

Postvention Checklists

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF A POSTVENTION PLAN FOR SCHOOLS?

What is Postvention?

Postvention is a concept in youth suicide prevention which addresses the potential impact a traumatic loss such as a completed suicide may have on youthful audiences. For the purposes of Archdiocesan Response Team project, we will use the term "postvention" to describe any school-based intervention plan which is designed to assist the students and staff deal with the aftermath of a traumatic loss.

Why is Postvention Important for Young People?

Young people have great difficulty adjusting to the impact of a traumatic loss, especially the unexpected shock of an accidental death or a completed suicide. The loss becomes a critical incident for them. They have a need to discuss their concerns and gain some understanding of what is troubling them through a discussion of their feelings about bereavement in small classroom settings. Others need to be identified as "vulnerable" in a loss situation and will benefit from crisis intervention counseling. Still others, who may themselves evidence signs that they are in distress, may need the involvement of their parents and more concentrated intervention to get through the crisis.

In a word, postvention is for the living. It suggests ways for a school to identify and assist students who may be negatively affected by the impact of loss.

What Benefits do Postvention Plans have for Managing Schools?

An effective postvention plan is truly time-competent. In schools where the loss is not discussed, students are frustrated in their developmentally appropriate need to publicly mourn their loss. Teachers are left without clear directions on how to assist students and often report frustration if they have not been informed, of the loss or given a direct role in assisting their students cope with the loss. Additionally, school-based pupil services personnel report that their resources are at times overwhelmed when crises occur and have requested the presence of trained additional support services to deal with the immediate impact.

In a worst case scenario, the absence of an effective postvention plan has been the first step in cluster suicides. At best, crises which have been ignored have left the school, both students and staff, feeling upset about what was or was not done when a crisis occurred.

What is the Benefit for Students?

Students who may become emotionally upset by the loss will be identified and receive emergency services. Teachers will be given timely information about the crisis and will be inserviced in practical crisis intervention strategies which they may use to assist their students. Staff members will receive the support of a trained cadre of professionals who are able to either assist through consultation or direct counseling. Administrators will receive consultation services in developing a response plan which avoids the dual dangers of overreaction or avoidance.

MAJOR FACTORS IN A SCHOOL POSTVENTION PLAN

- CONFIRMATION OF FACTS OF DEATH
- NOTIFICATION AT SCHOOL PRINCIPAL'S LEVEL
- INVOLVEMENT OF SCHOOL COUNSELOR ASSIGNED TO SCHOOL and the ARCHDIOCESAN RESPONSE TEAM
- PLANNING MEETING BY PHONE WITH KEY PERSONNEL
- SPECIFIC ASSIGNMENTS MADE (BEREAVED FAMILY, MEDIA, MONITORING)
- EARLY MEETING TO ADVISE ALL TEACHERS OF THE PLAN
- SCHOOL SCHEDULE CONTINUES; NO LARGE ASSEMBLY
- ANNOUNCEMENTS MADE TO STUDENTS IN CLASSROOMS
- CLASSWORK ADJUSTED TO ALLOW FOR STUDENTS TO DISCUSS THEIR LOSS
- STUDENTS IN NEED OF GRIEF COUNSELING ASSISTED TO COUNSELING CENTER
- "AT RISK" STUDENTS IDENTIFIED AND INTERVIEWED REFERRALS MADE WHERE NEEDED
- DECISION ON WAKE/FUNERAL ATTENDANCE MADE
- PARENTS INFORMED BY HAND-CARRIED LETTERS
- END OF DAY FACULTY MEETING
- FOLLOW-UP ONE WEEK LATER; DEBRIEFING WITHIN A MONTH

WORKING WITH A SCHOOL IN A POSTVENTION SITUATION

FACULTY MEETING

- introduce Archdiocesan Response Team
- announce facts of traumatic event
- outline postvention procedures
- distribute statement to be read
- discuss meeting needs of students
(Teacher handouts)

CLASSROOM POSTVENTION STRATEGIES

- explain why assemblies are not used
- encourage time for young people to process concerns with teacher/advisor
- suggest ways for teachers to lead discussion with students
- inquire whether teachers will need assistance
- discuss the "empty chair" and locker issues

ASSISTING STUDENTS WHO MAY BE AT RISK

- identification of close friends
- identification of previous hospitalized, depressed, or alienated students
- consideration of reasons to and means to refer distressed students for assistance
- involving additional resources as staff and student needs warrant

CAUTIONARY REMARKS ABOUT POSTVENTION

- know dangers of memorializing special types of deaths like suicides
- avoid negative speculation about a violent death and the reasons why it happened
- remember the importance of continuing the school day in order to provide assistance

SAMPLE RESPONSE TEAM MEMBERS' RESPONSIBILITIES

Coordinator In charge of team, first contact and key consultant with school head, processes information, makes final decisions on plan. Processes the impact of the intervention team and the plan.

Internal Communications Provides for the dissemination of information within the school to teachers and staff. Consults with staff on strategies for communicating effectively with youth.

External Communications Provides for the dissemination of information outside of school to media and parents. Often a staff member.

Staff Services Liaison Monitors the emotional well-being of staff members reactions. Provides additional information as needed.

Student Services Liaison Coordinates the provision of crisis counseling and referral services for students in need of more intensive therapeutic intervention.

