

Schools often react poorly to student suicides, experts say

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Many school officials react in exactly the wrong ways when one of their students completes suicide, according to the authors of a new book.

While they may be well-intentioned, administrators who don't send the right messages may make copycat suicides more likely, and are not providing the help needed by others hurting from the tragedy.

"Without the proper knowledge and resources, many school administrators may implement strategies that could actually increase the risk of suicide among students," said Darcy Haag Granello, professor of counselor education at Ohio State University.

Granello is co-author of the book *Suicide, Self-Injury and Violence in the Schools: Assessment, Prevention and Intervention Strategies*. She co-authored the portion of the book dealing with suicide with her husband, Paul Granello, also an associate professor of counselor education at Ohio State.

While school officials may be well-meaning in their response to a suicide, the best way to react is actually counterintuitive to our cultural norms, said Paul Granello.

"We naturally want to have ceremonies and memorials, flowers at the fence and burning candles. But when you do this in the case of a suicide, it sends the wrong message to troubled youth who might also be contemplating suicide," he said.

"They may see this outpouring of grief as a glorification of the person who completed suicide. Some troubled people might think that they want to get all that attention, too. That could cause contagion."

Even the way school officials and others talk about a suicide can send the wrong message.

For example, many well-meaning adults may say that a student killed himself to "end the pain."

"What a dangerous message that is for [young people](#)," Darcy Granello said.

"It tells them that suicide is the way to end pain. But suicide is never that simple. There is never a direct line from some bad things happening to someone to a choice to complete suicide."

Instead, adults should talk about how suicide transfers pain from the person who killed him or herself to a whole community who is now in pain, she said.

Schools should avoid holding in-school memorials, or cancelling classes or school. And while education about mental health issues and suicide is important, schools should not do this in large assemblies. All these actions can serve to sensationalize the death.

For the same reason, school officials should minimize discussion of the details of the suicide.

"Students learn from hearing the story of the student death, and copycat suicides can result," Paul Granello said.

"Instead of focusing on the suicide itself, focus on what help is available

and how people are responding to the grief. The focus should be on the community response."

But that doesn't mean suicide should not be discussed at all – quite the contrary, Darcy Granello emphasized.

Schools should provide students with facts about suicide risk and mental health resources. This should be done in small groups, or individually if needed.

Adults shouldn't be afraid to talk about suicide and to directly ask troubled students if they are thinking about suicide, Darcy Granello said.

"There's a lot of research that shows that talking about suicide appropriately actually reduces the risk – it doesn't increase it," she said.

"Young people are already talking about suicide. They are just talking about it with friends and others who don't know any more than they do. We need to find ways to have the conversation with young people."

The main message to students should be that their problems are not unsolvable. In most case, suicides result from undiagnosed or untreated depression.

"About 80 percent of cases of depression are treatable," Paul Granello said. "The tragedy is that we have this epidemic of suicide among young people, when in most cases the cause is depression that could be treated."

Teachers and administrators should be especially alert after a suicide for students who may be taking the death particularly hard.

Studies show that only about one-quarter of young people would tell an adult if they knew of a peer with suicidal thoughts, according to Darcy

Granello. That means that, after a suicide, many of the friends of the victim may be feeling guilty that they kept this secret.

"These young people are at a much higher risk of suicide themselves because they knew this secret and didn't do anything," she said.

"Part of the response by schools should be to work with all these friends who kept secrets. And part of the prevention strategy should be helping students recognize that keeping secrets about suicide is not smart."

While dealing with a suicide may seem overwhelming to school officials, there are resources to help them. The key is to have a plan in place before tragedy strikes.

"If you have a suicide at your school today, now is not the time to figure out what to do. That is how mistakes are made and inappropriate actions are taken," Darcy Granello said.

Fortunately for schools, a research-based plan for dealing with suicides is already available for them. It is called the School-based Youth Suicide Prevention Guide, available online through the Florida [Mental Health Institute](#): theguide.fmhi.usf.edu/

"One of the things we tell schools all the time is that they don't have to invent a [suicide](#) prevention plan. It just needs implementation, it doesn't need recreating," Darcy Granello said.

Provided by The Ohio State University

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