

Suicide Postvention

How to Begin a Suicide Response Plan



Suicide Postvention If a Suicide Occurs

Roadmap for Healing in K-12 School Communities

STEP 1

1. Identify key resources within school first, and the individuals attached to these.
2. Form a Postvention Team for suicide loss. (If school has a crisis management team already in place, the Postvention Team may be linked to it.)
3. Familiarize the new Postvention Team with this complete Postvention Framework and links to resources within this document.
4. Identify a point person within the school who will receive communication about offers to deliver aid from outside the school.
5. Identify a point person to respond to inquiries about the suicide from within and from outside of the school; identify a back up point person in case of the other’s absence or inability to take on this task.
6. Identify outside resources, what specific services these entities can offer, and agree how school will acquire aid when needed, such as mobile crisis units, local grief counselors, Community Services Board/Behavioral Health Agency, first responder chaplains, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP).
7. For instances when it will be applicable, investigate what the military and veteran family services can offer, like Department of Veteran Services and the Veterans Administration and inquire about suicide prevention coordinator contacts for [resources and free materials](#).
8. Contact Community Services Board/Behavioral Health Agency to connect with Prevention Services for free prevention and postvention materials to keep on-hand for students and staff. [Contacts](#)

STEP 2

1. As team plans crisis responses, recognize specific complexities addressing a suicide death, starting with educating the team about [suicide facts](#).
2. Consider to what extent your school is trauma-informed, and if there are gaps, inquire about Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) training from [Community Services Board](#)/Behavioral Health Agency or Department of Health.
3. Model using safe language about suicide as a team. [Guide](#)
4. For public schools, introduce Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) guidelines (private schools will also find helpful information within VDOE [Guidelines](#))
5. Educate team about contagion and how to avoid it. [Guidance on page 31](#):
6. Flush out an aftercare plan for staff and teachers and familiarize team with Employee Assistance Program if it is part of the benefits package.
7. Formulate a plan of action/response for when a student suicide happens over a weekend and social media has announced the death prior to school hours the following week. [Online Postvention Guide](#)

STEP 3

1. Identify the cultural/spiritual differences within the school community to prepare culturally sensitive responses.
2. Plan how the school will communicate and who will communicate directly with the family of the student lost to suicide.
3. Plan standards for memorials. [Guidance on page 33](#)
4. Identify staff training needs in Youth Mental Health First Aid (MHFA), Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST), safeTALK, Collaborative Assessment and Management of Suicidality (CAMS), or another evidence-based training. [Training Summaries](#)
5. Connect with Community Services Board/Behavioral Health Agency or Department of Health for free or low cost training opportunities.

Post-Suicide Response with Suggested Timeframes

Please Note:
If you are referring to this framework in the immediate aftermath of a suicide, page 2 is devoted to your needs.

If a suicide occurs, please evaluate your own ability (emotionally and practically) to carry out assigned tasks. It is good practice to establish a back-up point person on the Postvention Team for the higher profile tasks. Please seek support if you are struggling with a student suicide.

Need to talk? **Please call, text, or chat 988.**

This roadmap, summarized here and detailed on the following pages, is brought to you by the Virginia Suicide Prevention Interagency Advisory Group (SPIAG). It is intended to help school administrators (public and private) and professional helpers who are called upon to aid in the healing of a school community after a student suicide. Ideally, the journey through this roadmap begins with a school establishing a Postvention Team and a detailed plan (or during annual evaluation of a current one). In the event of a suicide, anyone who needs a quick reference with secure links to resources and best practices (including VDOE Guidelines) should have access to this roadmap. Share widely. Note there is a section devoted to longer-term healing which may include revision of the school’s postvention plan.

Planning for the Possibility of Suicide

Step 1 ➔ Step 2 ➔ Step 3

Helps a school plan ahead in 3 organized steps at a pace of the schools’ choosing.

If a Suicide Occurs

Day 1 ➔ 72 Hours ➔ Week 1-2

A quick tip sheet to support staff in times of distress; prioritizing actions with a suggested timeframe with linked details.

The Months Following a Suicide

1 Month ➔ 4 Months ➔ Long Term

Longer term school community care, especially regarding anniversaries and communication with vulnerable students and staff.

Revisit & Adjust Response Plan Using Lessons Learned.

