

Suicide Postvention in Schools

Handout compiled by [Forefront Suicide Prevention](#) in partnership with Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI)

The grief associated with a death by suicide can be quite overwhelming. When a school community experiences a loss by suicide the effects can be felt on various levels. Using protocols that follow model guidance and knowing where to turn for help is critical. Suicide is often sudden and unexpected, leaving loss survivors unprepared and looking for answers as to why this person took their life. This guide includes information, directions, and resources to help prepare and support you as you navigate this territory. In a perfect world:

- school resources would be in place before a crisis occurs
- community partners would be identified and trained
- postvention procedures would be reviewed regularly
- the school and/or district crisis team would have practiced responding to postvention situations

Postvention refers to activities that promote healing while also managing and containing the impact of the loss. Some schools will want to plan postvention activities where community members who have been personally affected by a recent suicide come together to ask questions, learn more about recognizing and preventing suicide and know where to turn for additional support. The primary goals of postvention are to help individuals as they begin to navigate the initial grieving process. When conducted using model guidance, this level of awareness, education and connection to others can help to reduce the likelihood of future suicides. It is important to remember that postvention activities are open to any individual who feels they have been impacted and not only those who were close to the person who died by suicide.

What is Suicide Postvention?

An organized response in the aftermath of a suicide attempt or death that:

- Provides opportunities to start healing from the grief and distress of suicide loss
- Recognizes that suicide can present a unique form of trauma exposure
- Ensures that individuals/families who have experienced a suicide and/or suicide attempt are offered support and a path to recovery
- Almost all the principles of suicide postvention apply to traumatic deaths under any circumstance

Why are Postvention Protocols needed Necessary?

Postvention provides:

- Space for grieving
- Care for those experiencing loss
- Identification and protection for others at risk

- Postvention protocols ensure consistency in response, no matter the cause of death, and should codify procedure in school policy

A school's role in postvention helps to:

- Maintain structure and order of the school routine
- Manage reactions to the death with developmentally appropriate and supportive interventions
- Provide support and resources to the school community in order to recognize and minimize suicide contagion risk

Proper postvention helps the school community process a death by suicide more safely, mitigating:

- Feelings of blame, responsibility, betrayal, and potential staff burnout
- Complicated grief/loss, both in the short and long term
- Risk potential for cluster/copycat deaths
- Difficulty focusing on academics and other activities

Postvention and Prevention

Postvention is also a critical prevention tool. Schools should use best practice guidelines, and include the following in their postvention planning:

- Crisis response
- Helping students cope
- Involving parents
- Model language for notifications
- Working with community/media
- Safe messaging
- Safe ways to remember the person (memorialization)
- Addressing needs when school is not in session