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School Memorials After Suicide: Helpful or Harmful?

Suicide is the second leading cause of death for young people in Canada. School-aged Canadians are affected by the suicide death of a family member, friend, classmate, or peer.

Schools have a role in supporting their students. Suicide can not and should not be ignored. After a death by suicide impacts one or more members of their student population, what is the role of the school to support grieving students? Is there a role for memorial activities at school and, if so, what form should that take?

What Are the Needs of Students Affected by Suicide?

According to the Dougy Centre (2000), students who have been affected by suicide need:

- ◆ to understand that they are not alone
- ◆ to learn to manage anxiety that may result from the suicide
- ◆ to talk about why a person dies by suicide

Issues Surrounding School-Based Memorials

Contagion or copycat suicides are a significant concern for schools. Schools need to respond to grief and also must be alert to other students who may be vulnerable as a result of the death. A delicate balance must be struck that creates opportunities for students to grieve but that does not increase suicide risk for other school students by glorifying, romanticizing or sensationalizing suicide (Metzgar, 1995; Callahan et al., 1999).

Conducting memorial tributes in school settings is controversial. According to The Dougy Center (2000), school support efforts after a suicide death should be consistent with those efforts after any other form of death. Where memorial services are used for other deaths, according to the Dougy Center, such services should also be available after a suicide death. Other authors and organizations, including the National Association of School Psychologists, do not agree that memorial services in school settings after a suicide death has occurred are appropriate or helpful. Whole-school memorials may communicate suicide as an appropriate or desired response to vulnerable youth and are therefore not recommended.

Several authors suggest clear parameters and roles for schools. According to Callahan et al. (1999) and Oates (1993), rather than memorialize or glamorize the issue of suicide through memorial rituals, schools can provide leadership in channelling the energies of students into projects to help the living. Suggestions follow:

- ◆ volunteer on crisis hotlines
- ◆ tutor younger children
- ◆ serve as peer helpers in their school
- ◆ donate any funds collected to helping agencies or offer to assist the family with funeral expenses

Establishing permanent memorials is NOT recommended (Callahan et al., 1999); such activities may present youth with a constant invitation to consider suicide. Examples of activities NOT recommended include designing and installing a plaque, planting a tree, or dedicating a yearbook to the deceased youth.

Metzgar (1995) and Siehl (1990) caution that if schools elect to provide some form of memorial following a suicide death, all such efforts MUST include positive messaging. It should be made clear to students that there are other solutions to problems. It should be made clear to students that there are people to help.

How Prepared Are School Staff to Support Grieving Children?

Teachers, because of their expertise with children, are also often assumed by parents and professional helpers to have expertise in supporting grieving children. This is not necessarily the case. In a study by Mahon et al. (1999), while the majority of elementary/middle school or education students surveyed believed death related interventions belonged in schools, fewer than one-third of respondents described themselves as qualified to provide those interventions. In a study schools in Australia and England, Rowling and Holland (2000) found similar low percentages of staff were trained to provide assistance. Steps can be taken to create supportive social and cultural environments.

Recommendations for action include:

- ◆ provision of professional development opportunities
- ◆ existence of well-developed plans for managing critical incidents
- ◆ Boards of Education or other governing bodies have a fundamental role in supporting or legitimizing such efforts

Many school systems have developed policies and protocols to guide their staff after a death has impacted their students. Guidelines are available to help schools prepare for such an occurrence. Sample protocols are available at the Centre for Suicide Prevention library. Please contact

Centre for Suicide Prevention
#320 1202 Centre St. S.E.
Calgary, Alberta
Canada T2G 5A5
phone: (403) 245-3900
fax: (403) 245-0299
web: www.suicideinfo.ca



SIEC Resources

SIEC #990423

Adams, D. W., Corr, C. A., Davies, B., Deveau, E., de Veber, L. L., Martinson, I. M., et al. (1999). Children, Adolescents, and Death: Myths, Realities, and Challenges. *Death Studies, 23*, 443-463.

