

QuickLits: Suicide Contagion

Evidence of Contagion

Research over several decades clearly demonstrates that vulnerable youth who are exposed to a suicide or fictional portrayals of suicide may subsequently attempt suicide themselves. This phenomenon is known as “contagion.” (Gould, Jamieson & Romer, 2003) Contagion accounts for 1% - 5% of suicide deaths each year (“After a Suicide”).

Definitions of Related Terms

CONTAGION: Exposure to a suicide death may influence someone (already at risk) to take their life or attempt suicide

CLUSTER: Consecutive suicides in the same area among a demographically similar group (note impact /reaction of community).

COPY-CAT: A suicide that copies the same characteristics of another suicide, e.g. same song playing, same means of death, etc.

PACT: An agreement by two or more individuals to die by suicide (NAMI NH, 2010)

Media Coverage and Risk for Contagion

Gould reports that “the magnitude of the increase in suicides following a suicide story is proportional to the amount, duration and prominence of media coverage.” (2001) Other factors such as the content of media headlines, language and terminology used in news reports, and dramatizing, sensationalizing, romanticizing, over-simplifying or providing graphic details on the methods and/or circumstances surrounding a death by suicide can also increase the risk of contagion. The CDC, NIMH, SAMHSA and other partners have created comprehensive recommendations for media reporting on suicide to minimize this risk. (“Reporting on Suicide”)

Contagion and Suicide Postvention

Preventing contagion is a primary goal of suicide postvention. (NAMI NH) In “After a Suicide”, experts recommend these postvention measures, in addition to basic crisis response, to minimize the risk of contagion:

- follow safe-messaging guidelines in all campus communications regarding the suicide (“Safe”)
- identify other students at possible risk for suicide, especially those who have been exposed, directly or indirectly, to the prior suicide, those who had a relationship with or may identify with the deceased, & those with mental health or behavioral challenges
- partner with local mental health and healthcare providers to expedite referrals of students who may need screening, evaluation and services
- provide on-campus grief counseling and related services, both after the suicide & at significant events or anniversaries that may renew focus on the suicide
- designate a campus spokesperson to work with the media (including student/campus media), use safe messaging, monitor media coverage and urge the media to follow responsible reporting guidelines
- work with trusted students to leverage social networking tools to identify & support at-risk students, disseminate information following safe-messaging guidelines & publicize available counseling & mental health services & resources
- discuss with family, friends and clergy of the deceased the need to avoid glamorizing or romanticizing either the student or the death in spontaneous or planned memorials, events or tributes; collaborate with them to create safe and appropriate memorials (“After a Suicide”)

Strategic Prevention

Building a community coalition before tragedy strikes may be the most powerful contagion prevention strategy. Include mental health & healthcare providers, law enforcement, first responders, clergy, students and others. See recommendations in “After a Suicide.”

- *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*. Online at: <http://www.sprc.org/library/AfteraSuicideToolkitforSchools.pdf>
- Gould, M. S. (2001). Suicide and the media. In H. Hendin & J. J. Mann (Eds.), *Suicide prevention: Clinical and scientific aspects* (Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, pp. 200-224). New York: New York Academy of Sciences.
- Gould, Madelyn, Patrick Jamieson, Daniel Romer (2003). Media Contagion and Suicide Among the Young. *American Behavioral Scientist* 2003 46: 1269 DOI: 10.1177/0002764202250670
- NAMI New Hampshire (2010). Reducing Risk and Promoting Healing for Individuals, Family and Communities After Suicide, GLS Grantee Conference 2010. Online at: <http://www.sprc.org/grantees/statetribe/2010/7A%201%20Norton.pdf>
- *Reporting on Suicide: Recommendations for the Media*. Online at: <http://www.sprc.org/library/sreporting.pdf>
- *Safe and Effective Messaging for Suicide Prevention*. Online at: <http://www.sprc.org/library/SafeMessagingfinal.pdf>