



After a School Tragedy...Readiness, Response, Recovery, & Resources

Acts of violence, suicide, and other tragedies affect many school communities. In 2018, there were 82 school shootings, the highest number since 1970 (CHDS, 2019). Death by suicide is currently the 2nd leading cause of death among teenagers, next to [car] accidents (CDC, 2018). In 2017, 2 out of every 100 teenagers made suicide attempts serious enough to require medical treatment; 7 out of 100 attempted suicide (CDC, 2019).

These tragedies have a wide-ranging impact on the school community that extends far beyond the events of the day. Secondary trauma and complicated grief affect students, families, and school staff in ways that may appear immediately following a school tragedy or weeks, months, or years later. Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida is facing another wave of painful challenges after death by suicide of two student survivors of the February 14th, 2018, school shooting that resulted in 17 student and teacher deaths.

This resource is designed to help schools better support students and families in the aftermath of violence and trauma. We provide strategies to assist schools with readiness, response, and recovery to help a school community support resilience in the event of a tragedy. We offer places to turn for more resources. We discuss terminology and concepts related to suicide and grief. Finally, we highlight the importance of providing culturally responsive services, with example cultural considerations for schools to help Hispanic/Latino students struggling with grief and trauma.



Readiness

While school shootings are rare, schools can and should be prepared to support students, staff, and families to recover from trauma related to school shootings, suicide, other acts of violence and tragedies that impact the school community. We summarize recommended readiness strategies advanced by several national and state-level agencies. Implementation of these strategies builds capacity of schools and the competencies of educators to respond effectively to traumatic events. Several national and state level agencies have recommendations; some of the most essential steps are summarized here:

- **Create compassionate school communities** with caring adults who will listen without judgment and strive to increase students' sense of belonging and connectedness.

How ready is your school?

- Who is your cadre of mental health volunteers? Who has a call-down list?
- What community agencies, private practices, or psychiatric hospitals might be mobilized to provide support?
- What staff training have you provided? Is more needed?
- Do you have a readiness checklist?

- **Put youth at the center** by not only seeking their needs and ideas for solutions, but engaging them in planning and making decisions.
- **Provide grief-specific and trauma-specific professional development** trainings for the whole school community. It is important to resource educators with the language, skills, and processing opportunities to facilitate complex conversations with students.
- **Develop a crisis-response team** and protocol that includes ways that schools/districts will address youth suicide and other school emergencies that may traumatize youth and adults. Identify the roles and responsibilities of crisis team members.
- **Have policies and protocols** for maintaining confidentiality,

tracking and monitoring high-risk situations, anti-bullying and cyber-bullying, parent notification, and referrals.

- **Have plans for suicide prevention**, including screening; networking with community-based behavioral health agencies; implementing substance use-related programs; and a protocol for assisting youth who are most at-risk. Support protective factors by offering opportunities for at-risk students to connect with caring adults.
- **Include a self-care program for school personnel** with education about toxic stress and strategies for alleviation.
- **Develop peer-support programs** that give students the tools to listen to one another and provide lifesaving assistance to one another when they are processing a tragedy.
- **Network with families** to involve them in prevention efforts and co-create a protocol for handling school crises.
- **Have plans for intervention and "postvention."** Make sure your school knows what to do if a tragedy occurs and is able to navigate its aftermath. Know who will be involved, how they will be involved, and how the school will announce programs such as counseling options (DiCara et al., 2009; SAMHSA, 2012).
- **Engage the media**, which are critical partners when it comes to suicide, violence, and contagion. Assign a media spokesperson, develop safe messages, and build relationships with media prior to a tragedy (American Association of Suicidology, 2018; American Foundation for Suicide Prevention & Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2018).

Response

As part of readiness, each school and district should have a plan for how to respond to an active emergency (e.g., securing the building, contacting 911). Another aspect of response is what happens starting right after the event. This section summarizes strategies that can help schools structure a coordinated response to the mental health needs of students. Eight core factors are adapted from Psychological First Aid (Brymer et al., 2006), an evidence-informed approach to help children, adolescents, and adults in the immediate aftermath of a trauma or tragedy.

