

Recommendations for Memorials or Remembrance Activities for Those Who Have Died by Suspected Suicide

(v2 2011)

Memorial services and remembrance activities play an important part in the healing process and can facilitate grieving after the death of a loved one. However, in the case of a death by suicide, the issue is complicated as those impacted by the suicide (family and friends), as well as any already vulnerable individuals are at risk of imitating the suicide. This is referred to as suicide contagion or “copy-cat” suicides. Any memorials need to strike a delicate balance between creating appropriate opportunities for people to grieve but not increasing risk for vulnerable others by glorifying, romanticising or sensationalising suicide.

Recommendations for any memorials or funerals

- Present the facts
- Encourage grieving and show respect for the deceased while avoiding romanticising the suicide and its cause.
- Don't glamorise the state of “peace” the deceased may have found through death (this can influence vulnerable others who are dealing with psychological pain to also seek that peace or escape via death).
- Make a clear distinction between the positive accomplishments and qualities of the deceased and his or her final act of suicide.
- Present suicide as the worst possible outcome of mental health or behavioural health problems.
- Avoid normalising the suicide by interpreting it as a reasonable response to particularly distressful life circumstances.
- Reassure family, friends and other bereaved that they are not to blame.
- Provide information about resources for treatment and support for others who may be feeling a similar way as the deceased.
- Embed suicide prevention in the service (e.g. mention how others may feel in distress and the importance of reaching out for help).
- Endeavour to normalise seeking professional help for emotional problems the same way one would seek help for physical problems.
- Avoid the suicide being seen as “successful”. Instead, use phrases such as “died by suicide”, “took his life”, “ended her life” etc.
- Be mindful of the specific cultural needs of ethnic communities.
- Avoid permanent memorials as these have been known to facilitate the suicidal acts of others, particularly youth.

- Pay particular attention to youth - ask them to look around and notice adults they can call on for help at this and other times of crisis. Consider pointing out specific adults who are particularly caring and approachable.
- If there is a public memorial, consider personal expressions that can be given to family to keep privately (e.g., letters, poetry etc.) and holding any event in the evening so that youth can attend with their parents.
- Avoid public artistic expressions of grief (including on social networking sites like MySpace, Facebook and Bebo, etc.,) because they may inadvertently increase thoughts of suicide amongst vulnerable youth.
- Suggest that surviving friends and family honour the deceased by living their lives in concert with community values such as compassion, generosity, service, honour and improving quality of life for all.
- Activity focused memorials might include a day of community service, sponsoring mental health awareness programmes, supporting peer counselling programmes, or fund raising for suicide prevention.

A guide for funeral directors is available at

<http://www.sprc.org/sites/default/files/migrate/library/funeraldirectors.pdf>

Also see CASA's CPRS:

- Recommendations for Memorials in Schools after a death by Suspected Suicide
- Social Media and Suicide Postvention
- Circles of Vulnerability (to identify those potentially at risk after a death by suicide)

References

- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and Suicide Prevention Resource Centre. (2011). *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*. Newton, MA: Education Development Centre, Inc.
- Centre for Suicide Prevention. Issue #54 May 2004. *School memorials after suicide: helpful or harmful?*
- Dafoe, B. and Monk. L. (2005). *Suicide Postvention is prevention: A proactive planning workbook for communities affected by youth suicide*. BC Council for Families.
- NASP (2002). Memorials/activities/rituals following traumatic events.
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