

CONNECT SUICIDE PREVENTION PROGRAM

# MEMORIAL SERVICES AND DEATH NOTICES

APPENDIX

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**INTRODUCTION:**

In the aftermath of a suicide, one of the most challenging aspects for families, survivors, schools, and communities is planning a memorial service for the deceased. The memorial service can be a highly emotional event that has the potential that can either increase or decrease the likelihood of suicide contagion.

Suicide contagion can occur when events (such as memorial services and media coverage) increase the risk factors for youth who are depressed, troubled, or at increased risk for suicide. Media reports as well as memorial services are two of the biggest factors that impact on suicide contagion. It is a human tendency to overstate the positive qualities of the deceased while at the same time minimizing or even ignoring less positive attributes, particularly their decision to take their own life. Yet this inclination can increase the risk level of suicide for survivors.

Teens or young adults who are troubled, socially outcast, or at increased risk of suicide may wrongly perceive this glorifying and memorializing as the only option to “make good” for their own life. Believing they may be remembered in the same manner increases the risk that they may attempt or complete suicide. Essentially, the challenge becomes one of how to appropriately grieve, remember, and honor the deceased without (unintentionally) glorifying their death.

There may be a number of different viewpoints about what type of services or memorial to have. How to respect the wishes of grieving and emotional family, friends, or others while balancing the need to reduce possible contagion can be a very difficult task. Many community members play a role in this process. Clergy, funeral directors, and others who have access to the family and are likely to be consulted about planning the memorial services can help educate the family about the risk of contagion and assist in designing services that are both respectful and reduce the risk of more suicides.

Below are a set of suggestions and explanations about points to consider when designing a memorial service or remembrance.

- Contact your local community mental health center or other social service agency to see if they can have crisis/grief counselors available before and after the memorial service.
  - Be sure to let people know they will be available and how to connect with them.
- Have someone watch out for and provide extra support to those people who might be at greatest risk including siblings, immediate family, girl/boyfriend, teammates, and other close friends.
- Work with local law enforcement officials to request their assistance.
  - They can often assist with directing traffic.
  - Discuss with them how they think they can best assist.
    - Their presence can have a calming effect for some youth/adults.
    - For other individuals, police presence may make them more tense or agitated.

- Different police and police departments have different relationships with youth/communities (decide what works best for your situation/community).
- Oftentimes, the suicide of a youth or young adult draws large crowds of mourners for memorial services. Be prepared for a large turnout and plan how to accommodate mourners.
- Some communities do not have a church or other public facility large enough to handle the anticipated crowd.
  - Consider all available options/locations including churches, civic halls, and neighboring communities.
  - Use school facilities only as a last resort (see below).
- Avoid any type of large scale memorial service or remembrance that takes place at school and especially during school hours.
  - Students who did not know the deceased may be traumatized by attending a mandatory or school-wide service.
  - Other students may forever associate that room/hall with the student's funeral or death.
  - If school facilities must be used, hold the service in the evening or on weekends when students can be accompanied by their parents and family or other responsible adult.
  - Avoid closing the school during the memorial service. This gives students the option of whether they wish to attend or not. For some students and staff, staying with their usual routine (and supports) is the healthiest way to grieve.
- Do not allow permanent plaques or dedications to the individual to be erected in public buildings or other locations (other than traditional cemetery markers).
  - Do not dedicate yearbooks, dances, ball games, etc. in memory of the person.
    - These types of memorials increase the likelihood of suicide contagion.
- Do not fly the flag at half staff. US Flag Codes indicates that only the President or a Governor has the authority to lower the flag. (See Appendix U.S. Code Title 36, Chapter 10, Section 175, Subsection M)
- Publicly acknowledge that the death is a suicide.
  - Providing factual and timely information about the cause and manner of death greatly reduces the rumor and innuendo that often accompany an untimely death.
  - Publicly acknowledging the suicide allows mental health, school officials, and others take steps to reduce possible suicide contagion.
  - The cause and manner of death listed on the death certificate is public information and can be obtained by the media or any qualified individual who calls the Medical Examiner's office (603) 271-1253.
  - In most communities/situations, believing that this information will remain a secret is not realistic.
- Celebrate the deceased's life, accomplishments, personal traits, etc.
  - Also talk about the loss/unknown potential of what the individual might have accomplished in the future.
  - Openly acknowledge and discuss the pain (anger) and heartache the death has caused.
    - Both of the above help reduce the risk of contagion by de-glamorizing the suicide.
- Some families choose to publicly disclose that the individual struggled with mental illness or substance use which contributed to their decision to take their own life.
  - This is one way of not glorifying the person's death.
- Encourage anyone who is depressed or has been having thoughts of harming themselves to ask for help.
- Encourage donations to the bereaved family, to favorite charities of the deceased or their family, or to suicide prevention efforts.
- Consider having a temporary memorial site where students or community members can leave remembrances and other personal expressions of grief. Examples include a scrapbook or spot where students can leave appropriate memorial remembrances.
  - Let people know in advance:
    - The display will be time limited (e.g. 1 week).
    - All remembrances will be turned over to the family at the end of that time period.

