



Suicide Postvention

The Role of the School Community After a Suicide

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A W E B I N A R P R E S E N T A T I O N

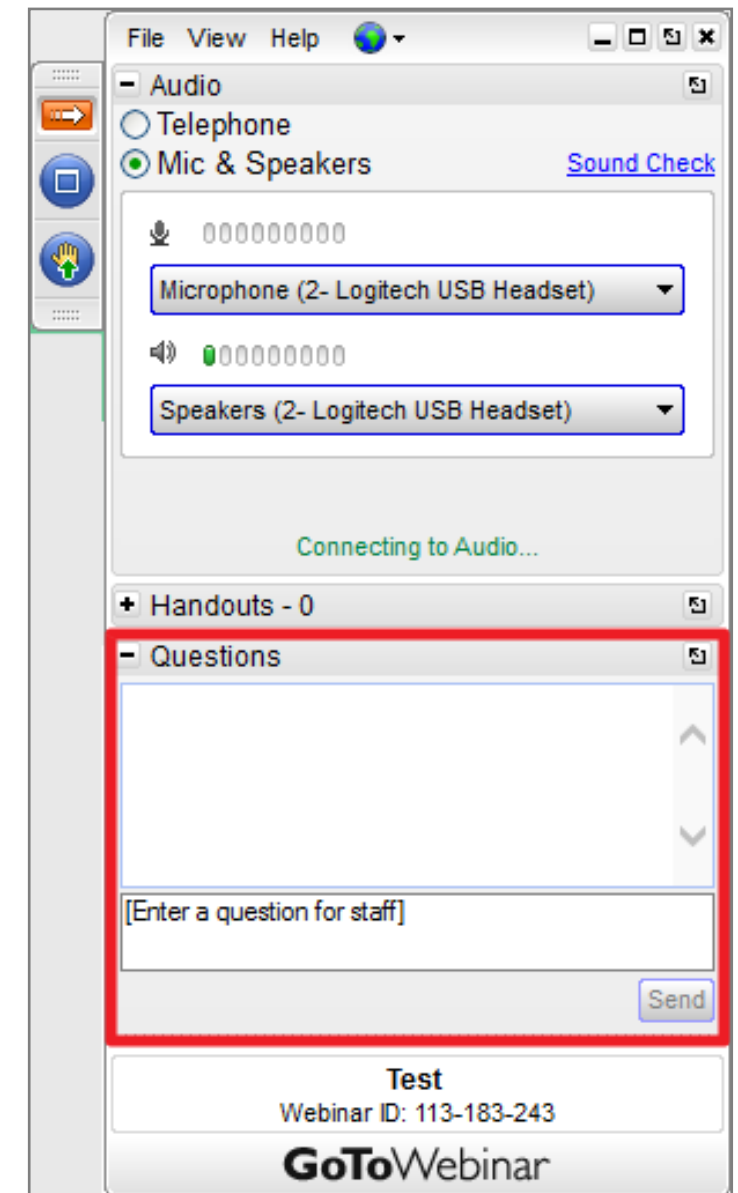
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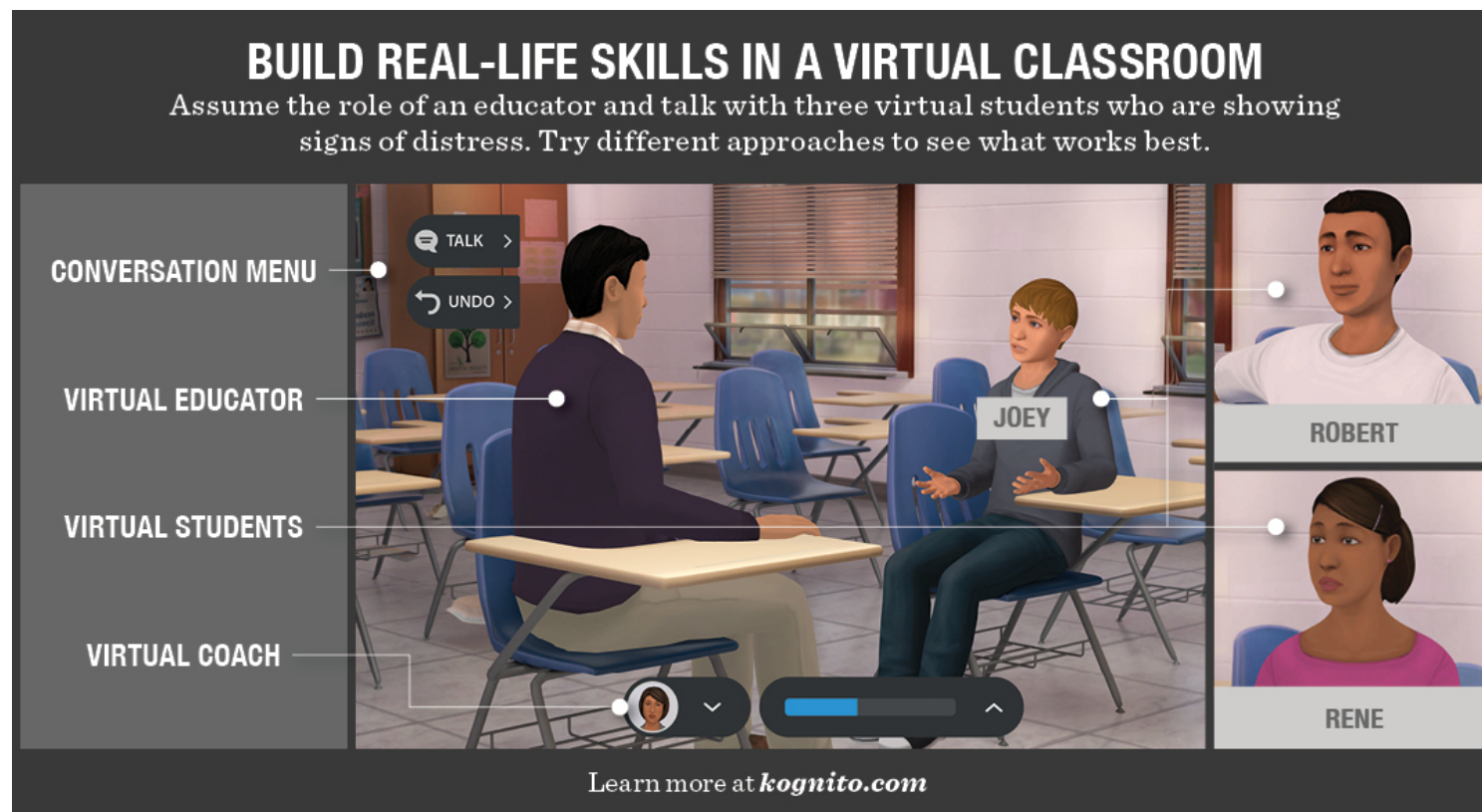


