

## **GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOL POSTVENTION DURING COVID-19**

A suicide in the midst of a larger crisis such as COVID-19 can present a significant challenge to a school community, particularly given the other types of losses occurring as part of this global pandemic. Due to the risk of contagion in the event of a youth suicide, it is important to prepare in advance for a suicide postvention, even though it is more likely that schools will experience a loss due to the impact of COVID-19 during this time. Although the current situation continues to change rapidly, schools should acknowledge and respond to any student or staff death as soon as is feasible and to the extent possible, particularly if it is a death by suicide.

There are clearly limitations to what can be put in place when schools are operating remotely within the context of a larger pandemic, and schools must also recognize that some youth and families may be even more isolated or vulnerable under these circumstances. Given these challenges, schools may want to assess what kind of response they are able to provide initially and over time, and in the event of multiple deaths, to ensure that response procedures are as consistent as possible. Regardless of the nature the response, communication should be guided by patience and flexibility, both for the decision-makers and for the entire school community.

### **BASIC CONSIDERATIONS**

There is limited research on postvention, even in the absence of a global pandemic. The immediate health, welfare, and safety of students, staff, and families should serve as a guiding principle for any response effort, along with adherence to federal and state guidelines. In acknowledging that schools and their community partners may be operating differently, it is especially important to determine what the outreach to students, staff, and families will look like, as well as the capacity of resources available. In recognizing that a full comprehensive postvention response is unlikely during this time, the following considerations may guide a school's response:

#### **1. Utilize a team approach.**

To the greatest extent possible, decision-making related to a postvention response should be a team effort. This can help ensure that no one staff member has to make difficult decisions alone and that multiple perspectives are considered to represent the diverse needs of students, staff, and families. Ideally, a multidisciplinary postvention or crisis team would already exist. If the members of this team are not established or are working to address other crisis-related issues, any effort to collaborate is still important, especially under circumstances of a larger crisis.

The following questions may be useful to consider:

- ✓ What is the availability of current postvention/crisis team members, and how are they accessed (e.g., school-issued devices, remote platforms)?
- ✓ What additional team members may be able to assist given the demands and limitations brought on by the larger crisis (e.g., staff from the tech/IT department or the district's media spokesperson)?
- ✓ What aspects of standard postvention procedures are feasible right now, and which activities may need to be altered or postponed?
- ✓ What existing community partners, including crisis response and/or behavioral health agencies, are available to assist with postvention activities?

**2. Communicate.**

Communication efforts related to postvention should consider how to best reach staff, students, families, community partners/providers, and the postvention team. One of the most pressing issues for schools during COVID-19, is to determine what modalities and/or platforms are available to enable communication to the school community, as well as if and how members of the school community will be able to communicate back with school personnel. It is important to acknowledge to the school community that during a larger crisis in which information is ever-changing, there may be inadvertent miscommunication, delays in messaging or resources, and possibly even conflicting information. Communication and messaging should be accessible to all members of the school community (e.g., readability level, language translation).

**3. Educate about stress and grief reactions.**

As in any postvention response, it is important for schools to normalize the range of stress and grief reactions of students and staff while also keeping vigilant to more concerning reactions that may suggest a need for additional support or more immediate intervention. Within a remote learning environment, school staff are more limited in their ability to monitor students' stress and grief reactions the way they would if students were physically attending school. Schools may need to determine how to best educate both students and adults (e.g., staff, family members, etc.) on identifying and reporting observable behaviors of concern, including how these may appear virtually and through social media. Additionally, given the context of the larger crisis, it is important to recognize that acute stress reactions may lead to the onset of new or worsening mental health concerns among students, families, and staff (including postvention/crisis team members).

**4. Provide a continuum of resources and supports.**

The full range of postvention-related supports and services are not likely to be available during a larger crisis such as COVID-19. The school should identify what resources are able to be disseminated to the school community, including those that address crisis (e.g., National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, Crisis Text Line, etc.), promote resilience and connectedness, and provide for safety and basic needs (e.g., local food banks, health advisories, keeping environments safe, etc.). To the extent possible, schools should also communicate how these resources can be accessed, while reminding the school community that availability may fluctuate with the changing conditions under COVID-19.

Given the potential for increased risk of suicide and/or depression among youth following the suicide of a peer, schools will also need to determine the ability of school staff to respond. Particularly for these students, community crisis and mental health partners may be able to help expand the school's capacity to address these concerns through more intensive components of a postvention response such as screening, developing safety plans, referrals to local mental health/telehealth services, and educating on lethal means safety.

In reaching out to community partners, schools may consider asking the following questions:

- ✓ Is the agency or organization available to assist with postvention and what specific services are provided (e.g., crisis, screening/assessment, treatment, support groups)?
- ✓ In what ways have existing services changed (e.g., availability, accessibility, etc.)?
- ✓ What are the agency or organization's current protocols (e.g., key contacts, referral process, etc.)?

