

Suicide Contagion and Suicide on School Property

School Resources to Support Military-Connected Students is a project by the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness an applied research center at The Pennsylvania State University and is funded by the Department of Defense Education Activity Grant number HE1254-19-0009.

For more information click on the links below:

<https://schoolresources.militaryfamilies.psu.edu/>

<https://militaryfamilies.psu.edu/>

<https://www.psu.edu/>

<https://dodeagrants.org/>

Our goal is to provide school personnel with free, evidence-based resources to support military-connected students. This training is part of our *Suicide Prevention* series.

Important Reminders

Before starting this training, please read the items below carefully and check the box in front of each item to indicate your understanding.

- The following content discusses suicide and may be upsetting to some individuals.
- Follow all district, local, state, and federal regulations. This training is **NOT** intended to replace or override existing procedures or laws.

Introduction

What is the purpose of this training?

Although the circumstances accompanying student suicides are always unique, when preparing for a suicide event there are two conditions that require special consideration. One is the impact of contagion. The second is the effect of a suicide that occurs in a school building or on school grounds.

Objective

The goal of this training is to increase your confidence in your ability to:

Identify and implement best practices to prevent suicide contagion and respond to a completed suicide on school property.

How confident are you in your ability to do this now?

Please click on the link below to submit your response.

https://pennstate.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6Gp3iBHLvhcTluR?modulenumber=suicide33

Verify that you have completed each of the tasks below before proceeding with this training.

Answered the survey question in the link.

Clicked the arrow underneath the survey question to submit your response.

Recorded the ID number provided after you submitted your answer to the survey question. You will need it to complete the survey at the end of this training.

Research

What is most important for me to know?

What is suicide contagion? According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP), contagion occurs when one suicide death contributes to another. The phenomenon has a very low base-rate (approximately 1-5% of all suicide deaths), but, seemingly, it is more common in teenagers—caused in part by the influence of peers. According to Abrutyn & Mueller (2014; as cited in Erbacher et al., 2015), there are four important ways that suicide contagion may affect teenagers:

1. Suicide attempts (not just deaths) by family or friends trigger the development of suicidal thoughts and sometimes suicide attempts.
2. There are differential effects by gender. Boys may develop thoughts but not necessarily attempts. Girls, however, may develop both suicidal thoughts and attempts.
3. These effects may last from 1-6 years, and longer for girls.
4. Generally, peer suicide has more pronounced effects than family suicide. However, after an attempt by a family member, girls tend to be more susceptible than boys.

When managing a response to death by suicide, efforts to prevent contagion must always happen immediately (e.g., managing social media, rumors, and glamorizing the death). However, be aware that there are some students who can be triaged for increased support at the Tier 2 level. The AFSP recommends that students with the following characteristics should be monitored carefully for contagion (Marshall et al., 2018):

- History of suicide
- Dealing with stressful life events (e.g., death, divorce in family)
- Eyewitness to the death
- Family members or close friends of the deceased. Do NOT overlook siblings that attend other school buildings, teammates, classmates, and acquaintances of the deceased
- Received a phone call, text, or other communication from the deceased foretelling the suicide
- May have fought with or bullied the deceased

Suicide contagion may also be a significant risk if a death by suicide happens on school grounds. Although this event is incredibly painful for all faculty, staff, and students, there are important considerations that must be immediately addressed to effectively manage the situation. In the event of a suicide on school grounds, there are several steps that should be taken (Erbacher et al., 2015):

1. Call 911
2. Notify the school nurse and School Resource Officer (if applicable)
3. Institute lockdown procedures
4. Isolate the area
5. Do not allow staff or students exposure to the body
6. Do not touch or move ANYTHING until the police and coroner arrive so that law enforcement can investigate the manner of death fully.

Application

How might this look in my professional practice?

The goal of this training is to increase your confidence in your ability to:

Identify and implement best practices to prevent suicide contagion and respond to a completed suicide on school property.

Below is you will see a series of statements about responding to suicide contagion and suicide that occurs on school property. Identify the statements as true or false.

