

After a Suicide: Helping Students Cope

Source: National Association of School Psychologists

The aftermath of a youth suicide is a sad and challenging time for a community. However, during this time, you can be a powerful role model for students. Here are some tips for how to respond to students:

- It is important to normalize and validate feelings such as anger, sadness, shock, fear or confusion. It is certainly acceptable to show your own emotions to students.
- There will likely be a wide range of emotions. Respect that some students may not want to verbalize their feelings, some may want to mourn openly, and still others may not be significantly affected.
- When talking with students, please state that the student died by suicide (NOT committed suicide or successfully attempted).
- To avoid contagion (copycat) situations, give students the facts, but do not attempt to explain details or why the student ended his/her life. Doing so may communicate to vulnerable students that death is a way to obtain incredible amounts of attention.
- Do not allow students to romanticize or view suicide as an acceptable means to deal with problems. Focus instead on helping students cope with their own grief. Remind students that there are positive coping strategies (talking to a trusted friend or adult, writing thoughts or feelings, exercise, rest) for life's difficulties and that there are resources for anyone contemplating suicide.
- One of the most precious gifts you can give a grieving teen is the gift of your presence.
- Do not feel you must give advice or suggestions. It is acceptable to say, "I don't know, or I don't know the answer, or "This is hard on us all".
- Do not attempt to impose your explanation on why this has happened.
- Do not attempt to reassure that everything is okay.
- Do not tell them you know how he/she feels (because you probably don't).
- Be willing to say nothing.
- Do not lecture or use well-intentioned clichés that minimize or take away from a student's need to mourn. For example, do not say things like "time heals all wounds."

Commonly asked questions and appropriate responses:

Why did he/she die by suicide? We are never going to know the answer to that question as the answer has died with him/her. The focus needs to be on helping you with your thoughts and feelings and everyone working together to prevent future suicides rather than explaining "why".

What method did they use to end their life? If you have factual information, answer specifically as to the method, such as he shot himself or she died by hanging. However, do not go into explicit details such as what was the type of gun or rope used or the condition of the body etc. (DCSD protocol attempts to honor the wishes of parents when releasing specific information.)

What should I say about him/her now that they have made the choice to die by suicide? It is important that we remember the positive things about them and to respect their privacy and that of their family. Please be sensitive to the needs of their close friends and family members.

Didn't he/she make a poor choice and is it okay to be angry with them? They did make a very poor choice and research has found that many young people who survived a suicide attempt are very glad to be alive and never attempted suicide again. You have permission for any and all your feelings in the aftermath of suicide and it is okay to be angry with them.

Isn't someone or something to blame for this suicide? The suicide victim made a poor choice and there is no one to blame. The decision to die by suicide involved every interaction and experience throughout the young person's entire life up until the moment they died and yet it did not have to happen. It is the fault of no one.

How can I deal with this suicide? It is important to remember what or who has helped you cope when you have had to deal with sad things in your life before. Please turn to the important adults in your life for help and share your feelings with them. It is important to maintain normal routines, proper sleeping and eating habits and to engage in regular exercise. Please avoid using drugs and alcohol to cope with this. Resiliency, which is the ability to bounce back from adversity, is a learned behavior. Everyone does the best when surrounded by friends and family who care about us and by viewing the future in a positive manner.

What is an appropriate memorial to a suicide victim? The most appropriate memorial is a living one such as a scholarship fund or contributions to support suicide prevention. The American Association of Suicidology cautions that permanent markers or memorials such as plaques or trees planted in memory of the deceased dramatize and glorify their actions. Special pages in yearbooks or school activities dedicated to the suicide victim are also not recommended as anything that glorifies the suicide victim will contribute to other teenagers considering suicide.

What are the warning signs of suicide? The most common signs are the following: making a suicide attempt, verbal and written statements about death and suicide, fascination and preoccupation with death, giving away of prized possessions, saying goodbye to friends and family, and dramatic changes in behavior and personality.

What should I do if I believe someone to be suicidal? Do not minimize their feelings or problems. Listen to them, support them, believe them, and let them know that they are not the first person to feel this way. Do not keep a secret about suicidal behavior. There is help available--mental health professionals such as counselors and psychologists have special training to help young people who are suicidal. It is important to stay with the person until they are connected to their support system. If you feel someone is in imminent danger, call 911.

Helpful National Resources:

1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433)

1-800-TALK (1-800-273-8255)

1-877-542-SAFE (encourages students to voice concerns & take responsibility for keeping selves/others safe.)

Helpful Local Resources:

First Link (24-hour hotline): Dial 211 or 701-235-7335

Mental Health America of North Dakota: 701-255-3692 during business hours.

List of grief resources/sessions/classes: www.bismarckschools.org/Page/2107, "Crisis Resources in Bismarck".