## 5. Offer hope and reinforce protective factors.

As part of a postvention response, schools may identify a variety of resources that can be shared with the school community to promote resilience and healthy coping. However, given the amount of information associated with the larger ongoing crisis of COVID-19, it is important for schools to recognize that parsing through resources can quickly become overwhelming to members of the school community. Schools can be intentional and trauma-informed in the manner in which they share resources, by considering the following:

- ✓ Acknowledge the “we” in this shared experience (e.g., “we are doing the best that we can”) and avoid judgment and criticism.
- ✓ Highlight what students, staff, and families **can do** in the midst of the ongoing uncertainty, while also helping them to prioritize and set limits as needed (e.g., “what’s one thing you can focus on right now?”).
- ✓ Reinforce healthy practices (e.g., exercise, sleep), adherence to routines, and maintaining social connections, as means to counterbalance stress reactions and strengthen protective factors.
- ✓ Emphasize individual preference and choice with regard to accessing resources. What works for one person may not work for others and may vary over time. It may be helpful to resend resources periodically and include updates.
- ✓ Recognize that members of the school community may need to limit their exposure, even to information that is intended to be helpful. Remind them that they can refer back to resources as needed.
- ✓ Encourage members of the school community (including members of the postvention or crisis team) to care for themselves and each other in the days, weeks, and months ahead, given the additional stressors that people are likely to experience due to COVID-19.

### **ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS**

In addition to the guidelines above, the following are additional considerations specific to the impact that COVID-19 may have on a school’s postvention response:

- Any given school’s ability to respond will likely be impacted in an ongoing manner, due to efforts to implement evolving state and federal mandates while balancing with the local needs of the school community.
- Preexisting individual, family, and environmental risk factors (e.g., family conflict, abuse within the home, access to lethal means) may intensify under the conditions of COVID-19 and may impact a postvention response with regard to the number of students in need of additional follow-up support, as well as their degree of risk.
- There may be additional barriers to follow-up evaluation and treatment that schools may need to anticipate, with regard to the impact of COVID-19 on families:
  - ✓ Due to national and state health advisories related to the spread of COVID-19, students identified as being at risk of suicide and their parents/caregivers may have concerns about going to a hospital, given risk of exposure.
  - ✓ Family structure, functioning, and dynamics may be affected by COVID-19 (e.g., family member becomes sick and must be hospitalized, family member is an essential employee and works long shifts, family member loses job and insurance coverage lapses) and may in turn impact the family’s ability to respond to the school’s recommendations.

- Schools may be able to reach out to community partners (e.g., county crisis services) to help identify and communicate to families about the risks and benefits of accessing services during this time. These partners may also have additional information about changes in standard protocols within health and behavioral health care settings (e.g., option for direct admit versus sitting in an emergency room).
- With many components of educational service delivery shifting to an online, virtual format, schools and their community partners may opt to explore how various aspects of the postvention response may be implemented remotely. This may include telecommunication or telehealth options for general outreach and more targeted follow-up (e.g., support groups, screening/assessment). The following questions may be useful to consider as part of these efforts:
  - ✓ What kinds of technology are needed by the school/provider and the family, and what virtual resources may be particularly useful during postvention (e.g., apps for safety planning)?
  - ✓ How will the district ensure that there is equitable access to essential information and services by all members of the school community?
  - ✓ What other legal and ethical concerns must be addressed (e.g., consent, confidentiality, safety)? For instance, during a screening/assessment, obtain contact information and location of the student in advance, in case of imminent risk or threat, or if a technology issue occurs before the student’s safety has been verified.

### **CONSIDERATIONS POST COVID-19: RETURNING TO SCHOOL**

The primary considerations upon returning to school following an adapted postvention response will involve follow-up, checking in, and monitoring of students that may have been identified previously as needing additional supports. It is important to bear in mind that the majority of students and staff will be resilient, given the natural healing afforded by the return to “normalcy” and routines.

Schools may consider the following as students and staff return to school:

- Identify methods to reestablish safety and continue to promote self-care, self-advocacy, and help-seeking for all students and staff.
- Recognize that prolonged exposure to stressors may impact natural coping strategies, and that the rate at which the school community resumes prior routines will likely impact the ability of students and staff to “bounce back.”
- Review documentation from any prior postvention to identify students that may be in need of follow-up (e.g., check-in, screening, and referral).
- Encourage staff and families to continue to look for observable behaviors of concern among all students, with the understanding that acute stress and grief reactions from months prior may have resolved themselves or worsened.
- Further complications due to other aspects of COVID-19 may also emerge (e.g., death(s) of loved ones, disruption in mourning rituals, possible need for extended quarantine or further restrictions within a family or community).
- Note anniversary dates from any postvention prior to and during the larger scale crisis, as stress and grief responses may appear or resurface.
- Reassess the status of educational and behavioral health services (e.g., telehealth, online learning options), as their sustainability is yet unknown. New services may emerge, while others may be discontinued, resulting in unintentional lapses in care.

## **KEY RESOURCES**

The resources below provide additional guidance on postvention, remote service delivery, behavioral health supports, and crisis response for schools and behavioral health providers.

### **Suicide Prevention, Intervention, and Postvention Resources**

STAR-Center University of Pittsburgh  
Postvention Standards Manual, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition (Pending posting on <https://www.starcenter.pitt.edu/>)

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline  
[Lifeline Online Postvention Manual](#)

National Association of School Psychologists (NASP)  
[Comprehensive School Suicide Prevention in a Time of Distance Learning](#)

Prevent Suicide PA  
[Act 71 Information](#)

### **Behavioral Health, Trauma, and Coping Resources**

National Center for School Mental Health  
[COVID-19 Resources](#)  
\*Includes “Technology to Support School Mental Health” tab with multiple resources

Treatment and Services Adaptation Center  
[COVID and School Crisis Resources](#)

National Alliance on Mental Illness  
[Home page](#)  
\*Includes “COVID-19 Resource and Information Guide”

### **Crisis Resources**



Developed by Paula McCommons, Ed.D., and Perri Rosen, Ph.D., NCSP to accompany the release of the revised STAR Center Postvention Standards Manual, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition (2020).