

## Anniversaries of Deaths by Suicide

As the anniversary of XXX's death approaches, we want to check in with students to make sure that if any are struggling with this, we have a chance of identifying them and getting them the support they need. We are outlining a discussion that we'd like you to lead in your classrooms during XXX period.

In approaching this, the focus will not be on the fact that XXX's death was a suicide, however that may come up as part of the discussion, and we don't want to shut that down. While it is not the goal of the discussion to focus on suicide, we know that some students may be struggling with fears, anxiety, anger or sadness. If those anxieties are specifically tied to suicide, that means that child or someone about whom s/he is worried is at risk, and this is our chance to make a difference by hearing about it and making sure the child gets the support needed. If we drive the conversation about suicide underground when it comes up, students take our (perhaps nonverbal) messages as indicators that they're on their own in surviving this very frightening thing.

Remember, you don't have to have answers for their questions or concerns. Some ways of keeping the discussion going might be responses such as:

*Sometimes not having answers about why someone did something is the most difficult part.*

*The first time we lose someone special, sometimes grief almost feels dangerous or frightening.*

*I don't have an answer for that, but I'm so glad we could take this moment together just to see where we all are with this. Does anybody else have a thought on this?*

*We really can never know what was in the heart or mind of a student at a time such as that. The answers died with XXX. We would all feel better if we could know what was in his/her mind, but really we'll never know.*

*Sometimes we think it was suicide, that it was intentional, and perhaps sometimes it was a cry for help from someone who hoped to be saved. We just can't know.*

*When we feel helpless because we think we should have known what was happening for him, and we feel guilty or feel so much regret because we missed that chance, the one thing we can do is use this as our lesson and our motivation to be the best listeners possible... the most supportive friends possible... the most compassionate beings possible... we can stand up for kids who are bullied and not be bystanders to it. We can stand up about an issue that is hurtful in defense of someone who needs our support.*

You can see that the goal here is to keep the conversation going and not close it off. Youth need adult perspective and compassionate support.

Regarding your time with the students:

The goal is to have students identify the kinds of things that helped them get through that time and what we can learn from this process. Please check with XXX(Counselor) if you have any question about the tone or focus of this time with students or wish any clarification at all.



Please open the discussion in generally this way:

*Students, we wanted to take a quiet moment and talk together about a difficult time we had last year. We're just coming up on the first anniversary of XXX's death, and we thought this would be an important time to check in with you all for several reasons. One thing is that the school wants to learn each time we have a tragedy so we can become better at supporting all of you. We also want to know how you are doing, and what would be helpful for us to do now. So let's perhaps start with hearing from a few of you about how you got through that time.*

- *What did students do that was helpful?*
- *What did staff do that was helpful?*
- *What was helpful about what the school did for those couple of weeks?*
- *What were some things that were perhaps not so helpful?*

*As we talk about these things, I want us to remain kind in what we say, particularly if it might be hurtful to someone else's feelings. But this is just a good time for us to learn together.*

Let students respond. Then:

*As you think back on that time now, what comes to mind?*

- *How did you get through that time?*
- *What kinds of things did you do at school that helped?*
- *What did you do at home?*
- *Have any of you lost a family member or someone else in this past year? A relative or friend or friend of the family? What happened that was helpful or hurtful for you at that time?*
- *Are there things that are surprising or difficult for you now a year later?*

Finally:

*Sometimes when we talk about things like this, you have thoughts about it later. A couple of things are really important here. One is that sometimes kids are concerned about whether they're doing OK or maybe are concerned about a friend who might be struggling. We want to make sure you know who you can talk to if you are worried. You can go to the counselor, XXX or certainly I would want you to know that I'll listen to you any time.*

It is important to remember that we aren't expecting teachers to be the "instant counselor" in this, but we know that sometimes they are the first person a child approaches about feeling suicidal or worrying about a friend, and the role of the teacher is just to listen long enough to gain trust and then to walk the child down to XXX to be sure that XXX actually does see the child and works with the situation. Please also be sure you keep a paper trail of any referrals you make (who you referred to the counselor, what day, what your concern was, when you voiced that concern to the counselor, whether you know there has been follow-up). Although policy may prevent the counselor or administrator from giving specific information about what was done for the child you referred, it is your responsibility to check back with the counselor to be sure that the child's need was addressed.