- 1) **Contact and Engagement.** Ensure initial contact with students is compassionate, respectful, and calm. Ask students what they need and listen to their responses and requests.
- 2) **Safety and Comfort.** Enhance immediate and ongoing safety and provide physical and emotional comfort. Provide accurate and up-to-date information about the event and the current response procedures. Reassure students that emergency and school personnel are doing everything they can to keep people safe. Ask students if they have questions about what they can expect and respond with practical information and resources.
- 3) **Stabilization.** Calm and orient emotionally overwhelmed or disoriented students. Use grounding techniques to bring students back to the physical present. For example, ask students to take slow, deep breaths or name five non-distressing objects they see around them.
- 4) **Information Gathering.** Identify immediate needs and concerns and gather information. Ask students open-ended questions to understand what they need and how you can help. For example: What are you feeling? Who would be helpful to be around or talk to right now? Do you need any information about what is going on or what to expect?
- 5) **Practical Assistance.** Offer practical help to students in addressing immediate needs and concerns. Provide support and resources that increase a sense of empowerment, hope, and restored dignity. Assist students to identify needs and problem-solve possible solutions. Help students create a manageable and achievable short-term plan.
- 6) **Connection with Social Supports.** Establish contact with primary support persons and other sources of support, including family, friends, and trusted school personnel. Ask students who they want to contact and if they need help reaching them. Model support by providing reflective, clarifying, and empowering comments.
- 7) **Information on Coping.** Provide information about stress reactions and coping to reduce distress and promote adaptive functioning. Remind students that there is no right way to react to or grieve a tragedy. Provide information on adaptive coping action such as connecting with support systems, taking care of everyday physical needs, engaging in positive distracting activities, and using calming self-talk.
- 8) **Collaborative Services.** Provide direct and effective linkages for students to available supports and services, immediate and ongoing. This can include in-school mental health services, local counseling centers, and grief or trauma-specific support groups.



Recovery

Although many schools have plans and are able to implement short term actions to address immediate needs for services such as counseling after an event, recovery takes time. A school shooting, other act of violence, or other tragedy violates the expectation of safety and may disrupt the worldview of students, staff, and family members. They can cause us to reassess our purpose, sense of self, and place in the world (Armour, 2002; Bailey et al., 2013). To recover from these events, we need to make sense of the experiences and understand their meaning for ourselves and our communities.



Educators often struggle to lead sense-making in the aftermath of traumatic events. To support students and model positive coping, educators must make sense of and then cope with the event for themselves first. On the one hand, school personnel are in “the unique position to model expressions of grief, encouraging and assuring students that adults and students alike are struggling to understand the unexpected death” (Balk et al., 2011, p.154). Yet they often are not trained, resourced, or supported to model grief, and may not know how to process the event, experiences, and effects. A recent study found that only 7% of classroom teachers received bereavement training (American Federation of Teachers/New York Life Foundation, 2012).

How do we talk about this?

Linguistic strategies can help school personnel lead conversations about grief and trauma. Intentional language is a powerful tool for whole-school healing. We offer specific language for school personnel to use when discussing violent death with students and explore the many emotional states that may be experienced after a trauma.

How do we talk about suicide? (for more information: <http://www.supportaftersuicide.org.au/what-to-do/information-for-friends-and-family>)

- Try to avoid using “commit” or “committed” – suicide is stigmatized and using language that implies the person did something wrong can shame other people away from help-seeking.
- The term “completed suicide” can also imply that something was successful.
- We encourage the use of “died by or of suicide” or “took their own life.”

Violent and Traumatic Loss

- “Traumatic loss” refers to sudden and violent modes of death and describes the subjective aspects of the survivor’s experience.
- “Violent loss” is used to describe objective mode of death.
- While a loss may be violent, it doesn’t necessarily mean it is traumatic. In response to a school shooting or death by suicide, it’s important to allow survivors to process and experience the event for themselves.

