Crisis Intervention in Schools: Lessons from the front lines

Dr. Scott Poland,
Nova Southeastern University
spoland@nova.edu
“There is no such thing as a perfect crisis response, but it is important to get the facts and do something and not wait to respond.”
Think Prevention: Activity

• The three leading causes of death for children are accidents, suicide and homicide

• Please outline primary prevention strategies in place or needed in your school and community to reduce the leading causes of death for children
Caplan’s Levels of Crisis Intervention

• Primary prevention---to prevent the crisis/tragedy from happening

• Secondary intervention---activities/support in the immediate aftermath to provide assistance to those affected

• Tertiary intervention---long term assistance over months and years to the most affected
School Crisis Planning

- Do you have a crisis team?
- Has the team identified individual duties and been trained?
- There are key roles for administrators, support personnel such as counselors, nurses, law enforcement and teachers
- Have you done a crisis needs assessment? Contact me for a sample needs assessment, spoland@nova.edu
You are a counselor and the next door neighbor to a H.S. Principal who calls you from the hospital to say that one of his students has just been pronounced dead as a result of a scooter accident witnessed by several of his friends.

Students gathered at the hospital have been told to leave as they are creating chaos. The Principal needs your advice about what to do. It is the first day of the December holiday vacation. What do you recommend?
Administrators Role in a Crisis

• Get input from crisis team
• Inform central administration
• Activate calling tree but if school is in session then what? Notify faculty by memo or PA system
• Conduct a faculty meeting asap (examples)
• Verify the facts and tell the truth
• Be visible and available
• Don’t be afraid to show emotion
Administrator Continued

• Contact the family of deceased
• Empower staff and students
• Accept outside help when needed
• Recognize the short and long term impact
• Keep everyone updated
• Manage the media and protect staff and students
• Realengo, Brazil consultation with Mr. Luis
Administrator Continued

• Set aside other duties and focus on crisis
• Help staff understand the crisis becomes the curriculum
• Give permission for a range of religious beliefs
• Examples of effective and non effective responses
• Death notification examples
Roles for Support Personnel

• Advise the administrator
• Give permission for range of emotions
• Help the faculty first
• Recognize the individual crisis history of each person
• Follow the schedule of the deceased
Support Role Continued

• Most students will get help they need in classroom
• Don’t hesitate to call parents
• Locate additional help
• Keep records of who was seen and concerns
• Ensure those most affected receive ongoing services
Teachers’ Role

• Put desks in a circle and sit down
• Provide factual information to stop rumors
• Model expression of emotions
• Give permission for a range of emotions and religious beliefs
• Know students well and their crisis history and identify students who need counseling help
• Provide activities such as writing and drawing especially for younger students
• Older students may want to become involved in prevention
Teacher Continued

• Provide activities such as ceremonies
• Help students communicate to victim’s family
• Emphasize no one is to blame
• Be familiar with developmental stages of death (Piaget) and cultural customs and practices
• Prepare students for funerals and provide a school presence at the funeral
Teacher Continued

- Listen to students as each has a story to tell
- Five T’s: talk, touch, tears, time and take care of oneself
- Emphasize coping strategies
- Help students to remember positives about deceased
- Don’t minimize the loss or give advice
- Monitor affected students over time
Taking Action: What Schools Can Do to Help

Notification Procedures

- Verify the facts
- Establish a calling tree
- Prepare an announcement or memorandum for distribution
- Conduct a faculty meeting
- Notify parents & students
Taking Action: What Schools Can Do to Help

Roles of School Personnel

Verify facts with local law enforcement

Activate Crisis Response Team

Principal

Set the tone for the school’s response

Partner with community

Contact family of the deceased
Taking Action: What Schools Can Do to Help

Roles of School Personnel

- School Psychologist
- Counselor

Assess student & staff reaction

Make referrals to mental health services

Identify & contact those closely acquainted with deceased

Provide emotional first aid

Identify at-risk students

Offer in-class assistance to teachers

Make referrals to mental health services
Basic Considerations

Bereavement among school children

Death of a family member or friend
- Most children will suffer such a loss before graduating from high school

Death of a parent
- Between 4 and 7% will lose a parent before age 18

Death of peer
- Almost 40% of children will experience the death of a peer
Basic Considerations

Bereavement among school children

Most children will display a normal adjustment to death; however, some may experience significant difficulties.

