

Universal Supports After a Student Suicide (Tier I Response)

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.

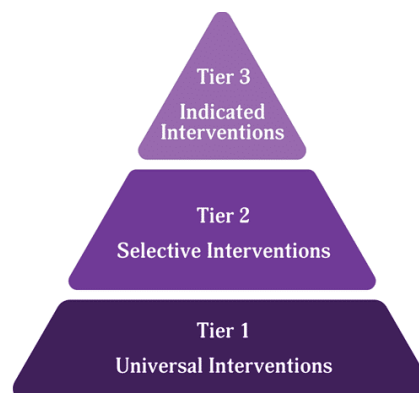
- The following content discusses suicide and may be upsetting to some individuals.
- Follow all district, local, state, and federal regulations. This training is **NOT** intended to replace or override existing procedures or laws.

Introduction

What is the purpose of this training?

Postvention efforts can be conceptualized in a multi-tiered systems of service (MTSS) framework (Erbacher, Singer, & Poland, 2015). While the MTSS perspective is most commonly employed as a method for improving instruction and academic results for students, it can also be effective in a crisis response situation. MTSS provides a framework for addressing all levels of need for students and staff, so that appropriate care can be provided for the entire school community.

See below for an overview of the three-tier model. This training will review best practices for tier 1 postvention after a student suicide.



Level of Service:

Tier 1

Target Population

School Community

Suggested Procedures and Interventions

1. Death announcement read in faculty/staff meeting and in class
2. Provide an opportunity to ask questions/dispel rumors/learn about funeral arrangements.
3. Psychoeducation about suicide and how to get help.
4. May include parent/community education meetings.

Level of Service:

Tier 2

Target Population

Those in Need of Additional Support

Suggested Procedures and Interventions

1. Small group or individual support from counselors.
2. Not therapy, but rather normalization of emotions and reactions.

Level of Service:

Tier 3

Target Population

Those at Higher Risk

Suggested Procedures and Interventions

1. Referrals for individual therapy support.
2. For students, possible coordination with parents.

Objective

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

Assist the school in taking appropriate action in the first 24 hours after a student suicide.

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=suicide34

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?

Immediate Response to Death by Suicide (The First 24-Hours)

Immediate, decisive, and careful response is needed in the event of a student (or school personnel) death by suicide. Throughout this section, best practices in the immediate response to suicide are presented, and all relevant Crisis Response procedures are embedded into the content. Crisis Response as well as Erbacher and colleagues (2015) suggest the following broad action steps for notifying key personnel.

Step 1: Notify the principal immediately.

The principal then convenes the Crisis Team and school resource officer (if applicable), the District/Area Superintendent's Office, and other school principals in the immediate area. The principal designates a person to contact the appropriate Public Affairs contact.

Step 2: Notify the staff via telephone tree or schedule a faculty meeting as soon as possible.

Present the facts to the faculty. Contact itinerant resource educators and non-school- based members of the team who provide additional support.

Step 3: Hold a Crisis Team meeting.

to appoint counselors, support staff, parent contacts, and hall monitors. Relieve team members from their normal duties for three to five days if possible. Review the crisis management plan with other schools that may be involved in the crisis.

Step 4: Verify facts.

Make sure you verify all of the facts: who is deceased? When did the death occur? Where, why, how did it happen? Etc.

One staff person should be designated as the only person to contact the family, express condolences, and ask how the school can assist them.

Verify whether or not the family gives PERMISSION to communicate openly about the cause of death. Respect the family's wishes.

If the parents are unreachable, an administrator should verify cause of death with law enforcement, coroner, or medical examiner.

Step 5: Brief the faculty and dispel rumors before they meet with students.

A comprehensive, planned statement should be created. This statement is discussed (with examples) below.

It is important to consider that depending on the nature of the incident, various levels of responses may be more appropriate than others. According to NASP's PREPaRE model there are four potential levels of response, including:

Minimal Response

Small enough crisis that staff can respond during the course of their daily jobs and responsibilities. Examples would include the death by suicide of a relative of a student that the majority of the school community did not know personally.

Building-Level Response

Small enough crisis that the building does not require additional assistance, but some staff may need to leave their normal duties to respond. This may be appropriate when there is a suicide by a student or staff member that was known to only one grade level or small group or was new to the community.

District-Level Response

Affects many of the students AND staff and requires assistance of more school district members. This may be appropriate in the event of the death of a well-known student who has siblings of varied ages across the district.

Regional Response

Requires the assistance of the community. An example may be a train suicide, or one that involves community hospitals, police, or other first responders across the community.

Notification of Students

Notification of students should not occur until after your Crisis Response Team has taken all necessary steps above to ensure you are prepared for the student response, have dispelled any staff misunderstanding, reviewed procedures with teachers and staff, and verified all facts. Generally speaking, it is NOT recommended that students be notified of ANY death by public announcement system. Statements of fact should be read in all classrooms at the same time, so that all students receive the same facts at the same time. Teachers and staff should be prepared to read a statement and answer questions truthfully about the facts pertaining to the suicide, avoiding colloquialisms or inaccurate information about mental health issues.