- Review Media Recommendations (see Appendix) before talking with the media or providing the media with personal information about the deceased. A few key points to remember regarding the media:
  - The family is not obligated to speak with any media person.
  - The family may wish to identify a spokesperson (who is familiar with how to speak with the media about suicide) to talk on their behalf.
  - Redirect the media by asking them to focus their story on services available to youth in your community or to suicide prevention efforts (rather than details about the deceased's life/death).

Schools face unique challenges in how to memorialize a deceased student or staff member.

- Do have policies in place for appropriate commemorative activities for the death of any member of the school community. This eliminates the possibility that someone will perceive that the student who suicided received more or less attention than another death in the school community.
- A good rule of thumb to consider before deciding on a permanent memorial is to consider what it would be like to times it by three or five if similar events happened in the future. What may seem like a good idea at the time (planting a tree, erecting a park bench, etc.) may seem much less appropriate when applied in multiples.
- Do allow students and faculty time away from school to attend a wake, funeral, or other memorial service.
  - Consider allowing attendance at service to be an excused absence.
  - Require a note from parents giving permission to attend.
  - Encourage parents to attend the service with their son/daughter or have them be accompanied by another parent or responsible adult (if they are leaving school grounds).
  - Avoid using school transportation (buses) to transport students to and from the service. If school transportation will be used, it should be chaperoned by teachers, parents, or other adults who can provide support to students and keep an eye out for students who may need additional supports.

#### **OBITUARY/DEATH NOTICES:**

One of the first big decisions a family will need to make is what to include in an obituary. Although many newspapers have established guidelines for the length and type of information they will print in an obituary, few have established guidelines for how to write about the death of someone who took their own life. While there is extensive information regarding recommendations for media coverage of suicide (see Appendix), these recommendations, while providing some good general information, do not mention obituaries specifically. Furthermore, there is little information in the professional literature regarding best practices for disclosing in an obituary that the death was by suicide. Also, in some situations, the cause and manner of death may take weeks to be officially determined and the family will not have this information. Below are a few things to consider when writing an obituary.

- Above all, the decision to include or not include the information in an obituary that the individual took their own life is a personal decision that each family will need to make on their own. Cultural and religious beliefs may impact on the decision which the family makes.
- The obituary is not the only opportunity to publicly disclose how the person died:
  - The family may wish to do so privately with family/friends.
  - The family may choose to include this information in any wake or memorial service that is planned.
- If the family chooses not to disclose the death as a suicide:
  - Avoid using euphemisms such as “died after a brief illness” or “died as a result of an accident.”
  - Making no statement about the cause of death is better than stating something misleading.
  - Be aware that if the cause and manner of death have been determined by the Medical Examiner, they are a matter of public record and can be accessed by media or others who request the death certificate.
  - Not openly disclosing the cause of death sometimes forces friends and family to “pretend” the death was not a suicide when it may be obvious (or known) to all involved.

- Families who choose not to disclose the death as a suicide isolate themselves from the support of other people who have survived the suicide of a loved one.
  - Remember, 30,000 suicides in the US per year equals over a quarter of a million suicides in ten years. While you may not be aware of it, many of your friends, family, neighbors, and colleagues have experienced traumatic loss by suicide.
- Stating outright that the individual died by suicide will:
  - Immediately end all the rumor and innuendo that often accompany an untimely death – especially the death of a teen or young adult.
  - Families who were open and honest about the suicide report that they received a great deal of support from many friends and relatives who came forward and disclosed that they were also the survivors of a suicide.
  - Openly disclosing the cause of death will allow mental health counselors and others to begin postvention activities that may help prevent suicide contagion/reduce the possibility of future suicides.
  - If disclosing that the death was a suicide, it is OK to mention how (e.g. used a gun, hanging), but state it simply and avoid providing specific/graphic details.
- The family may wish to establish a memorial fund for donations. The fund can be used to offset the costs of the funeral services.
- Whether the family chooses to disclose that the death was by suicide or not, the family may wish to identify a mental health organization or suicide prevention organization as a recipient of any donations.

**RESOURCES:**

Suicide Prevention Resource Center Publication: After a Suicide – Recommendations for Religious Services and Other Public Memorial Observances. Available at <http://www.sprc.org/library/aftersuicide.pdf>