

## **Special Considerations in the Event of a Death by Suicide**

A suicidal death is a particularly difficult one in that it asks school personnel to meet two crises in one:

- The death and the subsequent bereavement caused by the death.
- The suicide and subsequent suicidal prevention and intervention that may be needed among the survivors.

### **Extra Training is needed to be prepared**

- School personnel must be properly trained in how to detect and respond to a potentially suicidal situation and how to seek help. A suicide death may engender notes, remarks and behavior on the part of the surviving students that would indicate suicidal ideation and gesture.
- Professionals in suicide prevention should be called on to address these issues with school personnel. Have a list of resources posted and available, including the crisis hotline number.
- Although lawsuits against school and personnel are rare, liability usually centers on the issue of negligence, i.e., did they do what was reasonable to prevent the suicide? Having a school plan and providing training for staff should help reduce the chances of being the target of negligence in a lawsuit.
- Suicide may have a certain philosophical or religious significance to some staff. If a staff member does not feel willing or able to address the issues of suicide with neutrality, he or she should not be asked to process the experience with the students.

### **Talking about suicide and suicidal thoughts is the most powerful tool in diffusing the threat of suicide.**

- A suicidal death asks that we commit the time it takes to talk and talk until the talking needed with at-risk students is done.
- Support people should be available to every student who asks, and every student who is mentioned to be at risk by staff or other students. A preliminary assessment and referrals to professional counseling must be made.

### **Dealing with Parents**

- Inform all parents of students impacted by the suicide by letter.

- Call parents who have had a suicidal situation in their family in the past as members in this family may be re-stimulated by the recent suicide.
- Call parents of any at-risk students and make referrals to counseling. If you have a student at risk and parents are not following through with referrals, call Child Protective Services.

### **The Memorial**

- **It is essential to address and mourn a suicide death of a student or staff member as you would a death from any cause.** We must represent our respect and reverence for the life that is lost to our children/students no matter what the means of death.
- However, caution should be exercised in public memorials and commemoration of a student/staff member who has committed suicide. If done correctly, the mourning of someone who has committed suicide would inspire other despairing students to discuss depression and suicidal thoughts in order to seek help (small group meetings of friends and teachers, rather than a school assembly; a picture of the deceased among the class photos in the yearbook, but not a dedication of the yearbook).

**Commemoration requires a commitment of time.** In such a memorial, we celebrate the life of the one who dies and, at the same time, we educate about suicide and suicide prevention.

### **Possible Script**

“We remember \_\_\_\_\_ and her gifts. She brought us many things... Yet we are sad and disappointed that she chose to kill herself. We can never know exactly why she committed suicide. I am sure many of us wonder if we could have prevented it. What I know is that we probably did the best we could. In some ways, she couldn’t remember that we cared.

We do care. For those of you who feel like giving up, I want you to know that we, as your teachers and counselors, are people who are concerned and care about you. It is important to talk about how you are feeling. Find someone to talk to if you are having suicidal thoughts. Come to your teachers and counselors. There are people who know how to help. Counselors will be available... (when and where).”

### **Ongoing Care is Needed**

- Increased suicidal behavior sometimes occurs for years after a suicide.
- The anniversary of a suicide can be a time of increased suicidal behavior.

### **Estimation of Suicidal Potential**

1. Is the child thinking about suicide?
2. How long has the child had these thoughts and feelings?
3. How frequently does (s)he have these thoughts?
4. How long do these thoughts last?
5. How dangerous is the method?
6. Availability of the method.
7. How likely is the possibility of rescue?

### **Other Factors to be Considered**

1. Degree of hopelessness
2. Degree of helplessness
3. Mood state – how sad
4. How anxious, irritable, panicky — may be losing control?
5. How much sleep disturbance?
6. History of family suicides
7. What instances of recent loss?
8. Any indications of putting one's house in order?
9. Support systems available?

© 2007 HospiceCare of Boulder and Broomfield Counties

