

MEMORIALS AFTER A SUICIDE: *Guidelines for Schools and Families*

When a school community experiences the death of a student, there is often the very human tendency to want to do something in memory of the deceased student. These memorials can range from spontaneous tributes piled at lockers or parking spaces to more permanent, lasting tributes like placing plaques in halls or planting trees or gardens in the student's name. There may also be ceremonies or assemblies that bring together members of the school community to share memories and grieve together.

The one circumstance that may give schools pause in permitting these types of remembrances is when the death is by suicide. Currently, there is no specific research that addresses the connection between school-based memorials and copy-cat suicides or contagion. There is research however about media coverage of suicides that found that sensationalized news coverage contributed to copy-cat deaths. Experts in the field of postvention have reported anecdotal evidence to support the common-sense observation that vulnerable students who are at-risk for suicide may be affected by these memorial tributes. The distorted thinking of someone who is suicidal can be hard for those of us who have never entertained thoughts about suicide to understand. There is an irrational quality in the mental state of someone who is contemplating intentional death that overrides the intrinsic survival instinct. While the logic of dying by suicide so that the school will put up a plaque or hold an assembly to acknowledge the death is almost impossible for most of us to comprehend, it is the way suicidal students can think.

And what is even more complicating, is the fact that suicide contagion or clusters are often instigated by a death that is not a suicide. The first death or what public health officials call the 'index event' in a suicide cluster is often an accidental death. This is why it's essential that memorials to every death in a school community be handled in thoughtful ways that consider their potential impact on at-risk students.

Potentially suicidal students are not the only members of the school community who may be affected by dramatic or permanent memorials. Students who were close friends of the deceased or even faculty and staff who knew the students may be retraumatized by reminders of the death. As one educator in a school where six students had died in a six month period stated: "I would be having a good day until I saw a student wearing a tee shirt with a picture of one of those students...then all I could think about is how they weren't here anymore."

The task for schools, of course, is to develop a consistent policy that addresses all requests for memorials in the same way, regardless of the circumstances of the death. It can be a challenge to balance compassion with caution, especially in the immediate aftermath of a sudden student death. And while this topic has received an increasing amount of attention in recent years, even some of the most reputable sources provide information that is dated or somewhat inconsistent.





Here are some of the common questions raised about memorials by administrators, faculty, and students. Both the questions and the responses can provide talking points for your school and assist as you proactively craft policies, procedures and protocols that guide your school in addressing this very important topic.

Don't memorials assist in the grieving process?

Yes, for many people they are initiated as a way to honor the memory of the deceased and can reflect shared grief over a loss. They can also help to lessen some of the loneliness that can accompany the death of someone who was important by engaging groups of people in the planning and execution of the memorial itself. Cultural and religious rituals for death often incorporate a piece of that community healing into their ceremonies, and burial sites reflect the importance that some people place on having a lasting memorial to the deceased. What we sometimes forget, however, is that unlike in a family, not everyone in a school is affected by a death. Some students may not have even known the deceased, so have no need to be involved in the grieving process. This is why creating memorial guidelines can be so difficult - you want to help in the process of grief but not stigmatize those who were unaffected by the death. And again, remember that the student was also a member of the larger community, which generally is the more appropriate site for permanent memorials.

Should funeral activities ever be held in the school?

Ideally funerals are best held in places other than the school, like religious settings. However, in some communities, especially those in rural areas, the school is the normal center of all activities and funerals are no exceptions. When it is a common practice to hold a funeral in the school gym or auditorium, students may be less unnerved by this custom than those who attend schools where an in-school funeral would be an exceptional event. It's a good idea, though, regardless of custom, to reach out to vulnerable students after a funeral to check-in on their reactions.

Can you hold memorials for some students and not for others?

While it is certainly true that not every death has the same impact on the members of the school community, it is really important that the official policy of the school reflect a similar response to all deaths. When the approach is differential, it can be perceived that the school values the life of one student more than another or, even worse, that there is a stigma to deaths that occur under certain circumstances, like suicide.

Isn't it best to hold a memorial assembly for the entire school so you know everyone gets the same messages?

Actually, the 'same messages' can be delivered more effectively in classroom formats. Teachers can read a prepared statement to students that is simple, direct and to the point: the school has lost a valuable member of its community to a sudden, tragic death. In a classroom, the teacher can eye-ball student reaction and identify students who may need additional support, which is impossible to do in a large assembly. There are also fewer opportunities for the situation to become intensely emotional and potentially out of control in the small group format of a classroom. In most places, it isn't the school's responsibility to hold a memorial service - it is really better handled in a community setting, like a house of worship.



What do you do about 'spontaneous' memorials?

As one of the immediate responses to the death of a peer, students may create spontaneous memorials at the locker or parking spot of the deceased. These are examples of what we call “passive grieving”- placing a picture, flower, or small object as a token of remembrance. It’s important to let the students have an opportunity to express their feelings by creating these mini-shrines, but make sure your school protocols addresses the following questions:

- What is the acceptable duration for these tributes?
- How will you communicate that information to the students?
- What will you do with the tributes after you remove them?
- What alternative activity can you provide for students who need to continue to express their grief?

An idea to consider: allow the tributes until the day after the funeral. Place a note on the locker or parking spot that says something like: “We appreciate your gestures of remembrance for NAME THE STUDENT. Your tokens will remain here until the day after the funeral. They will then be collected and given to his/her family, whom we know will appreciate your kindness and compassion. (Please remember to check with the family beforehand to make sure this will be okay with them.) If you would like to share other thoughts with the family, please come to the guidance office to write your personal thoughts in a memory book.”

