school.
- Put the crisis plan into motion.

As previously stated, every adult staff member in your school building needs to be aware of these steps in dealing with this particular crisis. Also, if siblings of the student in crisis are in the same building, we strongly recommend that an adult accompany the student to the office. Never leave this student alone without a responsible adult.

Death of an Unpopular Student

One of the biggest mistakes the Crisis Response Team can make is underestimating the impact of the death of an unpopular student. An unpopular student may be defined as the school bully, a gang member, known drug dealer, etc. The response of the student body may be different, and may be something the Crisis Response Team cannot control. The school, however, must still show consistency in policy and procedure. If the school Crisis Response Team doesn't show consistency, they open themselves up for future problems. The death must be addressed, or the school can easily get into the "denial mode" which has plagued and continues to plague numbers of schools across the country.

Suicide Education and Prevention

This section centers on education and prevention of crisis-related issues, including grief management and the facts about suicide. It contains ideas, suggestions, and activities to help children overcome grief and loss. You will also find helpful information about the intervention process when dealing with a potentially suicidal person.

Grief Management

PAGE 85

- The Grief Cycle
- Proper Grief
- Needs of the Bereaved
- The School's Role In Grief Management
- Grief and Loss with Students: Suggestions for Teachers
- Classroom Activities for Dealing With Grief
- Reintegrating a Student Into the Classroom Following Loss

Suicide Facts and Myths

PAGE 90

- Suicide Facts
- Common Myths About Teen Suicide
- Suicide Warning Signs
- Intervening With a Potentially Suicidal Person
- School Protocol for Dealing With a Student Threatening Suicide

Survivors of Suicide

PAGE 96

- Grief Reactions of Suicide Survivors
- Helping Survivors of Suicide
- Helping Children Cope with Grief
- Specific Ideas for Elementary Student
- Distinguishing Between Normal and Abnormal Grief in Children
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