Complicated Grief

- Violent and traumatic loss can often result in complicated grief. School community members may have difficulty making meaning of what happened or why, and may experience an overwhelming sense of being out of control.
- Complicated grief is a bereavement reaction in which acute grief is prolonged, causing distress and interfering with normal functioning. The bereaved may experience great difficulty re-establishing a meaningful life. The person feels stuck; time moves forward but the intense grief remains.
- Symptoms include recurrent and intense pangs of grief and a constant worry about the person who died, mixed with avoidance of reminders of the loss. The bereaved may have recurrent intrusive images of the death, while positive memories may be blocked or interpreted as sad.

Survivors Guilt (for more information: <https://www.suicidology.org/suicide-survivors/suicide-loss-survivors>)

- When some school community members survive a life-threatening event and others don’t, it’s common for administrators, educators, students, community partners, and family members to experience guilt, shame, and anxiety. These feelings, when not expressed and processed, can contribute to depression and suicidal ideation or thinking.
- Survivor’s guilt is often misunderstood: people can feel grateful for being alive while simultaneously feeling complex remorse and responsibility for not doing more to prevent the loss(es).

Disenfranchised Grief

- “Disenfranchised grief” (Doka, 1989) refers to loss related to unrecognized and unacknowledged relationships or circumstances of the death that prevent social and individual access to empathy or support.
- Disenfranchised grief can affect teaching after a violent or traumatic loss. Educators often hold deep personal and professional tension about allowing themselves to grieve the death of their students versus helping students (Rowling, 2008).
- To re-enfranchise grief, it is important for the school community to normalize all reactions and allow educators and students alike to feel what they feel.

Culturally Responsive Services: Grief Amongst the Hispanic-Latino Population

Even though grief is a universal experience, a way of coping with pain and suffering that one finds “abnormal” in one’s own culture may be perfectly normal in other cultures. The expression of grief is greatly influenced by individual traditions and values. To help a grieving student, one must first have some understanding of one’s own worldview, including cultural heritage, social norms, religious beliefs, and ways of communicating, and then take into context the student’s cultural and specific population differences. The following are considerations for providing culturally responsive services to Hispanic-Latino students.

Among Hispanics living in the United States are people from various countries in North, Central, and South America who are proud of their unique heritages. Because there is no single “Hispanic culture,” cultural practices related to grief and bereavement vary.

By discarding the expectation of an all-purpose, pan-cultural response to grief and bereavement and embracing a multicultural perspective, we can better serve students and families in the face of a tragedy. The most important factor is to have an openness and willingness to learn the values and traditions that Hispanic-Latino students and their families share through the process of receiving emotional support. Despite the many variations, there are similarities that can be singled out as references to better work with this population:



- As Hispanics experience grief, they expect health care providers to be caring, show empathy, and be respectful of their beliefs, many of which have to do with their religious and cultural traditions.
- They also expect health care providers to consider the needs of the family members. In many Hispanic cultures, the entire family is involved in making important life decisions, and there is a strict family hierarchy (usually older to younger) to be honored.
- In some Hispanic cultures, family and friends often encourage people to express their grief, such as by crying, screaming, sighing, and even cursing, although these reactions vary from culture to culture.
- Many Hispanics embrace religion and spirituality at the core of their lives, as well as a belief in the spiritual and psychological continuity between the living and the dead. As part of their spiritual practices, the family may continue a relationship with the deceased person through prayer, ritual, and traditional practices. These spiritual traditions are a powerful means by which families deal with tragedy and loss; they must be honored and respected.

Resources

MHTTC Resources

[Suicide Prevention Addendum](#) | Pacific Southwest MHTTC

This addendum provides referral resources for school personnel in the Pacific Southwest region. Many schools integrate universal screening for depression but lack the ability to refer students to mental health services. Resources focus on crisis intervention services that can meet immediate student needs. Where possible, state- and island-specific resources are included. Many of these organizations can also link students in crisis to no-cost or low-cost counseling services.

[Support Resources After a School Shooting or Suicide](#) | Pacific Southwest MHTTC

Visit the [link](#) for resources and learning sessions about how to navigate the intersections of school violence, trauma, and suicide.

[Activities to Enhance School Mental Health](#) | South Southwest MHTTC

This lists opportunities available from the South Southwest MHTTC to enhance school-based mental health services and effective collaboration between schools and community mental health agencies.

