



RESPONDING TO A DEATH BY SUICIDE

A Guide for School
Administrators

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Responding to a Student's Death by Suicide:

A Guide for School Administrators

The Torah commands the mitzvah to learn, through the words *vishinantem livanecha*, we must teach our children. The primary responsibility for being *mechanech* and educating our children falls on the parents. The school system exists to support this goal. As partners with parents and the family structure, the school administration should seek guidance from and work together with the affected family in any crisis situation. This resource aims to provide support and guidance in fostering such a partnership with empathy and care. We hope to see a day when we will no longer need such resources, amen.

The loss of a student to suicide is a deeply complex event that affects the entire school community. A structured and compassionate response is critical in ensuring appropriate support for students, staff, and families.

Amudim, a nonprofit dedicated to crisis intervention and mental health support, created this resource to help school administrators, educators, and crisis response teams navigate both immediate and long-term challenges.

While focused on suicide-related crises, this guide can be adapted for any tragic event affecting students by adjusting specific details.

Developed with Expert Guidance

This guide was developed in collaboration with leading mental health professionals, crisis response experts, and educators who specialize in suicide prevention and postvention strategies. Our approach is informed by research-based methodologies and best practices from organizations such as:

- The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP)
- The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP)
- The Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC)
- Amudim's Crisis Response Team
- Licensed mental health professionals specializing in trauma and bereavement

Designed as a practical framework rather than a substitute for clinical care, this guide provides clear steps for communication, student and staff support, and fostering a culture of mental health awareness and suicide prevention.

Understanding the Impact

Death by suicide is one of the leading causes of death among young people in the United States. It significantly impacts adolescents, with many experiencing suicidal thoughts, making plans, or attempting suicide.

Prevalence of Suicidal Thoughts and Behaviors:

Source: 2022 NSDUH

- 22.3% of high school students seriously considered attempting suicide in 2022.
- 10.2% of high school students attempted suicide in 2022.

Suicide Rates Among Youth:

Source: CDC

- Death by suicide was the second-leading cause of death for individuals aged 10 to 34 in 2021.
- In 2021, death by suicide was the third leading cause of death among U.S. high school youth (ages 14–18), with 1,952 recorded deaths, a rate of 9.0 per 100,000 youth.

Underreporting of Death by Suicide:

Source: American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

Death by suicide is often underreported, as some cases may be classified as unintentional or accidental deaths due to unclear circumstances.

Impact on School Communities:

The death by suicide of school personnel or family members can profoundly affect children and adolescents, increasing their risk of distress, grief-related trauma, and suicidal ideation.

These statistics highlight the urgent need for suicide prevention programs, mental health education, and accessible crisis intervention within schools and communities. Schools play a crucial role in identifying at-risk students, fostering open conversations about mental health, and ensuring support systems are in place to prevent further tragedies.

For immediate help, the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline is available 24/7 for those in crisis.

Immediate Next Steps

Immediate Next Steps: Activating the School Crisis Team

As with any death or other crisis event, the school crisis team should be activated after a suicide has occurred.

- **Verify all information** with the family before making any announcements, ensuring accuracy and sensitivity. **Follow the family's wishes** regarding what details to share and how to communicate them, respecting their guidance on public dissemination.
- **Notify the school crisis team.** Assign responsibilities and ensure that mental health professionals are available.
- **Prepare staff before notifying students.** Hold a meeting with teachers to ensure a unified message.
- **Communicate with students appropriately.** Provide a clear, factual message, avoiding graphic details or speculation.
- **Avoid sensationalism.** Suicide should not be glorified in any way that might make it appear as an appealing option for distressed students.
- **Provide access to mental health resources.** Ensure students know where to seek support and make professionals available.
- **Monitor at-risk students.** Pay particular attention to close friends, students with prior suicide attempts, and those who exhibit emotional distress.
- **Communicate with parents.** Send a letter home with clear information on the school's response and available support services.
- **Reach out to external support services.** Organizations like Amudim, Chai Lifeline (Rabbi Fox), and Ohel (Norman Blumenthal) can provide crisis intervention.

Notification Guidelines

Notifying Staff Before Students:

- Conduct a staff meeting before school begins.
- Ensure all teachers and faculty receive the same accurate information.
- Allow staff to ask questions and express concerns.

