



# Helping Students Cope after a Suicide

After a suicide, students and staff may feel emotionally overwhelmed. This can make it difficult for the school to return to its primary focus of educating students and increase the risk of prolonged stress and even additional suicides. So, it is important for schools to provide students with appropriate opportunities to express their emotions and identify strategies for managing them.

## Strategies for Schools

With leadership from a school counselor, nurse, or mental health provider from the community, schools can implement the following strategies.

### Hold Meetings with Students in Small Groups

Meeting in small groups can provide students with the opportunity to get accurate information about suicide, express their feelings, and discuss practical coping strategies while also enabling adults to identify youth who may need additional attention. It is best to do this in a timely way rather than allow the emotional environment to escalate. The regular school schedule may need to be adjusted to allow time for these meetings. If possible, have counselors lead them. If the deceased person participated in sports, clubs, or other school activities, consider using the *first* practice, game, rehearsal, or meeting after the death to help students talk about their loss.

### Help Students Identify and Express Their Emotions

Acknowledge the wide range of feelings and experiences the students may have and emphasize the importance of being respectful of others. Some students may need help in identifying their emotions and reassurance that their feelings are okay. Also let them know that emotions may be experienced as physical symptoms, such as insomnia, stomach upset, or irritability.

### Share Practical Coping Strategies

Encourage students to think about specific things they can do when they start to feel intense emotions, such as worry or sadness, including:

- Doing simple relaxation exercises, such as taking three deep, slow breaths, counting to 10, or picturing themselves in a favorite calm and relaxing place.
- Engaging in favorite activities, exercising, or talking with a friend. Remind students that it is okay to do things to help themselves feel better and to take their mind off the stressful situation.
- Thinking about how they have coped with difficulties in the past and how they can use those same skills now.
- Talking with a trusted adult for support.
- Finding ways to remember their friend, such as writing a personal note to the family, doing something for another person in honor of their friend, or attending a memorial service.

Acknowledging students' need to express their feelings while helping them identify appropriate ways to do so can begin the process of returning their focus to their daily lives and responsibilities.



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## Talking Points for Students and Staff after a Suicide

Talking Points	What to Say
<p><b>Give accurate information about suicide.</b></p> <p>Suicide is a complicated behavior and not due to just one situation or event. Often, people who are thinking about suicide also have an underlying mental health disorder.</p> <p>Talking about suicide in a calm, straightforward manner does not put ideas into students' minds.</p>	<p><i>"Suicide is not caused by a single event, such as fighting with parents, a bad grade, or a relationship breakup."</i></p> <p><i>"In most cases, suicide is caused by mental health disorders like depression or substance abuse problems, which affect the way people feel and prevent them from thinking clearly. This is nothing to be ashamed of."</i></p> <p><i>"There are effective treatments to help people who have mental health disorders or substance abuse problems."</i></p>
<p><b>Address blaming and scapegoating.</b></p> <p>It is common to try to answer the question "Why?" by blaming others for the suicide.</p>	<p><i>"Blaming others for the suicide is wrong, and it's not fair. Doing that can hurt another person deeply."</i></p>
<p><b>Do not talk about the method.</b></p> <p>Talking about the method can create upsetting images and may increase the risk of contagion or imitative behavior by vulnerable youth. The focus should not be on how someone took their life but rather on how to cope with feelings such as sadness, loss, and anger.</p>	<p><i>"[Person's name] died by suicide. Let's focus on talking about the feelings we are left with after ____'s death and figure out the best way to manage them."</i></p>
<p><b>Address and normalize emotions, including anger.</b></p> <p>Feelings of sadness, numbness, and anger are normal responses to a suicide death. Accept students' expressions of anger at the deceased and help them understand such feelings are normal.</p>	<p><i>"It's okay to feel anger, sadness, and numbness. These feelings are normal."</i></p> <p><i>"You can be angry at someone's behavior and still deeply care about that person."</i></p>
<p><b>Address feelings of responsibility.</b></p> <p>Help students understand that suicide results from a complicated interaction of mental health distress and personal and environmental factors. Emphasize that no one is to blame for the person's death. Explain that many people are good at hiding their suffering and pain.</p>	<p><i>"This death is not your fault. Remember that suicide is not caused by any one event or situation but usually the result of mental health problems and other factors."</i></p> <p><i>"We cannot always see the signs because a person considering suicide may hide them well."</i></p>
<p><b>Encourage help seeking.</b></p> <p>Encourage students to seek help from a trusted adult if they—or a friend—feel depressed or suicidal.</p>	<p><i>"We are always here to help you through any problem. Who are the people you would go to if you or a friend were feeling worried or depressed or having thoughts of suicide? What trusted adult might you talk with?"</i></p>

Source: Adapted with permission from American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and Suicide Prevention Resource Center. (2011). *After a suicide: A toolkit for schools*. Newton, MA: Education Development Center, Inc.



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