MHTTC Upcoming Events

[Suicide Prevention Forum for Families and School Students](#)

Forum hosted by Central East MHTTC in collaboration with SAMHSA Region 3 and the National Center for School Mental Health (NCSMH) | April 2, 2019

This forum hosted by the Anne Arundel County Department of Education in Maryland will feature Dr. Anna Muller from the University of Chicago. She is a suicide prevention expert and will address this issue with the school community. The Central East MHTTC in collaboration with the National Center for School Mental Health will provide information on national and local suicide prevention resources.

[Trauma-Informed Suicide Prevention for Educators: Stories, Science, and Strategies](#)

Webinar hosted by Pacific Southwest MHTTC | April 4, 2019

This webinar will begin with the perspective of a young person with lived experience of suicidal thoughts. Presenters will identify common myths and misconceptions about students and suicide, and explore the vital importance of including students as partners in suicide prevention efforts. Examples of promising student-led initiatives, including peer-to-peer programs and school awareness campaigns, will be provided.

[Understanding and Recognizing Student's Mental Health Challenges and Building Resilience](#)

Training hosted by Central East MHTTC in collaboration with Delaware Health and Social Services, Division of Public Health and Department of Services for Children, Youth, and their Families | April 6, 2019

During this training session, teachers will develop an understanding of the prevalence of mental health challenges among Delaware's youth and how to recognize signs and symptoms of depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicidality. In addition, this session will provide teachers with common-sense approaches to recognize when students might need additional support and a discussion of what resources are available in Delaware for students, their families, and school communities.

[Youth Mental Health First Aid](#)

Training hosted by Great Lakes MHTTC | April 18, 2019

Youth Mental Health First Aid teaches the school community, health and human services workers, and other caring citizens how to help an adolescent (age 12-18) who is experiencing a mental health or addictions challenge or is in crisis.

[Supporting Students and Staff in the Aftermath of Crisis and Loss](#)

Webinar hosted by Pacific Southwest MHTTC and the MHTTC Network Coordinating Office | April 23, 2019

This workshop will help school professionals learn basic skills in how to talk with and support individual students or the entire class/school as they struggle to understand and cope with a crisis or loss in their lives. The presenter, David J Schonfeld, MD, established and directs the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement (www.schoolcrisiscenter.org) at the Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work at the University of Southern California; the Center Coordinates the Coalition to Support Grieving Students (www.grievingstudents.org), comprised of over 85 organizations including the major educational professional organizations. He will draw on over 30 years' experience in school crisis response and pediatric bereavement to illustrate key points.

Other Resources

Responding to a Crisis at School: Tools for Administrators

Toolkits and Resource Guides

[K-12 Toolkit for Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention](#) | Health Care Alliance for Response to Adolescent Depression (HEARD) Alliance

[NEA's School Crisis Guide](#) | National Education Association

[After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools](#) | American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and Suicide Prevention Resource Center

[Dealing with the Death of a Student or School Staff Member \(Video Modules\)](#) | Coalition to Support Grieving Students

[Grief Support Modules for School Personnel](#) | Coalition to Support Grieving Students

[Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators](#) | National Child Traumatic Stress Network

[Preventing Suicide: A Toolkit for High Schools](#) | SAMHSA

Additional Guidance

[Recovery From Large-Scale Crises: Guidelines for Crisis Teams and Administrators](#) | National Association of School Psychologists

[Guidelines for Responding to the Death of a Student or School Staff](#) | USC National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement

[Guidelines for Schools Responding to a Death by Suicide](#) | USC National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement

[Reunification of Students with their Parents and Legal Guardians \(Fact and Tip Sheet\)](#) | National Association of School Psychologists

[Self Care for Educators \(Tip Sheet\)](#) | National Child Traumatic Stress Network

[Managing Strong Emotional Reactions to Traumatic Events: Tips for Families and Teachers](#) | National Association of School Psychologists

[Memorials After Suicide: Guidelines for Schools and Families](#) | Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide

[Anniversaries of Traumatic Events: Guidance for Educators](#) | National Association of School Psychologists