1. Girls are more likely to have suicidal thoughts and attempts than boys.

- a) True
- b) False

Correct answer: a) True

2. If there is a suicide on school grounds: call 911 even before parents.

- a) True
- b) False

Correct answer: a) True

3. Students that bullied a student who has died should be considered for Tier II.

- a) True
- b) False

Correct answer: a) True

4. Schools do not need to be concerned about suicide contagion.

- a) True
- b) False

Correct answer: b) False

Implementation

How can I effectively implement this content in my professional practice?

Please review the considerations below regarding potential implementation strategies, barriers to implementation, and collaboration strategies related to this content. This will help you coordinate the next steps as you begin to incorporate the information presented in this training into your professional practice.

This information can also be found on a handout that you will be able to download at the end of this training.

Implementation Strategies

- Ongoing training, meetings, and refinement of procedures are critical to manage both contagion and death by suicide on school grounds.
- Your crisis team should collaborate closely with those who know the friends, siblings, romantic partners/ interests, or bullies of the deceased to monitor for potential risk.
- Press releases, memorials, and announcements should be worded carefully out of respect for the family of the deceased and to manage contagion.

Overcoming Barriers to Implementation

- All members of the school faculty, administration, and staff should be aware of procedures for the event of a death by suicide (or suicide attempt) on school property to ensure proper care and to minimize panic. Lack of training and awareness may result in unintended, yet harmful, consequences.

Collaboration Strategies

- Staff, faculty, administrators, or students who were witnesses to a death by suicide should be referred for appropriate supportive services and monitored for indications of trauma or thoughts of self-harm.

- Ongoing community collaboration to leverage support for a death is critical for building capacity.

Resources

Are there any resources available to help me implement this content?

Click on the link below to download a tool that you can use to implement this content in your professional practice.

<https://documentcloud.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:f4a1b224-69de-4929-a356-b93a0457be05>

Feedback

How can I help improve this training?

The objective of this training was to increase your confidence in your ability to:

Identify and implement best practices to prevent suicide contagion and respond to a completed suicide on school property.

Answer the questions in the link below to let us know how well this training increased your confidence in your ability to accomplish this objective. Once you have answered all of the questions, click the blue arrow button underneath to submit your responses.

https://pennstate.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_d771mLr9ZgW3kyx?modulenummer=suicide33

Verify that you have completed each of the tasks below.

Answered all of the survey questions above. You may have to scroll to see all of the questions.
Clicked the arrow underneath the last survey question to submit your responses.

Additional Readings

Where can I learn more about this content?

The following resources were used to create this training. If you would like more information about the information presented in this training, we encourage you to start here.

Arbutyn, S., & Mueller, A. S. (2014). Are Suicidal Behaviors Contagious in Adolescence?: Using Longitudinal Data to Examine Suicide Suggestion. *American sociological review*, 79(2), 211–227.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122413519445>

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. (2020, November 02). Retrieved November 06, 2020, from <https://afsp.org/>

Erbacher, Terri & Singer, Jonathan & Poland, Scott. (2015). *Suicide in schools: A practitioner's guide to multi-level prevention, assessment, intervention, and postvention.*

Marshall, Moutier, Rosenblum, Miara, Posner, Poland, & Singer (2018). *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools* Second Edition Suicide Prevention Resource Center. <https://www.sprc.org/resources-programs/after-suicide-toolkit-schools>.

Thank You!

Thank you for taking the time to complete this training. If you have any questions or comments, please email us at schoolresources@psu.edu.

Proceed to the next training

Click on the link below to move on to the next training titled *Universal Supports After a Student Suicide (Tier I Response)*. In this training, you will increase your confidence in your ability to assist the school in taking appropriate action in the first 24 hours after a student suicide.

https://learning.militaryfamilies.psu.edu/school-resources/modules/suicide_34-universal-supports-after-a-student-suicide-tier-i-response_201022/

Return to the module directory

Click on this button to return to the module directory.

<https://schoolresources.militaryfamilies.psu.edu/modules/>