Jennifer Spiegler
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Today's Presenters



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Why Postvention in Schools?

- Schools are often unsure about how to respond after a suicide and there has been debate as to best practice response
- Certain practices may put some students at greater risk
- An effective response can reduce the risk of suicide contagion and restore a safe, healthy learning environment

Postvention Research in Schools: Summary

- Postvention efforts have been too short in duration
- Postvention efforts have focused on too few students
- Autopsy studies have found access to lethal weapons, substance abuse and LGBTQ issues as contributing factors
- Epidemiology studies of clusters have found extreme academic pressure and parents did not see the need for mental health treatment for their child

Suicide Contagion

- Contagion is rare, but adolescents and young adults are more susceptible than other age groups.
- A death by suicide or suicidal behavior in peers may increase the likelihood of suicidal ideation or attempts in youth.
- Contagion can lead to a cluster.

Goals of Suicide Postvention

- Assist survivors in the grief process
- Prevent the next suicide
- Identify and refer individuals who may be at risk following the suicide
- Provide accurate information while minimizing the risk of suicide contagion
- Implement ongoing prevention efforts

Everyone Plays a Role in Suicide Prevention

- Prevention policies should include ***professional development for all school personnel in all job categories*** who regularly interact with students or are in a position to recognize the risk factors and warning signs of suicide, including ***substitute teachers, volunteers, expanded learning staff (afterschool) and other individuals with regular contact with students such as transportation personnel, crossing guards, tutors, and coaches.***"

The Impact of a Suicide Loss

- Research based estimate suggests that for each death by suicide **147 people are exposed** (6.3 million annually), and among those, **6-18 experience a major life disruption** (loss survivors; earlier, non-research based estimates were 6)
- A loss by suicide can be a traumatic loss

Suicide Postvention in Schools Key Terms

- There is a distinction between “suicide survivorship” and “exposure to suicide.”
 - Survivor applies to bereaved persons who had a personal/close relationship with the deceased.
 - Exposure applies to persons who know about the death through reports of others, media or social media who may know the deceased personally, but have personal vulnerabilities such as a history of mental illness, traumatic loss or suicidality.

Suicide Postvention in Schools Key Terms

- Both survivors and exposed persons need support
 - Support groups
 - Support from outside of the family
 - To be educated about the complicated dynamics of grieving
 - To be contacted in person (instead of by letter or phone)

Impact of Traumatic Loss: School-Age

- Reactions tend to be more directly connected to crisis event
- Fear of others dying by suicide
- Reactions are often expressed behaviorally
- Feelings associated with the traumatic loss are often expressed via physical symptoms
- Trauma related play (becomes more complex and elaborate)
- Repetitive verbal descriptions of the event
- Problems paying attention

Impact of Traumatic Loss: Adolescents

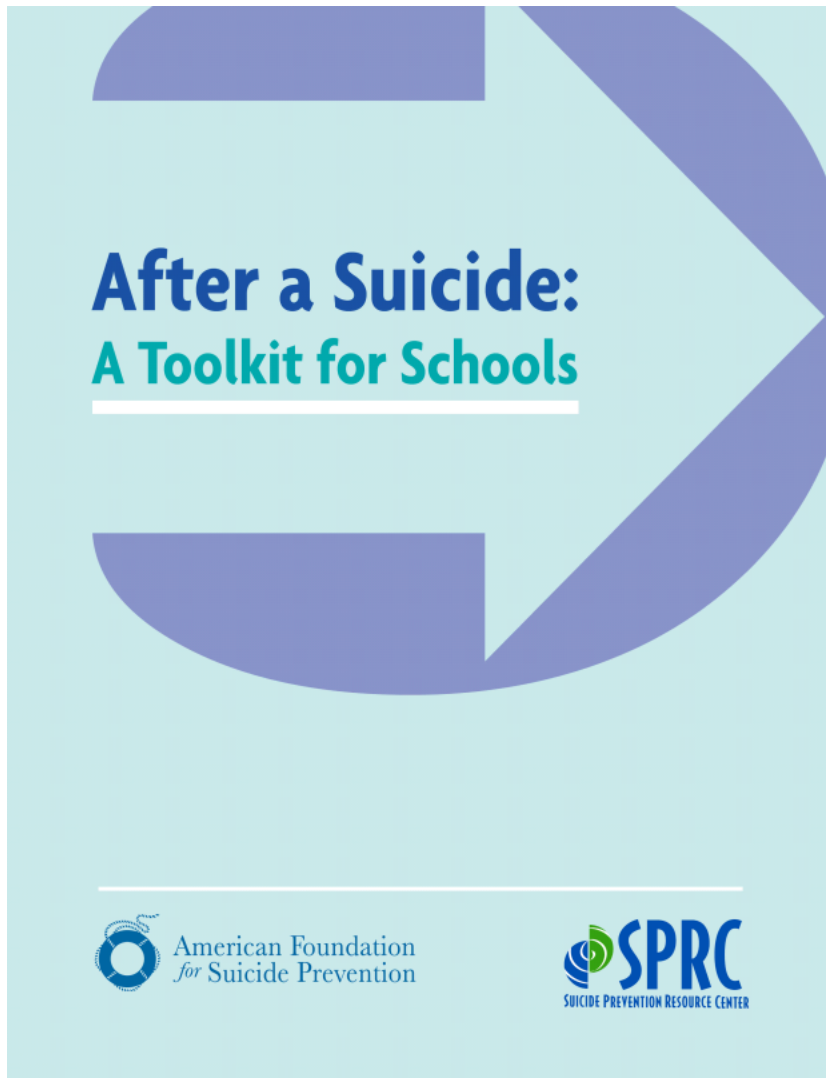
- More adult-like reactions
- Quick to simplify suicide by assessing “blame”
- Revenge fantasies
- Oppositional/aggressive behaviors to regain a sense of control
- Self-injurious behavior and thinking
- Substance abuse
- Sleeplessness & social media overload