15-20%
Basic Considerations

Schools as Optimal Settings to Provide Services

- Provide a familiar environment
- Can facilitate large number of students
- Early and ongoing intervention
- Allow for ongoing monitoring of students

Need for Education and Training

- School personnel often unprepared to assist grieving students
- It is important to provide support to the faculty first
Basic Considerations

Developing a *mature* concept of death:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Irreversibility</th>
<th>Non functionality</th>
<th>Universality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Once a living things dies, it cannot become living again</td>
<td>All life functions end upon death</td>
<td>All living things die; it is an inevitable aspect of life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Basic Considerations

Understanding the Grieving Process

Grief

- Cultural practices
- Religious beliefs & practices
- Personality
- Social support
- Previous experiences with death
- Emotional maturity
- Age
- Relationship to deceased

Previous experiences with death
Basic Considerations

Understanding the Grieving Process

- Variability in onset of grief among children
- Grief may erupt in brief, intense episodes, with a sudden return to normal
- Students may appear to be doing well, but may show later difficulties
- Each student has their own unique history of traumatic events and losses
What Reactions Can Be Expected From Students

Educating Staff and Parents on Grief Reactions

- Important for adults to model hope and coping
- Reach out do not preach
- Continue routines
- Keep schools open
- Parent meeting often necessary (Columbine example)
- Provide activities to express emotions
- Students will want to reach out to the family of deceased
- “Gift of hope” as students may want to start prevention programs
- Make referrals to community agencies
- Provide staff and parents handouts that outline the typical reactions that children have to trauma:
  - Nightmares/Worry/Sleeping Problems
  - Regression academically
  - Regression behaviorally
Assessing Impact

Degree and Range of Impact

- Popularity of the deceased/longevity at school?
- Do other family members attend school?
- Manner of death?
- Was there a perpetrator?
- Location of the death?
- What other tragedies have impacted the school?
Assessing Impact
Identifying At-Risk Students

Circles of Vulnerability

Physical Proximity

Psychosocial Proximity

Population at Risk
Realengo, Brazil

- Perpetrator returned to his previous middle school killing 12 and wounding many others
- He appeared to be imitating the VA Tech shooter
- He died by suicide at the school
- My consultation and key responses from Principal Luis
### Assessing Impact

**Identifying Signs of Distress**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symptoms Associated with Complicated Grief</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intense focus on the death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty accepting the reality of the death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preoccupation with how the deceased died</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intense longing for the deceased</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistent personality changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extreme irritability or agitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pervasive fantasies of the deceased’s return</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excessive or inappropriate guilt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extreme withdrawal and detachment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Taking Action: Provide Help

**Emotional First-Aid**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reaching out Physically</th>
<th>Reaching out Emotionally</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Position yourself at the person’s side,</td>
<td>Use brief comments:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at their level</td>
<td>“This must be very painful for you”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“You are not alone. We are here for you.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I’m sorry this happened. I am here to listen.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use the individual’s name, using a soft</td>
<td>Use brief suggestions:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>voice</td>
<td>“It’s okay to let your feelings out.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide a comforting physical presence</td>
<td>Use brief questions:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>through the use of body language</td>
<td>“How are you feeling?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“How can I help?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Taking Action: What Schools Can Do to Help

Memorials & Other Rituals

- Provide opportunities for memorial activities or allow for a temporary memorial site

- Memorial activities should be based on needs and wishes of the school community