It is important to allow teachers and other school personnel to ask questions and voice concerns before they face students. Openly discussing the death by suicide sends the message that it is “ok” to talk about the topic.

For example, when addressing school personnel, the leader of the crisis team may say, “there has been a death by suicide of one of our students, (Student Name).” Then insert facts as they are known but omit graphic details.

- Prepare staff to respond to student questions appropriately.

If a teacher does not feel able to talk to his/her students about the death by suicide, another faculty member should be available to assist.

Addressing Students:

- Share the news in small, naturally occurring groups (e.g., homeroom, advisory periods).
- Avoid large assemblies or public announcements.
- Every effort should be made to ensure that all students are present at the time this information is shared so all students receive the same information simultaneously.
- Use direct language:

“We are deeply saddened to share that [Student Name] has died. We know that some of you may be struggling with this news, and we want to ensure that everyone has the support they need.”

- Avoid phrases like “committed suicide” (which implies wrongdoing); instead, use “died by suicide.”
- Include information about the availability of mental health and support services and how students may access these services

Notification Guidelines

In the aftermath of a death by suicide, helping students understand the connection between mental health problems and suicidal actions is helpful.

- **For young children:** Use simple, clear language.

Example: “Some people feel so sad that they don’t think they can get better. They need help, but sometimes they don’t ask for it or don’t even know that it’s ok to ask for help. If you ever feel sad about something big or small, please come talk to a parent, a teacher, a counselor, or someone else you feel comfortable with and we will make sure you get the help you need”

- **For older students:** Emphasize the link between mental health struggles and suicide.

Example: “Sometimes, when people are struggling with depression or other mental health challenges, they may not think clearly or see solutions to their pain. It’s important to know that when someone dies by suicide, it’s often because their mind was overwhelmed by feelings they couldn’t manage alone. This doesn’t mean their choice was logical—it was the result of their illness. That’s why talking about mental health and getting help is so important. If you ever have thoughts of hurting yourself, or if a friend confides in you about feeling hopeless, the best thing you can do is talk to a trusted adult. That could be a parent, a teacher, a counselor, or someone else you feel comfortable with. You are never alone, and there are always people who care and want to help. I also want to remind you that if someone you knew died by suicide, it is not your fault. It’s normal to wonder if you could have done something, but mental illness is complicated, and no one person is responsible for another’s actions. If you are struggling with guilt, sadness, or any difficult emotions, please talk to someone you trust. You don’t have to go through this alone, and we have support available for you.

When discussing suicide, listening is just as important as speaking. If a friend is grieving or struggling, you don’t need to have all the answers—sometimes, just being there and letting them express their feelings can make a difference. Remember, healing takes time, and there is no ‘right’ way to feel.”

Notifying Parents:

Draft a letter to parents to notify them about the death by suicide and what services are being offered to students and families.

Provide information about plans for a meeting for parents to ask questions about what to expect and how to best support their children after a loss

Sample Letter to Parents:

Dear Parents,

We are deeply saddened to inform you of the loss of one of our students, [Name]. The family has asked us to share [approved details].

Given that the cause of death was suicide, we will be holding an information meeting for parents/caregivers on how to talk to children about suicide and steps that children and adults should take if they are concerned about depression or thoughts of self-harm in themselves or in friends or family members. The meeting will be taking place on [date and time] at [address]. We hope that you will be able to join us for this meeting (or one of these meetings).

We understand this news is difficult, and we are committed to supporting our students.

Our school crisis team has been activated, and counselors are available for students who need support. We encourage you to have open conversations with your children and reach out if you need guidance. If you or your child need additional support, please contact [Mental Health Contact].

Sincerely, [Principal's Name]

After a death by suicide, there are groups of students and teachers who are more likely to benefit from additional emotional support.

This includes:

- Close friends of the deceased.
- Those with a strained relationship with the deceased (e.g., ex-friends, past conflicts).
- Students with a history of depression or prior suicide attempts.
- Those who have lost a loved one to suicide in the past.
- Teachers who had a close relationship with the student.

Watch for warning signs.

Educators and parents should be alert to:

- Sudden withdrawal from friends, family, or activities.
- Drastic changes in mood, behavior, sleep, or eating habits.
- Expressions of hopelessness or feeling like a burden.
- Giving away personal belongings or saying goodbye.
- Increased risk-taking behavior (e.g., reckless driving, substance use).

If any of these signs are observed, immediate intervention is critical.

