

How to Respond to a Suicide at your School

This document is adapted from Jack.org's many resources to train and equip young leaders to take action for mental health across Canada.

Objectives:

- To help student teams and staff limit risk and reduce harm after a suicide
- To help student teams and staff craft messages and guide decision-making after a suicide
- To help student teams and staff avoid risk of contagion

Pause health promotion initiatives

After a loss from suicide, health promotion student groups should refrain from having initiatives while the community grieves and begins to recover from the loss. This is not the appropriate time to advocate for mental health, and it's important for you to recognize your limitations as students in this situation; we are not trained counsellors, professional care providers, or elders. Non-trained student teams should not host any initiatives for several weeks after a crisis, and should especially avoid any initiative that may potentially lead to a student-led support group as this could be quite unsafe.

Avoid the risk of contagion

If there is a loss from suicide at your school, it is important to take the precautions to avoid triggering members of your community, as well as to avoid contagion. Contagion occurs when there is a community fixation on an individual who has died by suicide that results in an increase in self harming thoughts or behaviours. Having memorial assemblies centered on the individual who has passed, disrupting class time in response to a suicide, and creating merchandise with the deceased student's name or face glamorizes suicide in a way that can cause contagion. When suicide becomes perceived as glamorous to other students who are struggling, there is a risk of suicide becoming a replicable model for them. For this reason, student work should strictly avoid any emphasis on the individual or method of death after a loss from suicide amongst the school population.

Lean on your teachers and school administration

In the aftermath of the suicide, you may have students looking to your team for guidance on how to grieve and process this incident. In this case, encourage your teachers and school administration to make space for classroom discussions and counselling rooms. Suggesting that the school hold an assembly or fly flags at half mast is not an appropriate response. It is ultimately up to the deceased student's family to decide how they wish to specifically address this death and what they wish to do to memorialize the passing of this student, not the school community.

Remind your peers of support and resources in your community

Another immediate response that a student group could take with a loss from suicide is to remind students what support exists in the community, and encourage those who are struggling to get the support they need. One effective way to promote this message is through your social media accounts like Facebook and Twitter. We encourage your team to think in advance about what resources are available and what this message might look like, as it can be very emotionally challenging to draft a response when a loss has recently occurred.