Below are various sample statements that may be useful to reference should a student death occur. A handout that includes these statements will be provided at the end of this training.

When the death has been ruled a suicide.

It is with great sadness that I have to tell you that one of our students, _____, has taken [his/her] own life. All of us want you to know that we are here to help you in any way we can.

A suicide death presents us with many questions that we may not be able to answer right away. Rumors may begin to circulate, and we ask that you not spread rumors you may hear. We'll do our best to give you accurate information as it becomes known to us.

Suicide is a very complicated act. It is usually caused by a mental disorder such as depression, which can prevent a person from thinking clearly about their problems and how to solve them. Sometimes these disorders are not identified or noticed; in other cases, a person with a disorder will show obvious symptoms or signs. One thing is certain: there are treatments that can help. Suicide should never, ever be an option.

Each of us will react to _____'s death in our own way, and we need to be respectful of each other. Feeling sad is a normal response to any loss. Some of you may not have known _____ very well and may not be as affected, while others may experience a great deal of sadness. Some of you may find you're having difficulty concentrating on your schoolwork, and others may find that diving into your work is a good distraction.

We have counselors available to help our school community deal with this sad loss and to enable us to understand more about suicide. If you'd like to talk to a counselor, just let your teachers know. Please remember that we are all here for you.

When the cause of death is unconfirmed.

It is with great sadness that I have to tell you that one of our students, _____, has died. All of us want you to know that we are here to help you in any way we can.

The cause of death has not been determined by the authorities. We are aware that there has been some talk about the possibility that this was a suicide death.

Rumors may begin to circulate, and we ask that you not spread rumors since they may turn out to be inaccurate and can be deeply hurtful and unfair to as well as their family and friends. We'll do our best to give you accurate information as it becomes known to us.

Each of us will react to _____'s death in our own way, and we need to be respectful of each other. Feeling sad is a normal response to any loss. Some of you may not have known _____ very well and may not be as affected, while others may experience a great deal of sadness. Some of you may find you're have difficulty concentrating on your schoolwork, and others may find that diving into your work is a good distraction.

We have counselors available to help our school community deal with this sad loss and to enable us to understand more about suicide. If you'd like to talk to a counselor, just let your teachers know. Please remember that we are all here for you.

When the family has requested that the cause of death not be disclosed.

It is with great sadness that I have to tell you that one of our students, _____, has died. All of us want you to know that we are here to help you in any way we can. The family has requested that information about the cause of death not be shared at this time.

We are aware that there has been some talk about the possibility that this was a suicide death. Rumors may begin to circulate, and we ask that you not spread rumors since they may turn out to be inaccurate and can be deeply hurtful and unfair to _____ as well as their family and friends. We'll do our best to give you accurate information as it becomes known to us.

Since the subject has been raised, we do want to take this opportunity to remind you that suicide, when it does occur, is a very complicated act. It is usually caused by a mental disorder such as depression which can prevent a person from thinking clearly about his or her problems and how to solve them. Sometimes these disorders are not identified or noticed; in other cases, a person with a disorder will show obvious symptoms or signs. One thing is certain: there are treatments that can help. Suicide should never, ever be an option.

Each of us will react to _____'s death in our own way, and we need to be respectful of each other. Feeling sad is a normal response to any loss. Some of you may not have known _____ very well and may not be as affected, while others may experience a great deal of sadness. Some of you may find you're have difficulty concentrating on your schoolwork, and others may find that diving into your work is a good distraction.

We have counselors available to help our school community deal with this sad loss and to enable us to understand more about suicide. If you'd like to talk to a counselor, just let your teachers know. Please remember that we are all here for you.

Student Notifications – What NOT to say

Teachers and staff will be approached with questions, a range of emotional responses, and curiosity about what happened to the deceased. Generally, teachers and other school professionals have good intentions regarding how they respond to students, but there are some topics they should avoid. Training for teachers and other personnel who are delivering the student notifications should contain a sense of what NOT to say as well as what TO say. Please refer to the following recommendations and include them as part of a pre-briefing before student notifications occur.

Debriefing

Debriefing is an important step at the end of the first day. This provides an opportunity to care for your school professionals who have had a difficult day supporting others. The meeting can help to provide closure and share important information. Debriefing meetings should include the following (Erbacher et al., 2015):

- Verbal appreciation of the staff.
- A review of the day's challenges and bright moments, sharing of experiences, and an opportunity to ask questions.
- Updated information (as needed) related to the death or funeral arrangements.
- Discussion of the schedule and determination of additional support needs for the following day for students and staff.
- Checking in with staff to assess who may be in pain, and making appropriate referrals for support as needed.
- Reminding staff of the importance of self-care strategies.
- Reminding staff to document crisis response efforts for future planning and evaluation.

Application

How might this look in my professional practice?

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

Assist the school in taking appropriate action in the first 24 hours after a student suicide.