Traumatic Loss

Reactions Suggesting the Need for an Immediate Mental Health Referral

- Poor coping
- Suicidal and/or homicidal thoughts, threats, writing or high risk behaviors
- Abuse of others or self (e.g., IPV; NSSI)
- Extreme substance abuse and/or self-medication
- Extreme rumination, hyper-vigilance and/or avoidance behavior

After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools



Suicide Prevention
Resource Center

www.sprc.org

American Foundation for
Suicide Prevention

www.afsp.org

Tragic Loss: When the Educator Grieves

- Crisis team should triage staff first
- Notify selected staff *in person*
- Allow for crisis reactions/release from classroom
- Attend funeral with no crisis team responsibilities
- Seek help through Employee Assistance Program or community mental health/bereavement services

Suicide Postvention in Schools: Guidelines for Educators

- Address staff reactions. Staff need to know that how they respond, in the eyes of the children, is very important and has a great impact on elementary aged students.
- Staff needs to provide accurate information to students through fact sheets
- Staff could be provided:
 - Current information regarding the death
 - Information about suicide contagion
 - Suicide risk factors and warning signs
 - Referral procedures
 - Specific activities/responsibilities

Suicide Postvention in Schools: The Educator Role

- Replacing rumors with facts and recognizing family's request for privacy
- Encouraging the ventilation of feelings
- Stressing the normality of grief and validating wide array of stress reactions children demonstrate
- Discouraging attempts to romanticize the suicide
- Temporarily adjust academic expectation
- Allow for expression of sadness and grief in classroom
- Encourage participation in grief activities

Tragic Loss: Educator Roles

- Identifying students at risk for an imitative response
- Making the appropriate referrals
- Facilitating student's social support systems
- Providing information on grief and grieving
- Prevention messaging

Suicide Postvention in Schools

Identify Those Significantly Affected by the Suicide & Initiate Referral Procedures

- Risk Factors for Imitative Behavior
- Participant in suicide pact
- Had last negative interaction with the suicide victim
- Physically or Emotionally proximal to suicide
- Psychologically vulnerable with history of depression or previous suicidal behavior
- Suicide history in family or history of other traumatic loss

Suicide Postvention in Schools

- Identify those significantly affected by the suicide & initiate Referral procedures
- Do not be afraid to talk to students about suicide
- Know the risk factors/warning signs
- Respond immediately
- Supervise child
- Escort to crisis team
- Join crisis team and provide valuable background information

Suicide Loss: Psychological First Aid

- Listen
 - “I am so sorry this happened to you”
 - Don’t be afraid to talk about suicide, you will not be putting ideas into their heads
 - Listen and observe for risk factors/warning signs
- Protect
 - What is the most difficult thing to deal with right now?
 - Intervene/advocate in cases of bullying or insensitivity
 - Normalize wide range of reactions. The grief that follows a death by suicide is complex.

Suicide Loss: Psychological First Aid

- Connect
 - What can I/teachers do to help you?
 - The benefit of peer connectedness and other social supports
- Model
 - Model calm and optimistic behavior
- Teach
 - “You are not to blame, it is not your fault”
 - Provide suicide prevention resources
 - Provide information on crisis reactions and stress management techniques

Suicide Postvention in Schools

- Talking to a student whose parent/peer died by suicide
- Answering the difficult questions
 - Why did he/she die by suicide?
 - What method did they use?
 - Why didn't God stop them?
 - Isn't something or someone to blame?
 - How can I cope now and make a difference in suicide prevention?