DAY 1

IF A SUICIDE OCCURS

1. Confirm death through established channels before reaching out to family. Condolences to the family (through appointed administrator); inquire what the family will allow the school to share about the student's death.
2. Convene the Postvention Team and prepare a statement. [After a Suicide Toolkit pages 5-12](#)
3. Notify about the death in small groups preferably with counselor present using a prepared statement from the Postvention Team: meetings with close friends, teacher, and others in the student's inner circle and supply tips on responding to those grieving. [Guidance on Providing Support](#)
4. If the school is in the public school system, the superintendent and division-wide crisis coordinator should be informed of the school response.
5. Assign a member of the Postvention Team to monitor social media accounts after suicide for vulnerability and to make sure resources are posted, including 988. [Guidance on page 34](#)
6. Identify other central office or school mental health professionals or other division staff that can assist in the crisis response.
7. Email a letter to school community expressing sympathy, resources, any known plans: A suggested template and guide: [Sample Death Notice](#)
8. Social media guidelines go with the sympathy email letter as an attachment.
9. Include a pdf on how to talk to youth about trauma and grief: [A suggested guide](#)
10. Do not inadvertently simplify, glamorize, or romanticize the students' death because it may contribute to contagion. Review and utilize safe messaging guidelines:
11. If applicable, connect family with [Tragedy Assistance Program for military families](#).
12. Refer to SPRC's [After a Suicide Toolkit](#) for in-depth guidance.

FIRST 72 HOURS

1. Instructors should communicate a plan for make-up work/tests with students of the inner circle and their parents/guardians, as driven by student need.
2. Staff can monitor spontaneous memorials for any inappropriate messages. Let students know items will be offered to family after memorial is down. Memorial guide page 33 of VA DOE Guidelines
3. Touch base with inner circle, provide loss [survivor resources](#).
4. Point person should prepare to [answer family questions](#) regarding "signs" or looking for "reasons."
5. An appointed Postvention Team member may offer to gather inner circle but do not expect a traumatized staff member be responsible for helping traumatized students and staff.
6. Postvention Team activates a support plan for staff and informs them all how to seek support from Employee Assistance Program if it is part of the benefits package.
7. An appointed Postvention Team member sends email updates about funeral/memorial plans as they become available.
8. Supply access to [suicide facts](#).
9. Email school community information on grieving and coping with suicide loss, such as Children, Teens and [Suicide Loss flip book](#).

WEEK 1 - 2

1. Announce any plans to safely memorialize student to school community.
2. Plan to remove any spontaneous memorials within school or on grounds (like a decorated locker) following a funeral/memorial (or within 5 days of suicide death) [Memorial guide page 33](#).
3. Greet and guide surviving family to collect personal belongings and spontaneous memorial items.
4. Relay school postvention activities to the parents/guardians of the deceased student.
5. Let school community know any spontaneous memorial items were offered to the surviving family.
6. Supply local and [national grief resources](#) to family, guardians, and others.

LONG TERM POSTVENTION
(& COLLECTING INFORMATION FOR FUTURE RESPONSE)

Our response to a suicide does not end after the first day or week. Healing takes time, and grief timelines are different depending on the relationships to the deceased and the fact that grief varies from individual to individual. There are opportunities to learn from the healing and inform future postvention planning, too.

1 MONTH

1. Set up school counselor, school psychologist, or outside grief counselor to follow up with inner circle immediately after a planned memorial activity.
2. Be aware of upcoming special school events (like graduation), holidays, and birthdays since these may be difficult for some of the loss survivors and plan ahead for supporting individuals who are bereaved.
3. Remind staff about their Employee Assistance Program if it is available in their benefits and how to access this resource. If EAP is not available, give them resources to other professional help and encourage them to use informal resources, too. Encourage school administration to look at feasibility of establishing an EAP.

4 MONTHS

1. Consider a timeframe in which to offer Youth Mental Health First Aid, QPR, or another evidence-based course in mental wellness and basic suicide awareness.
2. 2Plan and schedule suicide alertness skills trainings (such as safeTALK), for staff, bus drivers, teachers, or administration. Info at your Community Services Board Prevention Office
3. Allow staff directly affected by loss to opt out of suicide alertness skills training.
4. Touch base with long-term bereaved. [More info page 32](#).
5. Revisit Suicide Postvention plan with Postvention Team and update or revise including any new/updated resources and consider what went well and what aspects of the response need improvement.

LONG TERM

1. After 4 months, consider offering suicide intervention skills training such as Applied Intervention Skills Training (ASIST). Coaches, counselors, administration, school resource officers, nurses may find this training helpful. [ASIST Training](#)
2. Once staff is trained at a higher level, consider training students with an age-appropriate, responsibility-appropriate curriculum like [Teen Mental Health First Aid](#).
3. Schedule a free training through [Community Services Board](#) or [Virginia Department of Health](#).
4. Make sure school works towards successful overall response to suicide death and other crises with the goal that the responses, particularly memorials, are consistent.
5. Be aware that the anniversary of a student's suicide death can be especially difficult for survivors of suicide loss.

Longer Term Response
Loops Back to
Incident Response Planning
(see next page)