

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEMORIALS IN SCHOOLS AFTER A DEATH BY SUSPECTED SUICIDE

Memorial services and remembrance activities play an important part in the healing process and can facilitate grieving after the death of a loved one. However, in the case of a death by suicide, the issue is complicated as those impacted by the suicide (family and friends), as well as any already vulnerable individuals are at risk of imitating the suicide. This is referred to as suicide contagion or “copy-cat” suicides.

Suicide contagion is particularly risky when the death occurs within the context of an institution, such as a school. Schools face the difficult task of endeavouring to strike a delicate balance which creates appropriate opportunities for students to grieve but that does not increase suicide risk for other school students by glorifying, romanticising or sensationalising suicide.

The New Zealand Ministry of Education does not agree that memorial services after a suicide death are appropriate or helpful. They believe that whole school memorials may communicate suicide as an appropriate or desired response to vulnerable youth and are therefore not recommended. Those already vulnerable to thoughts of suicide may wrongly perceive they will be remembered or honoured in the same manner as the service of the student they are attending. This erroneous belief might increase their risk for suicide or suicide attempts.

However, if schools do choose to provide memorials then it’s recommend that all efforts **MUST** include positive messaging and it should be made clear to students that there are people who can help.

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL MEMORIAL SERVICES

- Avoid school memorial assemblies which can create highly charged emotional atmospheres. Large assemblies risk contributing to suicidal contagion.
- Avoid establishing permanent memorials on school grounds (e.g., installing a plaque, tree or year book) as these may present vulnerable youth with a constant invitation to consider suicide.
- If possible, ask the family to consider holding the funeral in the evening so that young people can attend with their parents.
- If the family does hold the service during school hours, it is recommended that the school remain open and that school buses are not used to transport students to and from the service.

SPONTANEOUS MEMORIALS

Students often create spontaneous memorials by leaving flowers, cards, poems, stuffed animals etc in a place closely associated with the person who died. Students may even come to school wearing t-shirts with photographs of the deceased student on them. The school needs to balance the students need to grieve with the goal of limiting opportunities to glamorise the death.

The school can do this by setting limits with compassion and sensitivity, e.g.:

- Monitor any spontaneous memorial for inappropriate messages (hostile or inflammatory) or which indicates risk amongst the bereaved.
- Leave memorials in place until after the funeral (or for up to approximately 5 days) after which the tribute objects may be offered to the family.
- Discourage requests to create or distribute t-shirts or buttons bearing images of the deceased by explaining how upsetting these can be to some students and how wearing them can be disruptive and glamorise suicide. If students come to school wearing such items, it is recommended that they be allowed to wear the items for that day only.
- If spontaneous memorials occur off school grounds, schools are limited in what they can do. However, they can talk to student leaders and encourage a responsible approach by explaining it is recommended that memorials be time limited (approximately 5 days or until after the funeral) and then disassemble the memorial and offer it to the family.
- The school should discourage large unsupervised gatherings off school grounds. Police can be enlisted to monitor off school sites for safety. Counsellors can also be enlisted to attend any gatherings and offer appropriate support and guidance.

CREATIVE SUGGESTIONS FOR MEMORIALS

Simply prohibiting any memorialisation to publicly acknowledge the death can be problematic in itself and upsetting to family and friends of the deceased. It can also generate intense negative reactions. Schools can offer creative suggestions to help channel the energy and passion of students in a positive direction, balancing the community's need to grieve with the impact the proposed activity will have on students, particularly those who were closest to the deceased.

Meet with the students close friends to talk about type and timing of memorials. This can provide an important opportunity for students to be heard and also gives the school a chance to explain why some activities are safer than others. Some helpful, constructive suggestions may include:

- Make a posterboard and markers available so that students can gather and write messages (in a place where those who don't wish to participate can avoid). After a few days, the posters can be removed and offered to the family.
- Holding a day of community service or creating a school based community service programme

in honor of the deceased

- Putting together a team to participate in an awareness or fundraising event sponsored by one of the national mental health or suicide prevention organisations
- Sponsoring a mental health awareness day
- Buying books on mental health for the school or library
- Volunteering at a community crisis hotline
- Raising funds to help contribute towards funeral expenses
- Making a book available in the school office for several weeks in which students can write messages to the family, share memories of the deceased, or offer condolences; the book can be presented to the family on behalf of the school community

See also CASA's CPRS:

- Recommendations for Memorials or Remembrance Activities for those who have died by Suspected Suicide
- Social Media and Suicide Postvention
- Circles of Vulnerability (to identify who may be at risk after a death by suicide)

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