How to Respond to Suicidal Thoughts

- **Take all mentions of suicide seriously** – Do not assume a student is “just seeking attention.”
- **Ask directly** – “Are you thinking about hurting yourself?”
- **Listen without judgment** – Validate their emotions instead of minimizing them.
- **Connect them to a professional** – Never leave a student alone if they are expressing suicidal thoughts.
- **Follow up** – Continue to check in and ensure they are receiving the support they need.

Addressing a Death by Suicide in a School Setting

Suicide remains a difficult and often stigmatized topic in society. In the aftermath of a student's death, surviving family members may experience intense emotions, including guilt, regret, and anger. As a result, some families may request that the school refrain from identifying suicide as the cause of death. Even in situations where available evidence strongly suggests the death was a suicide—such as the circumstances of the incident or the presence of a note—families may still prefer to keep the details private.

In these cases, schools should strive to balance respect for the family's wishes with the need to support students and address their concerns. If students bring up the possibility of suicide, or if it has been mentioned in media reports, it is important to acknowledge the discussion without contradicting the family's position. For example, a school leader might say:

"We are all deeply saddened by [name's] passing. The exact cause of death is still being determined [or the family believes it was an accident, despite reports].

However, because some of you have mentioned concerns about suicide, and given that this topic is being widely discussed, we want to take this opportunity to have an open conversation about mental health and suicide prevention."

This approach allows educators to respect the family's wishes while creating space for students to discuss the topic and seek support. Although difficult, discussions about suicide can serve as valuable learning opportunities. They provide a chance to emphasize the importance of mental health awareness, teach students how to recognize warning signs in themselves or others, and reinforce the availability of crisis support resources. Use these moments to outline plans for handling suicidal ideation and ensure that students know where to turn for help. Any discussion about suicide or a recent death by suicide should emphasize the importance of seeking help and accessing available resources. Schools play a crucial role in ensuring that students and staff know where to turn in times of crisis.

Fostering a Supportive School Atmosphere

In the immediate period following a tragedy, teachers should exercise additional flexibility in their classrooms to support students who may be struggling emotionally. This can include allowing extra time for assignments, reports, and tests, while still maintaining a sense of structure and routine. The classroom can serve as a calming and grounding environment for students, and ensuring a balance between stability and flexibility can help them navigate their emotions while continuing their academic responsibilities.

In addition to crisis response, schools should proactively cultivate an environment that prioritizes mental health and well-being. One key aspect is ensuring that even seemingly casual or joking references to suicide are taken seriously. If a student makes a comment about harming themselves, even in frustration, it should be addressed calmly but firmly with an approach that prioritizes care and concern rather than punishment.

Staff should explain the seriousness of such statements, provide resources, and, if necessary, involve the school's mental health professionals to assess the student's well-being and offer appropriate support.

Furthermore, school personnel should report anything that seems even slightly concerning. It is always better to err on the side of caution and communicate concerns rather than overlook potential warning signs. Teachers, counselors, and administrators should collaborate to create a school culture where students feel safe discussing their mental health struggles without fear of judgment or retribution. Schools should also provide regular training to staff on how to identify and respond to students in distress, reinforcing that early intervention can save lives.

By fostering open conversations, ensuring staff are equipped to address warning signs, and maintaining an atmosphere of vigilance and support, schools can play a crucial role in suicide prevention and mental health advocacy.

When a student or staff member passes away, it is natural for the school community to want to honor their memory in a meaningful way. To maintain consistency, it is important that all deaths impacting the school are acknowledged using the same approach, including deaths by suicide.

However, special care must be taken when memorializing a death by suicide to avoid glorifying or sensationalizing the cause of death. Certain actions—such as holding large assemblies or creating permanent tributes like plaques or trees—can unintentionally send the wrong message, particularly to students who may be struggling with depression or suicidal thoughts. Instead, schools should guide the community toward healthy, constructive ways to remember the deceased while reinforcing the importance of mental health support.

Encouraging Thoughtful and Constructive Remembrance

While permanent tributes are discouraged, students and loved ones should have an opportunity to express their grief in meaningful ways. This could include:

- Participating in a suicide awareness walk or fundraising event.
- Supporting a mental health campaign within the school or local community.
- Volunteering for a cause that was meaningful to the deceased, such as an animal shelter, the arts, or a charitable organization.
- Promoting suicide prevention initiatives to reduce stigma and encourage help-seeking behavior.