Suggestions to Teachers for Helping Students Following Death in a School

1. Be prepared for tears. Crying is a normal and healthy reaction, even though it may make you or some students uncomfortable.
2. Recognize that some students who are traumatized most by this news may be very quiet or seem to be in a daze. Be alert to this possibility and have someone bring these students to the counseling office. Notify the counselors if you become aware of a student who is especially affected by the death.
3. During the day, you may, if you wish, let your students discuss this event or allow them to write about their feelings. Avoid rumors and blaming through speculation about causality.
4. If, in your opinion, the class discussion is not helping some grieving students, send them to the counseling office. A counselor or crisis interventionist will be there to assist them.
5. Just listening to students express their feelings and responding to the "hurt" is helpful. Supportive responses include:

"I can see that you are really hurting."

"It is very hard to accept the death of someone you knew well."

"It must seem unbelievable that someone your age has. . . ."

6. Some teachers ask their students to share the memories they have of their deceased friend or teacher. This discussion helps them realize the influence the deceased person has had in their lives.
7. Avoid responses which could be perceived as cold or avoiding any discussion about death:

"It's best if we just forget about this and get back to our work. "

"You'll feel better tomorrow. "

"OK, let's start our test. "

"Here, you move up to this empty chair."

8. Consult with crisis intervention team members for further strategies on working with student grief.

Communicating with the Media

- Be **proactive**. with the press:
 - If there is a chance that this will be a public crisis, contact them before they contact you.
 - Set up geographic and time restrictions for contact between the media and your spokesperson.
 - Explain restrictions such as, no photographing on campus or within the school.
- Be **positive** and **focused** in your communications with the media:
 - Be willing to speak to the media through an identified spokesperson.
 - Have a set number of points (3/4) which you wish to get across and work them into your responses to their questions.
 - Have a written statement to distribute to media.
 - Stress the preparation you have taken:
 - 8 A crisis intervention plan was immediately begun
 - 8 An archdiocesan response team is already in place assisting students and staff.
 - 8 Students are handling the loss calmly and with understanding. They are working with counselors
 - 8 Parents will be informed of the loss and given suggestions on how to be of assistance to their children through communication sent home.
- Be **honest**:
 - If you do not have information, merely say,
I have no information about that at this time.
 - Be cautious about statements of cause and effect until your facts are clear.
 - Offer to update information when more facts are known.
- Be **candid but confidential**:
Who (Use "student" and "teacher"), **What** (the critical incident itself)**When, Where, How** (without providing a prescription for copycats), and **What is being** done now (general information about the intervention and the team).

Administrative Checklist for Responding to Traumatic Loss

- _____ Has the death been verified?
- _____ Has the Coordinator of the Archdiocesan Response Teams been notified?
Telephone number(s) _____
- _____ Have you evaluated the possible impact of the incident to the school and the community?
- _____ Is there a need to contact other agencies within the community?
- _____ Is there a need to contact feeder schools to make the schools aware of siblings and close friends?
- _____ Has the faculty and staff been notified and arrangements made for a preschool faculty meeting? Is a telephone tree in place? Is there a need to notify bus drivers, school crossing guards, cafeteria workers etc.?
- _____ Has someone been identified to write the announcement that the faculty will read to the students? Has the time for the reading of the announcement been determined and necessary scheduling changes been made?
- _____ Is there a need to conduct an afterschool debriefing meeting with the faculty and has an appropriate announcement of the meeting been made to the faculty and staff?
- _____ Has there been personal contact with the family? Has someone been identified as a liaison between the school and the family for the purpose of gathering information?
- _____ Is there a need to address parents on a schoolwide basis?
- _____ Have rooms been assigned for members of the Archdiocesan Response Team to use to meet and to provide counseling?
- _____ Has proposed testing and other schoolwide activities been postponed?
- _____ Have notifications about student activities and school functions been stopped from going to the family of the student?
- _____ Have personal items been removed from the student's lockers?
- _____ Have arrangements been made to allow administrators to remain visible?

- _____ Is a system in place to allow for the dissemination of information concerning funeral arrangements to be given to faculty, staff and student body?
- _____ Has a standardized statement regarding the incident been created to be used by office staff answering telephones?
- _____ Have arrangements for excused absences for students attending memorial/funeral services been considered?
- _____ Has a spokesperson been identified as responsible for disseminating information to the media?
- _____ Is there a need to provide a meeting for concerned parents and community members?

Faculty Checklist for Traumatic Loss

- _____ Are teachers comfortable with reading the death announcement to their students?
Is there a teacher that needs assistance with this task?
- _____ Are teachers aware of vulnerable and at-risk students that need to be identified?
- _____ Are teachers aware of the procedures for assisting students that are in distress-
individual students and an entire class?
- _____ Is there a need to restructure lesson plans, testing calendar, etc.?
- _____ Are teachers comfortable with providing opportunities for discussing the loss and
providing for the stages of grieving if necessary?
- _____ Are teachers comfortable with providing opportunities for projects for the family,
special remembrances, etc.?
- _____ Are teachers comfortable with discussing the subject of death with their students?

Archdiocesan Response Team Checklist for Traumatic Loss

- _____ Has the school administration been contacted and assistance offered?
- _____ Has an Archdiocesan Response Team meeting before school been arranged with the identification of responsibilities?
- _____ Is there an area established to meet faculty and students?
- _____ Is there a need to present assistance to faculty, cafeteria workers, custodians, crossing guards and bus drivers?
- _____ Is there a visitation log with a means of identifying students with continuing needs?
- _____ Have vulnerable students been identified?
- _____ Are there parents in distress that need to be contacted?
- _____ Have feeder schools been contacted?
- _____ Have arrangements been made for postintervention?
- _____ Has an Archdiocesan Response Team debriefing meeting been arranged?