

Care Station Management Guidelines for Student Support

The purpose of care stations in the aftermath of a crisis is threefold:

- to provide a safe, private location where affected students can discuss feelings and reactions with trained staff
- to provide an opportunity for supportive group interaction with peers
- to identify students who may need continuing follow-up either in school or through referral to off-campus resources

With these goals in mind, here are guidelines for care station management:

1. Try to staff care stations with at least two or three crisis team members (this may include pairing your school staff with community partners). This allows flexibility to provide individualized support to students who need it.
2. Small, focused groups are a very effective way to use care station resources. Limit group size to twelve students and under. Smaller groups will better facilitate reaching the goals of providing a better opportunity to stabilize initial crisis responses and helping students identify other sources of support. Larger groups can be more difficult to control and limit opportunities for participation by each member. Additionally, discussion in larger groups often turns into repetitive recitation of the details of the event and speculation about the causes, neither of which is usually helpful. Try to limit the group meeting time to the length of a normal class period, and do not include students who seem emotionally “out of control” (i.e., visibly upset, sobbing uncontrollably, unable to communicate). These students should receive individualized support.

Support Group Goals

- Stabilize students
- Assess the need for follow-up

3. Recognize that the goals of these groups, especially in the immediate aftermath of the crisis, are *very* limited: to help stabilize students and assess their need for additional follow-up. Because of the intense emotionality usually present at this time, these groups are not designed to educate in depth about the grief process. There is a brief discussion about the tasks of grieving, but it is extremely limited and should not be construed as grief education. The groups are also not designed to provide what has been called

“psychological debriefing,” a controversial process that encourages participants to “relive” or “revisit” in a graphic way the particular events and experience of the trauma.

Remember to Provide

- Control
- Support
- Structure

4. Remember the guiding principles of postvention (the provision of control, support, and structure), and apply them to your interactions with students.
 - a. You provide *control* with clear leadership that will give students a sense of security. Start by greeting each arriving student by name and introducing yourself. Explain that the care stations have been set up to provide students with extra support during this difficult time. Students can either join their peers in a small group (led by a crisis team member or community partner) or talk individually with resource staff. Visible screening or “eyeballing” of students should give you an idea which students may be too upset to participate in a group discussion and require individual support. Review and reinforce group rules that only one student speaks at a time, information shared in the group remains in the group, and every reaction or response is to be accepted without criticism or judgment. If a student becomes emotionally distraught during the group, assess the need for individual support and respond appropriately. At the end of the group, if a student expresses the need for additional support, speak to him or her privately to initiate a referral.
 - b. *Support* is conveyed by your tone of voice and your acknowledgment and validation of all student responses. The presence of tissue boxes and bottled water are visible symbols of a supportive climate that recognizes personal needs. Students may also feel supported when they are given permission to participate by simply listening. Knowing that they are *not* required to share personal feelings and observations can be a relief to the more reserved students. Make sure that you check in with these quiet students at the conclusion of the meeting to find out what they’re taking away from the meeting and if they feel they need additional support.
 - c. The setup of the group can announce *structure* as soon as students enter. Arrange chairs in a circle, with or without a center table. A center table that holds the tissues and water bottles is actually a very effective structuring device. Psychologically, it also provides a physical boundary that can create feelings of safety and protection for participants, especially the more reluctant members.

Explain that the group will last for a class period. Clarity about the time frame is important, since it announces up front what the limits to the discussion will be. Obviously, students who need more support can remain in the care station after the conclusion of the meeting, but students whose needs may be less significant can generally return to the classroom. Briefly explaining the process of grief, especially initial reactions, also begins to provide an organizing structure for the emotional responses of group members. (See the handout *How Children Understand Death* from chapter 1.)

- d. An effective opening question to the group can be “What are you feeling about what happened, and how can the support staff be helpful to you?” Be sure to mention the other staff in addition to crisis team members who are available to support the students. Explaining to students that the school is offering a safety net of support can be very comforting and reassuring.
- e. Label and summarize the reactions that are expressed, since they may be confusing. Naming the feelings you hear in the group also helps clarify them; for example, “It sounds like most of you are still very shocked about what happened and really can’t believe it” or “And you, LaToya, suspected that Justin was feeling really sad, but you never believed he would do anything to hurt himself” or “In general, I also hear that you are worried that another student might copy what Justin did. Am I getting that right?” Check out your summary with the group to make sure you’ve gotten it right.
- f. Realize that students may seem preoccupied with the details of what happened and with trying to find reasons to explain it (especially if the death was a suicide). Briefly review the facts of the death, but don’t let them dominate the discussion. This search for reasons will continue for some time and your task is to help students understand that ultimately they may never be able to truly answer the question of why their peer chose to take his or her own life. Point out that part of the reason *why* this search is so important is that by trying to understand what was going on in the mind of the deceased, we are trying to protect ourselves from ever being in the same emotional condition. This search for reasons can help us learn ways we can protect ourselves and others by reaching out for help.
- g. Try to move the discussion from the reasons for the death to what the students will miss about the deceased and what the person meant to them. This can be very challenging, especially if students have just learned about the death and are still trying to assimilate the fact that it happened. The predominant emotions of shock and disbelief may need to run their course before any other meaningful discussion can occur.
- h. Recognize that just as each student may express grief in personal and individual ways, so, too, each small group may differ in its expression of grief. Some groups, as mentioned above, may remain stuck in disbelief about what happened, while others may be able to discuss funeral attendance. Take your leadership cues

from group content. Your task as leader is to give students permission to express their feelings whatever they happen to be, validate what you hear, and suggest supportive ways for students to address their feelings.

- i. Give yourself at least 5 minutes before the scheduled ending of the group to discuss coping methods and sources of continuing support. Get students to actively participate in this discussion and encourage them to brainstorm strategies. The following examples can be used:
 - Make a mental note of at least three trusted adults that you can share your feelings and concerns with.
 - Understand that upsetting feelings are part of the grief process, but know that you can share those feelings with a trusted adult or close friend if they become too overwhelming.
 - Recognize that the death has affected the entire community and support is available at more locations than just the school. (Distribute a list of community resources if appropriate.)
 - Write a note to the family of the deceased to express not just your feelings but to share a memory of your friend. This can provide a way to “contain” some of your emotion as well as give the family an additional memory of the deceased to hold on to.
 - Remember that the suicide of a friend or peer may make you begin to think about suicide yourself. And while this is a normal outcome after a suicide, it is absolutely *essential* that you share these thoughts or feelings with someone who can help you manage them.
- j. Follow up that evening with all students who were seen at care stations. This can be done in person or by phone or e-mail. Simply check in to see what and how they are doing. Contact parents to discuss techniques for helping their children during this crisis (see the *Lifelines Postvention* handout *When a Friend of Your Child’s Dies by Suicide: A Guide for Parents* in chapter 6) and for providing follow-up support if it appears indicated.