[Request Direct Crisis Support](#) | National Association of School Psychologists

Evidence-Based Programs for all Schools

[Psychological First Aid \(PFA\) for Students and Teachers: Listen, Protect, Connect \(Tip Sheet\)](#) | Treatment and Services Adaptation Center

[Support for Students Exposed to Trauma \(Online Training\)](#) | Treatment and Services Adaptation Center

[Skills for Psychological Recovery \(Online Training\)](#) | National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Webinars

[Secondary Traumatic Stress: Educators](#) | National Child Traumatic Stress Network

[Organizational Secondary Traumatic Stress](#) | National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Preparing Your School Before a Crisis Occurs

[A Framework for Safe and Successful Schools](#) | National Association of School Psychologists
[Conducting Crisis Exercises & Drills: Guidelines for Schools](#) | National Association of School Psychologists
[School Violence Prevention \(Fact and Tip Sheet\)](#) | National Association of School Psychologists
[Suicide Prevention Can Start in School \(Tip Sheet\)](#) | George Lucas Educational Foundation
[Suicide Prevention in Schools \(Resource Webpage\)](#) | Suicide Prevention Resource Center
[Culturally Relevant Strategies for Suicide Prevention \(Handout\)](#) | California Mental Health Services Authority

Supporting Children After a Crisis: Tools for Families

[Talking with Children \(Video Modules\)](#) | Coalition to Support Grieving Students
[Talking to Children About Violence: Tips for Parents and Teachers](#) | National Association of School Psychologists
[Coping After Suicide Loss Tips for Grieving Adults, Children, and Schools](#) | American Psychological Association
[Talking to Children about the Shooting \(Tip Sheet\)](#) | National Child Traumatic Stress Network
[Helping Your Child Manage Distress in the Aftermath of a Shooting \(Tip Sheet\)](#) | American Psychological Association
[Common Stress Reactions Experienced by Children after a Disaster \(List\)](#) | National Center for Disaster Preparedness
[Talking with Kids about the News \(Tip Sheets\)](#) | PBS Parents
[Going Back to School after a Tragedy \(Tip Sheet\)](#) | Child Mind Institute
[Taking Care of Yourself \(Checklist\)](#) | National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Resources by Age Group

[Helping Teens with Traumatic Grief \(Tip Sheet\)](#) | National Child Traumatic Stress Network
[Helping School-Age Children with Traumatic Grief \(Tip Sheet\)](#) | National Child Traumatic Stress Network
[Helping Young Children with Traumatic Grief \(Tip Sheet\)](#) | National Child Traumatic Stress Network
[After a Crisis: Helping Young Children Heal Checklist](#) | National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Finding Additional Support

[Resources for Survivors of Loss by Suicide](#) | American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
[Grief Organizations and Grief Camps](#) | Eluna Network
[National Suicide Prevention Lifeline Website](#) | National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

[Chat](#)

[1-800-273-TALK \(8255\)](#)

[Disaster Distress Helpline](#) | SAMHSA

Text TalkWithUs to 66746

1-800-985-5990

TTY 1-800-846-8517

[Spanish Speakers](#)

Call 1-800-985-5990 and press "2"

From the 50 States, text Hablanos to 66746

From Puerto Rico, text Hablanos to 1-787-339-2663

[En Español](#)

Exemplar State Resources

[Crisis Response Box: A Guide to Help Every School Assemble the Tools and Resources Needed for a Critical Incident Response](#) | California Department of Education

[Suicide Prevention and Response: A Comprehensive Resource Guide for Indiana Schools 2018](#) - Indiana Department of Education

[Maryland's Suicide Prevention and Early Intervention Network \(Program Website\)](#) - Maryland Department of Health

[Maine Youth Suicide Prevention, Intervention, Postvention Guidelines](#) | Maine Department of Health and Human Services

[Prevention Suicide West Virginia \(Program Website\)](#) | West Virginia Bureau of Behavioral Health and Health Facilities and the Bureau for Public Health

[Traumatic Loss Coalitions for Youth Program \(Program Website\)](#) | New Jersey Department of Children and Families

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