

Suicide Postvention

Suggested Procedures During the Aftermath of a Student Suicide

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Outline

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- Special Considerations
- Suicide Protocol
- Conclusion

Introduction

- In 2005, suicide was the third leading cause of death among youth aged 15-24.
- Females have a higher rate of suicide attempts, yet males are five times as likely to die by suicide.
- Other factors associated with higher rates of suicide include age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and access to firearms.
- It is estimated that six people are directly affected by a completed suicide. These individuals are considered “Survivors of Suicide.”

American Association of Suicidology (2005); Brock, S.E., Sandoval, J., & Hart, S.R. (2006)

Introduction

- Survivors typically experience an array of emotional reactions:
 - Shock, guilt, despair, denial, anger, disbelief, pain, shame, hopelessness, rejection, confusion, and self-blame.
- Suicide is associated with stigma, guilt, denial, and limited social support.
- Survivors are at an increased risk of suicide contagion.

American Association of Suicidology (2007); Parrish & Tunkle (2005); Debski, Spadafore, Jacon, Poole, & Hixson (2007); Sakinofsky (2007).

Definition of Terms

- Suicide Postvention
 - Procedures aimed at identifying those affected by a suicide in order to decrease negative reactions and increase adaptive coping.
- Survivors of Suicide
 - Individuals directly affected by a completed suicide. Affected individuals include: family members, classmates, friends, teachers, girl/boyfriend.

American Association of Suicidology (2005); Brock et. al (2005); Parrish et. al (2005).

Special Considerations

Special factors that need to be considered when implementing postvention services.

- **Suicide Contagion**

- Increase of suicidal behaviors shortly after a completed suicide typically due to imitation.
- To decrease contagion, sensationalism, glorification, and romanticization should be avoided.

Special Considerations

- Assessing the Need For and Providing Support
 - Physical, emotional, and temporal proximity to the suicide act.
 - Specific attention should be given to the siblings of the suicide victim.

Parrish et. al (2005); Sakinofsky (2007)

Special Considerations

- Social Stigma
 - Survivors may be shunned or avoided by friends and/or family members because of an inability to comfort survivors or in fear of contagion.
 - Survivors may be reluctant to seek out help from mental health professionals, complicating the bereavement process.

Parrish et. al (2005); Brock (2002)

Special Considerations

- Providing Information
 - Information should be provided to facilitate understanding and clarification.
 - Follow the students schedule
 - Present information simultaneously as soon as possible.
 - Sensalization, glorification, and romanticization of the suicide act should be avoided to alleviate contagion.

Brock et al. (2006); Brock (2002); Debski et. al (2005)

Suicide Postvention Protocol

- Goals
 - Assist survivors with the grief process
 - Identification and referral of students at-risk for psychopathology
 - Reducing contagion
 - Providing appropriate information
- Are postvention services always needed?

Suicide Postvention Protocol

- Verify the death has occurred
- Mobilize the crisis intervention team
- Assess the suicide's impact and level of services needed
- Notify other school personnel
- Contact the family of the suicide victim
- Determine what and how to share information
- Intervention services
- Memorials and funerals
- Dealing with the media
- Debriefing

Suicide Postvention Protocol

- Verify that a death has occurred
 - Police or sheriff departments, hospitals, family of suicide victim, coroner's office
 - Label the death a suicide once it's been officially determined.
 - Medical examiner or coroner's office.
- Mobilize the crisis team
 - School Psychologists are the Crisis Intervention Coordinator
 - Identify individuals in need of postvention services
 - Facilitate community based mental health support

Suicide Postvention Protocol

- Assess the suicides impact and level of services needed
 - Physical Proximity
 - Emotional Proximity
 - Temporal Proximity
- Other factors that contribute to the level of services needed:
 - When, by whom, and where the death took place

Suicide Postvention Protocol

- Notify other involved school personnel
 - District office
 - Other potentially affected school sites
 - Staff members at the school affected by the death
- Contact the family of suicide victim
 - Should be made in person, within 24 hours
 - Offer empathy, postvention services, and identify others affected by death

Suicide Postvention Protocol

- Determine what and how to share information
 - Before death is classified a suicide
 - After death is classified a suicide

Goal: To provide factual information without glorifying or vilifying suicide victim. Rumors need to be dispelled as soon as possible.

- Talking to students
 - Factual information delivered simultaneously in classrooms or small groups
- Talking to parents
 - By letter
 - Parent meeting

Suicide Postvention Protocol

- Intervention services
 - Initiated within 24 hours
 - School Based: Walk-thoughts, drop-in counseling, individual/group counseling, classroom activities/presentations, parent/staff meetings.
 - Community Based: Outside mental health referrals for students needing psychotherapeutic support.

High-risk students and level of support will be contingent on the impact of the suicide on the school site.

Suicide Postvention Protocol

- Memorials and funerals
 - Do...
 - Encourage affected students to attend the funeral service
 - Develop suicide prevention procedures, including better ways to cope with emotion.
 - Don't...
 - Send all students to funeral
 - Cancel or change the school schedule
 - Permit physical memorials on school grounds
 - Fly flag at half-staff, have assemblies or yearbook dedications for victim, or moments of silence.

Suicide Postvention Protocol

- Dealing with the media
 - Do...
 - Work with press to downplay the suicide act
 - Story on inside of paper
 - Provide information about community resources
 - Don't...
 - Include a picture or “suicide” in caption
 - Provide details about the suicide
 - Romanticize the death
- Debriefing
 - Process emotional reactions
 - Evaluate performance
 - Plan for future postvention services

Conclusion

- In suicide postvention, “one size does not fit all.”
- Suicide Prevention is key.
- *“Postvention is prevention for the next Generation!”*

Questions



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