Managing Spontaneous Memorials

Following the loss of a student, temporary memorials such as flowers, notes, and stuffed animals often appear in common areas. Schools should establish a clear timeline for how these items will be handled to maintain a respectful yet structured approach to grieving.

- Items should be collected every few days, with a maximum duration of five days.
- Families should be consulted about donating memorial items to a cause of their choice or keeping them.
- Any notes, letters, or written tributes should be reviewed by school staff before being shared with the family to ensure they are appropriate.

Monitoring Social Media and School Communication Spaces

- Public forums—such as large posters or message boards left unattended—should be avoided, as they can become unmonitored spaces where harmful comments or messages of distress may be posted.
- Schools should remind students that social media is not always a safe space for grieving, as online discussions can sometimes lead to misinformation, distressing content, or even self-harm encouragement.
- Encourage students to report any concerning posts or statements of self-harm to a trusted adult or school counselor.
- Close friends of the deceased may benefit from discussing alternative ways to remember their friend, such as engaging in community service, supporting a mental health initiative, or raising awareness about suicide prevention.

By taking a thoughtful and structured approach to memorials, we can honor the loss of a student while prioritizing the emotional well-being of the entire community.

The goal should always be to support those who are grieving while promoting mental health awareness and suicide prevention.

Addressing the School Environment

The student's desk, locker, or cubby may serve as a difficult reminder for classmates. Consider involving classmates or teachers in decisions about how to handle these spaces in a way that is respectful and appropriate.

Any school materials, textbooks, or personal belongings left behind should be carefully sorted before being returned to the family.

Handling the Student's Belongings

Handling a Student's Belongings After Their Passing

Following the loss of a student, it is important to handle their personal belongings with care, respect, and sensitivity. The process should be conducted in a way that minimizes distress for both the student's family and their classmates.

Coordinating with the Family

Privately arrange a time for family members to collect personal belongings.

Whenever possible, gather all items in advance so the family does not have to clean out desks, lockers, or other personal spaces themselves.

Ideally, the collection should take place after school hours in a discreet and private location, such as the front office, to provide the family with a supportive and quiet environment.

Updating School Communications

To prevent unintentional distress, remove the student's name from:

- Mailing lists for school updates and newsletters.
- Class rosters and administrative systems, ensuring future communications do not include their name.
- Automated notifications, such as attendance alerts or report cards.

Long-Term Prevention Strategies

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Curriculum

- Implement SEL programs like those offered by Darcheinu.org and OurPathSEL.org to teach students coping skills, emotional regulation, and mental health awareness.
- Train staff on identifying and supporting at-risk students.
- Encourage ongoing discussions about mental health and wellness in classrooms.

Crisis & Grief Counseling

The impact of suicide can linger for months. Schools should:

- Check in regularly with students who were close to the deceased.
- Offer ongoing mental health support for staff and students.
- Organize educational sessions for parents and staff on mental health awareness.
- Ensure mental health professionals are available for check-ins, particularly during triggering events like anniversaries and graduations.

Conclusion

Addressing suicide in a school community requires a sensitive, well-coordinated approach that prioritizes the needs of students, staff, and families. Schools play a critical role in ensuring that those affected receive the support they need while also working toward long-term prevention. By fostering open conversations about mental health and creating a culture of care and awareness, schools can help prevent future tragedies and support student well-being.

For additional resources, contact Amudim at www.amudim.org.

Short-Term Response (Week 1-2)

Support for Students and Staff

Identify students and staff members who may be particularly vulnerable (close friends, those with previous trauma, those who bullied or had conflicts with the deceased).

Dashed lines for notes.

- Provide crisis counseling and grief support groups.
Set up a Staff Support Room where teachers can access support.
Allow students to visit the counseling office as needed and communicate procedures for leaving class.
Monitor attendance and academic performance for signs of distress.
Work with the family to arrange a time for them to collect personal items privately.
Remove the student's name from mailing lists and school communications.

Memorial Plans

Notes:

Dashed lines for notes.

List Staff Member(s) who will monitor spontaneous memorials (e.g., notes, flowers) and plan for their respectful removal after a few days.

Dashed lines for notes.

List Staff Member(s) who will ensure social media discussions are monitored for harmful or concerning content.

Dashed lines for notes.

