



Guidelines for Memorial Services Following the Death by Suicide of a Student or Teacher

In a memorial observance for a young person who has died by suicide, service leaders should address the young people in attendance very directly, since they are most prone to imitate or model the suicide event. The death of their peer may make them feel numb or intensely unsettled. Regardless of how disturbing this sudden loss may be, impart a sense of community to the audience highlighting the need to pull together to get through this.

Make specific suggestions that will unite the community around the purpose of caring for one another more effectively. Also, ask the young people to look around and notice adults on whom they can call for help in this or other times of crisis. Consider pointing out examples of adults who are known to be particularly caring and approachable. These may be teachers, counselors, youth ministers, coaches, etc. Note their desire to talk and listen to anyone who is feeling down or depressed, questioning, including having thoughts of death or suicide.

Focus attention on the hope of a brighter future and the goal of discovering constructive solutions to life's problems—even when these problems include feelings of depression or other signs of mental or emotional problems. Encourage the youth to reach outside themselves to find resources for living lives to their fullest potential and to talk with others when they are having difficulties in life. Additionally, it is critically important that the young people who are present watch each other for signs of distress and never keep thoughts of suicide a secret, whether those thoughts are their own or a friend's. Stress the importance of telling a caring adult if they even *think* one of their friends may be struggling with these issues.

Note: Schools and faith communities may wish to organize individual classes or small discussion groups with prepared adult leaders where the youth can more comfortably discuss their thoughts and feelings regarding their loss, and where questions may be more easily raised and addressed.

There have been several cases where dedicating public memorials after a suicide have facilitated the suicidal acts of others, usually youth. Consequently, dedicating memorials in public settings, such as park benches, flag poles, or trophy cases soon after the suicide is discouraged. In some situations, however, survivors feel a pressing need for the community to express its grief in a tangible way. Open discussion with proponents about the inherent risks of memorials for youth should help the community find a fitting, yet safe outlet. These may include personal expressions that can be given to the family to keep privately, such as letters, poetry or works of art. Alternatively, suggest that surviving friends dedicate their lives as a memorial to the deceased and in concert with community values, such as caring, honoring, and promoting a better life. While artistic expression is often therapeutic for those experiencing grief, public performances of poems, plays or songs may inadvertently increase thoughts of suicide among vulnerable youth.

Adapted from Draft Guidelines by NSSP Sub-committee