

A young woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing a green long-sleeved shirt, is sitting at a desk in a classroom. She is looking down and writing in a notebook with a yellow pencil. In the background, another student is visible, slightly out of focus. The overall scene is a classroom setting.

After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools

Second Edition



Social Media

In the emotionally charged atmosphere that often follows a suicide death, schools may be inclined to try to control or stifle students' use of social tools such as texting, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat—a task that is virtually impossible. However, by working in partnership with key students to identify and monitor the relevant social networking sites, schools can strategically use social media to disseminate information, share prevention-oriented messaging, offer support to students who may be struggling, and identify and respond to students who could be at risk.

Key Considerations

Following a suicide death, students may immediately turn to social media for a variety of purposes, including:

- Getting and sharing news about the death (both accurate and rumored)
- Expressing their feelings about what has happened
- Giving and receiving emotional support
- Calling for impromptu gatherings (both safe and unsafe)
- Creating online memorials (both moving and risky) and posting messages (both appropriate and hostile) about the deceased

The deceased person's social media page often becomes a place where friends and family talk about the suicide and the person who died.

Social media provides schools with a powerful set of tools to do the following:

- Disseminate important and accurate information to the school community
- Identify students who may be in need of additional support or further intervention
- Share resources for grief support and mental health care
- Promote safe messages that emphasize suicide prevention
- Minimize the risk of suicide contagion that could occur through glorifying suicide or describing details of the means used

Schools will be able to use social media most effectively and efficiently if they have set up policies and protocols and developed a presence on social media sites before a crisis takes place. Policies can include guidelines about how social media should be used (e.g., for broadcast, interaction, linkage). Protocols can include platform-specific templates that can be filled in and deployed rapidly in a crisis. Schools should determine which social media tools to use based on the culture and needs of their school community. Schools may also want to have a designated staff person serve as a social media manager to assist the school district's public information officer.

Involve Students

Students themselves are in the best position to assist in the school's efforts. They can:

- Help identify the particular media favored by the student body
- Engage their peers in honoring their friend's life appropriately and safely
- Inform school or other trusted adults about online communications that may be worrisome or inappropriate

It will enhance the credibility and effectiveness of social media efforts to have a designated member of the Crisis Response Team who is familiar with social media work in partnership with student leaders.

Students recruited to help should be reassured that school staff are only interested in supporting a healthy response to their peer's death, not in thwarting communication. They should also be made aware that staff are available to provide support if they see a social media post that indicates someone may be at risk of suicide.

Disseminate Information

Schools may already have a website and/or an online presence on one or more social media sites. These can be used to share information with students, teachers, and parents, for example:

- The funeral or memorial service (schools should check with the student's family before sharing information about the funeral)
- Where students can go for help or to meet with counselors
- Facts related to mental illness and the warning signs of suicide
- Local mental health resources
- The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 800-273-TALK (8255) or www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org for live chat
- Other national suicide prevention organizations, such as [AFSP](http://AFSP.org) and [SPRC](http://SPRC.org)
- Schools should emphasize help-seeking and suicide prevention. Students can also be enlisted to post this information on their own social media outlets. More specific guidance for safe message content is in the [*Framework for Successful Messaging*](#).

Monitor and Respond

Social media sites, including the deceased's wall or personal profile pages, should be monitored to whatever extent possible for the following:

- Rumors
- Information about upcoming or impromptu gatherings
- Derogatory messages about the deceased
- Messages that bully or victimize current students
- Comments indicating students who may themselves be at risk

Responses should emphasize safe messaging and dispel rumors, reinforce the connection between mental illness and suicide, and offer resources for mental health care. In some cases, it may be appropriate to go beyond replying online, for example, to notify parents and local law enforcement about the need for security at late-night student gatherings.

It may also be necessary in some cases to take action against so-called "trolls," who seek out memorial pages on social media sites and post deliberately offensive messages and pictures. Most services (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) have a report mechanism or comparable feature that enables users to notify the site of the offensive material and request that it be removed. The administrator of the memorial page may also be able to block particular individuals from accessing the site.

On occasion, schools may become aware of posted messages indicating that another student may be at risk of suicide. Messages of greatest concern are those suggesting hopelessness or referring to plans to join the deceased student. In these instances, it may be necessary to alert the student's family, refer the student for immediate mental health services, and/or contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline to request that a crisis center follow up with the student.

For more resources on social media, see [Appendix B: Additional Resources](#).