Suicide Postvention in Schools: Memorials

- Strive to treat all student deaths the same way
- Encourage and allow students, with parental permission, to attend the funeral
- Reach out to the family of the victim and gain their permission to acknowledge death was a suicide
- Utilize the sample letters provided by the AFSP Toolkit
- Contribute to a suicide prevention effort in the community
- Develop living memorials, such as student assistance programs, that address risk factors in local youth
- Address spontaneous memorials on school grounds

Suicide Postvention in Schools: Social Media

- Appoint a Social Media Manager to assist PIO
- Utilize students as "cultural brokers" to help faculty and staff understand their use of social media
- Train students in gatekeeper role, and specifically identify what suicide risk looks like when communicated via social media
- Have staff monitor social networks and provide safe messaging when important (this will require that districts not completely block these networks)
- Have parents get involved in their child's social media

A National Focus on Safe Messaging

- Unsafe messaging can lead to contagion
- Media: “Committed suicide”/”Died by suicide”
- Suicide is preventable
- There are evidenced based treatments for all the risk factors of youth suicide
- Everyone plays a role in suicide prevention
- Resilience and recovery are possible

Prevention Messaging for School Staff

Suicide and the grief that follows a death by suicide are very complex and no one person, no one thing is ever to blame.

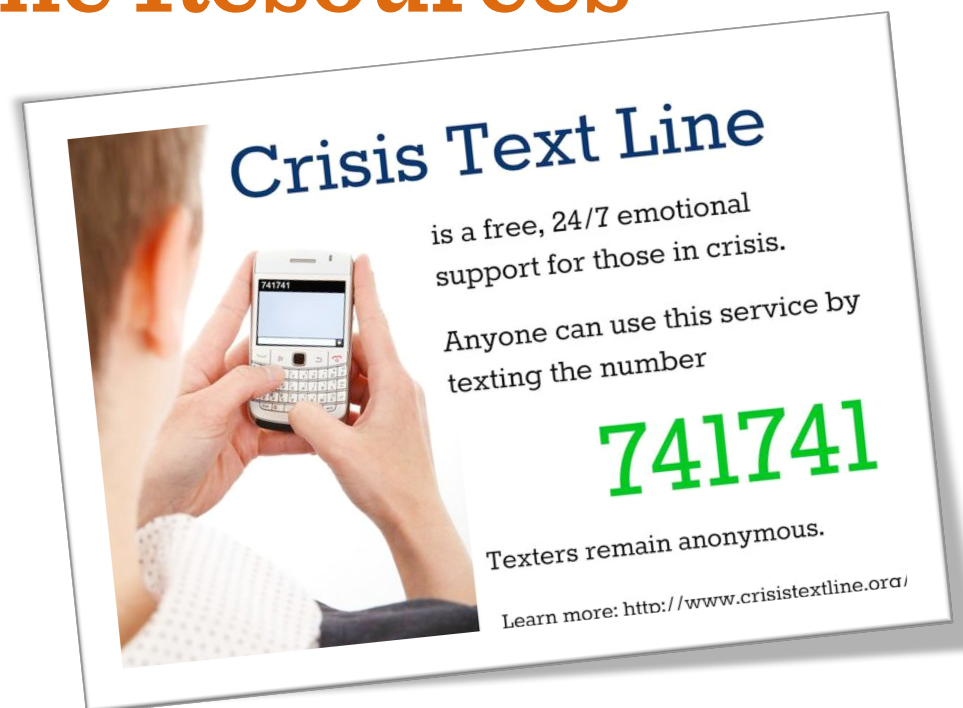
Long Term Follow-up

- Maintain ongoing monitoring of affected students and staff
- Continued communication to monitor academic progress, social relationships, and overall adjustment
- Do not underestimate the long term impact
- Identify those in need of additional support or services
- Utilize and accept community resources and assistance

Long Term Follow-up

- Resurfacing of grief reactions may occur during momentous occasions, such as:
 - Graduation
 - Anniversary of the death
 - Another death by suicide in the school community

Model Policy: Hotline Resources



Youth Suicide: National Resources

- The Trevor Project
www.thetrevorproject.org
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org
- Suicide Prevention Resource Center
www.sprc.org
- Centers for Disease Control
www.cdc.gov

Everyone's Responsibility

More Information:

Suicide in Schools

Erbacher, Singer & Poland (2015) Routledge

www.nova.edu/suicideprevention

Lieberman, R., Poland, S., & Kornfeld, C. (2014). Best practices in suicide intervention. In A. Thomas & P. Harrison (Eds.), Best practices in school psychology. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

Q&A



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