Determine the appropriate level of response for the following scenarios:

An eighth-grade girl entered her home to find her middle school brother dead by gunshot wound. She called, talked to, and texted many of her friends about what she had seen. By the time the school was notified and had people in place to help the next school day, the news was still not releasing that the death was a suicide. Most grade levels at the middle school were impacted, but this did not seem to affect the elementary and high schools. Students assumed suicide, even though they all said they had no reason to believe the student was suicidal (there were no warning signs observed). On the other hand, there was plenty of blame and the next day another student made a suicidal comment on one of the memorial

Facebook pages that was brought to the administration's attention and addressed. All the interventions occurred at the middle school, but did involve staff from other schools in the district to help with triage.

1. What is the appropriate level of response in this scenario?

- a) Minimal Response
- b) Building-Level Response
- c) District-Level Response
- d) Regional Response

Correct Answer: c) District-Level Response

Following Hurricane Maria, in Puerto Rico, most schools operated under difficult conditions and required an extensive recovery effort towards normal operations. Many students were displaced at least temporarily, and may have changed schools (to brick-and-mortar or virtual schooling) in order to meet requirements. Even after schools reopened, calendars had to be modified and supports such as free meal waivers from the USDA for all students were necessary.

2. What is the appropriate level of response in this scenario?

- a) Minimal Response
- b) Building-Level Response
- c) District-Level Response
- d) Regional Response

Correct Answer: d) Regional Response

There is a student in first grade whose mother has a terminal illness. This student's class is aware of her illness, which she explained using a storybook during the last time she volunteered in the classroom. The class sends her cards while she is in the hospital. When she dies later in the school year, the students are told, and a counselor is assigned to support the students in the classroom related to the death of a classroom volunteer as well as a classmate's mother.

3. What is the appropriate level of response in this scenario?

- a) Minimal Response
- b) Building-Level Response
- c) District-Level Response
- d) Regional Response

Correct Answer: a) Minimal Response

A Navy ship sunk. Several sailors (including parents of district students) were injured—but alive—and one was missing, presumed dead. This one sailor had students at two schools that were immediately impacted. The other students in the schools were worried that their parent could have died. Community supports were utilized for these students and for other students who had parents onboard during the accident.

4. What is the appropriate level of response in this scenario?

- a) Minimal Response
- b) Building-Level Response
- c) District-Level Response
- d) Regional Response

Correct Answer: b) Building-Level Response

Next, identify whether the responses from school personnel are appropriate or inappropriate in the following scenarios.

1. An announcement of a student death is made over the loudspeaker in order to ensure that all students receive the information at the same time.

- a) Appropriate

b) Inappropriate

Correct Answer: b) Inappropriate

2. The classroom teacher reads a prepared statement to the class. When asked about how the student died, the teacher said that while it is natural to want to know the details, she would not be sharing that information because the student's parents don't want it to be shared.

a) Appropriate

b) Inappropriate

Correct Answer: a) Appropriate

3. The classroom teacher reads a prepared statement to the class. When students in her room began crying, she encouraged her students to remember that their friend was now at peace.

a) Appropriate

b) Inappropriate

Correct Answer: b) Inappropriate

4. A student expresses guilt over making fun of the student the week prior to his death. The classroom teacher says, "I think a lot of people wonder what they could have done differently after a person dies, and you might have some feelings about what you wish you could change. I want to remind everyone that no one's actions caused this death, even if it feels that way."

a) Appropriate

b) Inappropriate

Correct Answer: a) Appropriate

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 handling student notifications of deaths and community-level crises.
- 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. Always follow the expressed wishes of the family, whether you agree with their decision or not.

Overcoming Barriers to Implementation

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

Collaboration Strategies

- Provide avenues for discussion and consultation for all school personnel so that they can get assistance when faced with questions, reactions, or circumstances that are confusing for them.
- Always be sure to check-in with school personnel about their own feelings and reactions and offer support if needed.

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:8a46bb73-4abf-4441-99a9-f55ace5f6698>

Feedback

How can I help improve this training?

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

Assist the school in taking appropriate action in the first 24 hours after a student suicide.

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?modulenumber=suicide34

Below you can find other supplemental materials that may be helpful for you in your professional practice.

<https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/6f351b1d-5ae1-4308-855c-eacec363cfc2/downloads/08%20Checklist%20of%20Crisis%20Team%20Tasks.pdf?ver=1600961345541>

http://mces.org/PDFs/SuicideLossBook_YouthEdition.pdf

<https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/6f351b1d-5ae1-4308-855c-eacec363cfc2/downloads/08%20Helping%20Grieving%20Students%20.pdf?ver=1600961345541>

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.

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

PREPaRE Training Curriculum. (n.d.). Retrieved October 27, 2020, from

<https://www.nasonline.org/professional-development/prepare-training-curriculum>.

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 *Students that Require Some Additional Support After a Student Suicide (Tier II Response)*. In this training, you will increase your confidence in your ability to identify and support students that may need additional help at the tier II level after a student suicide.

https://learning.militaryfamilies.psu.edu/school-resources/modules/suicide_35-students-that-require-some-additional-support-after-a-student-suicide-tier-ii-response_201022/

Return to the module directory

Click on this button to return to the module directory.

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