This memory book encourages something we call ‘active grieving’. It requires students to share something about the deceased - their feelings, memories, whatever! - that can actually help them more personally deal with what the death means to them. Creating this kind of memory book also serves another very important function. What a family loses when one of its members dies is not just the life of that person but any chance to ever know the ways in which the deceased interacted with people outside the family. By encouraging students to share a story about the deceased, the family is actually gifted with a memory that might never have had.

Another type of spontaneous memorial that seems to be showing up with increasing frequency is the creation of wearing apparel like tee shirts or sweatshirts with a picture of the deceased. School officials are generally unaware that students are even planning this kind of tribute until students arrive at school wearing the shirts. For the students who create the shirts, of course, the intent is to honor their deceased peer. The last thing on their minds is the negative impact these shirts may have on other vulnerable students. In an attempt to contain these types of tributes, schools have identified the students who orchestrated the printing of the shirts, met with them and explained their inadvertent impact on other students. Students are asked not to wear the shirts to school and are invited to craft other, less dramatic ways to remember their deceased peer.

What other types of memorial activities inappropriate?

Use this as your benchmark: if it dramatizes, sensationalizes, or glamorizes the student, or creates an opportunity for continuing attention to the death, it is probably not a good idea. Samples of inappropriate activities include:

- Flying the flag at half-staff
- Putting a notice on the school’s outdoor message board
- Letting students create and wearing apparel like tee-shirts, sweatshirts or armbands



What other types of memorial activities inappropriate? (cont)

- Planting trees or gardens
- Placing plaques in school corridors
- Naming rooms or sports venues
- Creating banners
- Dedicating yearbooks, dances, sporting events to the person
- Making special acknowledgements at graduation ceremonies

What kinds of memorials are 'appropriate'?

The benchmark here is to create a memorial that is life-affirming and encourages coping skills and resilience, especially in the face of difficult life events. Samples of these types of activities include:

- Making donations to a local crisis center
- Participating in an event that raises awareness about suicide prevention
- Buying books for the school library or hosting school programs that highlight resilience
- Creating community based service activities in the school that emphasize the importance of student's taking care of each other and provide opportunities for taking an active role in helping others
- Writing notes to the family to encourage the 'gift of memories'
- Implementing a suicide prevention program in the school
- Collaborating with community agencies and groups that promote good mental health, such as the local chapter of the Mental Health Association

What can the school do about on-line memorials?

This is a really important concern since this has become one of the more common ways today's youth honor a deceased peer. These sites usually appear within hours of the death. You certainly can't stop students from creating them, but you can try to monitor them. Many times the sites may be public which means you don't have to be a 'friend' to see them. Try to find someone who is savvy with online lingo and can translate postings to monitor the site activity. If there is anything of concern, make sure someone in the school is notified. When you are concerned about postings on the private Facebook page of the deceased, enlist other members of the school community who may have access to the site to help monitor what students are writing. For additional tips on how to monitor on-line postings, visit the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline website: www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org.

How do you handle issues like yearbook pages or graduation ceremonies?

Carefully, with respect and in line with the school's established policies and procedures. It is important to recognize that yearbook tribute pages risk crossing the line of sensationalizing the deceased student, and may therefore pose a risk for those vulnerable students we mentioned earlier. To address this, some schools are adopting yearbook standards to make it clear that deceased students will be remembered in the same way as their living peers - with pictures, short quotes and acknowledgement of the contributions they have made to the school. Under no circumstances, should the circumstances of the death be highlighted. Yearbooks are tributes to the accomplish-



ments students made during their academic careers, not to the way in which they died. Graduation ceremonies can follow the same guidelines - acknowledgement of the student as a member of the matriculating class.

How can schools implement memorial guidelines when they have established precedent that run counter to some of these suggestions?

For most schools, the response to a student death is not specifically addressed in board-approved policies. It is an unwritten protocol that may have been used so often through the years that it seems to have become an established precedent. It is certainly appropriate, however, to consider revisiting your existing memorial precedents in light of the increasing body of knowledge about contagion and copy-cat behaviors in youth and making clear recommendations based on enhancing school safety for at-risk youth. Schools may also want to consider creating a committee to review all memorial requests. This committee could include a school board member, administrator, faculty and staff members, a parent and a student (in a high school setting). Armed with knowledge about the implication of memorials in suicide clusters or contagion, this committee can be charged with making the careful decisions about memorials that consider student safety.

How can you help students - or parents understand the potential risk presented by memorials to vulnerable students?

This is a really important question that should ideally be considered in theory before a school is confronted with the fact of a student's death. Having a memorial committee that reviews all requests can be a helpful part of this process, especially if they are also able to meet with parents or students and explain the reasons behind the school's decision that reflect documented concerns about copy-cat suicides. This explanation, however, is only one part of the process. It is really important to not just discourage certain types of potentially dramatic memorials but also to encourage other memorials that emphasize life-affirming activities. It may take a little extra time to help direct parents or students to these other types of activities, but it can lessen or eliminate the contentiousness that can sometimes cloud this process when students and or parents feel their feelings are not being considered or respected.

Another effective strategy, especially when dealing with the parents of the deceased, is to engage a survivor parent (a parent who has lost a child to suicide) to help advocate for the school's position. The survivor parent can speak with a credibility and level of understanding that comes from shared experience. Your local chapter of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (www.afsp.org) may be helpful in identifying survivor parents to help your school with these delicate conversations.