- Develop policies for memorials in advance (Arapahoe example)

- Most debate about memorials after a suicide
## Taking Action: What Schools Can Do to Help

### Preparing for the Return of a Grieving Student

- Contact the student and their family to determine how the grieving student is coping with the loss
- Discuss the topic of grief with students in the class
- Highlight potential difficulties the returning student may experience
- Prepare students for possible behavior changes in the returning student
- Be attentive to potential grief reactions of classmates
- Provide opportunities to reach out to the grieving student
- Teach students to respect the grieving process
Parental support is the most critical aspect of child’s adjustment

- Acknowledge what has happened
- Listen empathically
- Express genuine concern and provide support
- Give reassurance without minimizing the loss

Provide handouts to parents with basic information about the grieving process, how to talk to their child, & local resources
What If the Death Was a Suicide?

**Key Points**

- Tell the truth about the manner of death but focus on the living and their reactions
- Contact the family of the victim
- Avoid glamorizing the victim
- Follow media guidelines for reporting suicide
- The answer as to “why” died with them
- Emphasize not all suicides can be prevented and mental illness and depression are often involved
- Focus on assistance to those affected and educate everyone on the warning signs and sources of help
- Identify those most at risk for imitative behavior
- Research has found school interventions after a suicide are short in duration and focus on too few students
- Monitor social media
- Review and implement recommendations from, Crisis Action School Toolkit-Suicide (2017) by Poland and Poland available at [www.namimt.org](http://www.namimt.org)
- Recognize that memorial activities should be allowed and often are necessary after a suicide death and that schools should strive to treat all deaths the same
- Do not have an assembly after a suicide
Resilience

The ability to thrive and to show positive adaptation despite significant adversity or challenging circumstances.
# Setting the Stage for Resilience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies for Promoting Resilience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Help students identify supportive adults in their lives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help students make connections with peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create positive classroom connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empower students by encouraging them to help others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help students increase a sense of competence by setting realistic goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage proper self-care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help nurture a positive self-view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach the importance of maintaining a daily routine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage students to maintain a positive outlook</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Key Points

- Schools often neglect crisis planning and don’t have an identified crisis team
- Schools often underestimate the long term impact of a crisis
- Schools often fail to review crisis events for lessons learned for prevention/intervention
- Crisis planning is an ongoing proves involving school staff, parents and students
Crisis intervention is intense, demanding, and changes us... We must care for ourselves! It is okay to say NO!

“Promoting Healing- Caring for the Caregiver”
From
Erbacher, Singer, and Poland, Suicide in Schools (2015)
“The manner in which schools/communities respond to a death can...set the stage for healing, recovery, and a return to relative normalcy.”
Contact Information

• Email: spoland@nova.edu

• Website: www.nova.edu/suicideprevention

• Latest Book: Suicide in schools (2015) by Erbacher, Singer and Poland, Routledge: NY
We’d love to hear from you!

The survey can be accessed via Sched or using the QR code.

Please make sure you complete the conference survey so your name can be entered into a drawing for an Amazon gift card.
Resources

• American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and Suicide Prevention Resource Center
  After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools.
  www.sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/library/AfteraSuicideToolkitforSchools.pdf

• Dougy Center: The National Center for Grieving Children and Families
  http://www.dougy.org/grief-resources/death-impacts-your-school/
  Provides publications and information for grieving children and families and also provides training and technical assistance to establish peer support groups for grieving children, teens, and their families.
Resources

• National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement: http://www.stchristophershospital.com/pediatric-specialties-programs/specialties/690
  Serves as a resource center for information, training materials, consultation, and technical assistance for school systems and other professional organizations in order to assist schools in supporting students, staff, and families during times of crisis and loss.

• National Child Traumatic Stress Network: www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/traumatic-grief
  Provides information for parents and caregivers, educators, and other professionals on topics such as the grieving process, childhood traumatic grief, and sibling death.
References