SIEC #990856

Callahan, J., Meripolski, D., Rosen, N., Sattlem, L., & Tierney, R. (1999). *Suicide Postvention Guidelines: Suggestions for Dealing with the Aftermath of Suicide in the Schools (2nd Edition)*. American Association of Suicidology: Washington.

SIEC #030507

Centre for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA. (2003). *A technical assistance sampler on school interventions to prevent youth suicide*. Los Angeles, CA: Author.

SIEC #980280

Goldman, L. (1996). *Breaking the Silence: A Guide to Help Children With Complicated Grief -- Suicide, Homicide, AIDS, Violence, and Abuse*. Washington: Taylor & Francis.

SIEC #000044

Klicker, R. L. (1999). *A Student Dies, A School Mourns: Dealing with Death and Loss in the School Community*. Ann Arbor, Braun-Brumfield.

SIEC #990417

Mahon, M. M., Goldberg, R. L., & Washington, S. K. (1999). Discussing death in the classroom: Beliefs and experiences of educators and education students. *Omega, 39(2)*, 99-121.

SIEC #950925

Metzgar, M. M. (1995). What do we do with the empty desk? In Adams, D. W., & Deveau, E. J. (Eds.) *Beyond the Innocence of Childhood: Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Death and Bereavement*. Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing Company, Inc., 167-180.

SIEC #020387

Oates, M. D. (1993). *Death in the School Community: A Handbook for Counselors, Teachers, and Administrators*. Alexandria: American Counseling Association.

SIEC #910141

Siehl, P. M. (1990). Suicide postvention: A new disaster plan – what a school should do when faced with a suicide. *The School Counselor, 38*, 52-57.

SIEC #030673

Taylor, B., Howard, J., & Cahill, H. (2000). *Educating for Life: A Guide for School-Based Responses to Preventing Self-Harm and Suicide*. Canberra: Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care.

SIEC #010861

The Dougy Center, The National Center for Grieving Children and Families (2000). *When Death Impacts Your School: A Guide for School Administrators*. Portland: Western Graphics & Data.

Pricing Information

You can order copies of these articles from the Centre for Suicide Prevention Library. Simply contact us by phone or e-mail.
Alberta: \$6.00 per document (subsidized by Alberta Health and Wellness)
Outside Alberta: \$10.00 per document
Please order by SIEC Number.

Additional Resources

Haney, C. A., Leimer, C., & Lowery, J. (1997). Spontaneous memorialization: Violent death and emerging mourning ritual. *Omega, 35(2)*, 159-171.

Lowton, K. & Higginson, I. J. (2003). Managing bereavement in the classroom: A conspiracy of silence? *Death Studies, 27*, 717-741.

Rowling, L. & Holland, J. (2000). Grief and school communities: The impact of social context, a comparison between Australia and England. *Death Studies, 24*, 35-50.

Web-Based Resources

Gould, M. *Suicide and the Media*. Retrieved May 14, 2004, from <http://www.afsp.org/research/gould.htm>

Jones, R. (2001). Suicide Watch. *American School Board Journal*. Retrieved May 14, 2004 from www.asbj.com/2001/05/0501coverstory.html

National Association of School Psychologists. *Memorial Activities Related to War, Terrorism, or Other Large-Scale Trauma: Suggestions for Schools*. Retrieved May 14, 2004 from <http://www.nasponline.org/NEAT/MemorialsWar.pdf>

Poland, S. *Suicide Intervention in the Schools: Information for School Personnel*. Retrieved May 14, 2004 from the National Mental Health and Education Center. http://www.naspcenter.org/teachers/gc_suicide.html

Additional SIEC Alerts that may be helpful

Alert 53 (December 2003) Suicide Among Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered Youth

Alert 45 (July 2001) A Suicide Attempt is Meaningful and Significant

Alert 39 (January 2000) Children and Suicide

Alert 38 (December 1999) Supporting Suicide Survivors

Alert 32 (October 1998) Considerations for School Suicide Prevention



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