



TRANSCRIPT

Postvention is Prevention: Considerations for Responding to Youth Suicide

NARRATOR

The numbers are staggering. In the United States, more than 6,000 children and youth die by suicide each year, and it's the second leading cause of death for youth ages 15 to 24. Nearly one in five high school students also report that they've seriously considered attempting suicide. As part of an event series on student mental health in California's Central Valley, REL West and the California School-Based Health Alliance hosted a virtual convening for educators and other youth-serving professionals to learn more about how to prevent youth suicide.

A keynote presenter was Stan Collins, a national leader who works with the California Department of Education and school districts to develop comprehensive youth suicide prevention efforts. He started his presentation by sharing his personal story of suicide loss during his high school years. In this video, he reflects on his experience, going back to school and sitting next to his friend's empty desk.

Stan introduces a number of practical and evidence-based prevention, intervention, and postvention strategies, and explains how postvention—activities that reduce risk and promote healing after a suicide death—is an integral part of prevention. Stan is an expert on postvention strategies. He shared quick and easy ideas the schools can adopt to minimize the risk of other suicides and promote healing in school communities. Here are some highlights from his suggestions.

STAN COLLINS

Postvention is an area of suicide prevention under the umbrella of suicide prevention because postvention is prevention. We know we need to do a better job at identifying and intervening with youth. But postvention is something that often gets left off the table until we need it. What is postvention? This may be a word that you're not familiar with. So postvention refers to steps that are taken in response to a suicide death. Some will also include responses to a suicide attempt in this. But really, it's talking about suicide deaths. One of the most important things is that timing is critical. After a suicide occurs is not the time to start to develop a postvention plan. You need to have all your ducks in a row so that immediately, once you're notified, everybody knows their role, you can check in with your staff, and you can get moving.

With that, why postvention? The reality is that schools are often unsure how to respond. And what we instinctually do in a school setting to respond to suicide death can actually increase risk among youths. So we want to be very careful about the steps and actions that we take. What we also know is that certain responses from the school can actually decrease risk. What are we trying to do when we're talking about postvention? We're trying to assist that grief

process. One of the things that we need to do also is provide accurate information. A lot of times, we're concerned or confused about what information's appropriate to share, what information should we not share, what is dangerous. And so, what oftentimes happens when schools are communicating to the students or to the larger community, is they get very formal and almost robotic in their responses. And it's OK to bring heart to these conversations. You and your staff, and everyone in that community, is grieving right now. It's OK to acknowledge that. But we only want to provide the amount of information that is needed to keep other youths safe, to acknowledge the death, and we'll talk a little bit about whether or not we can talk about suicide in this situation.

One of the other things we want to do is, we want to get our team together and identify who may be at increased risk after exposure to this death. Now, a lot of times, immediately following a suicide death, schools want to jump in, "Hey, we've got to educate our staff. We've got to educate our youth." But I would caution you in immediately implementing suicide prevention efforts because what that can do is what we call survivor guilt or survivor grief. To kick off postvention, I actually want to share just a couple practical considerations and suggestions that I hope you'll take to heart in terms of being effective in a postvention response. Because one of the things I remember, looking back to that geometry class, one of the hardest parts about the next few weeks, the next few months was that I still was sitting next to my best friend's empty desk. And so, I honestly don't know if I learned anything else about geometry for the rest of that semester because every day, I sat there, staring at his desk, wondering what I could've done, what I could've said. What if something would've gone differently?

And so, one of the first steps to look at...and not immediately. Give kids time to process. There probably was some healing that came from being associated with that desk, but at some point, when the time is right, rearranging the seating chart. Not just switching what student's sitting in what seat, because no kid wants to sit in the desk of the dead kid, right? So actually rearranging the seating chart. So if you're theater style, move to circle. If you're circle, move to theater. I've also heard of teachers coming in over the weekend to support the teachers who lost that student and redecorating the room, just bringing a different kind of vibe and environment to the students and the educator.

Another thing is, I think about how powerful it would've been, and supportive, both to us and to our teacher, Mr. Schenn[?], to have a counselor in the room to lead that conversation, to help him make that statement. And a lot of times, what schools will do is, they will have a counselor shadow that student's schedule for one day. But to be honest with you, looking back at that one day, everything was just a mess. And it's after day two, or day three, day four that you start to see who's going to sink and swim. So not just shadowing the student's schedule, but shadowing it for multiple days.

Another part is that we also have to be prepared that each of us will be impacted by student death in different ways. Some of us have a stronger connection to different students. And so, a protocol can't be tied to an individual. It needs to really be tied to the position, and there always needs to be a backup. Because we always need to look at staff wellness first and foremost. Because if our staff is not well, our students will not be well. And we need to give space for that staff member to be able to say, "I just can't do this right now."

We also need to think about cultural considerations for families. Some languages don't even have a word for suicide. Some families will not want to talk about this. So if you're not familiar

with the culture, bringing in a cultural broker or a family member to help guide your conversation and your supports.

Another suggestion that I have for you is that, oftentimes, when we have a suicide, we give every resource in the world. We give every hotline, every warmline, every support line. But what I say is, that when we give every resource, we actually give no resource. And if you don't believe me, try to look for a mental health professional on your insurance carrier's website, and you will see a list of names, and you're just picking things out of a hat. So really trying to identify, what are your key resources? I recommend the National Lifeline, Crisis Textline, and Teenline.

And perhaps, one of the best suggestions I've ever heard is that, oftentimes, when I work with staff in a postvention setting, the staff on campus, especially the staff who had that individual, are so impassioned to be there for others that they will push through for the coming weeks. But after about a two- or three-week period, the staff momentum, their energy starts to fall off. And so, one of the best ways to support staff in that situation is, instead of offering the teacher—for example, my geometry teacher—a substitute, instead ask them, "Hey, who's your best friend, who's your buddy, who's your partner on campus?" And having a substitute come in and backfill for that other buddy teacher, and have that buddy teacher come in and co-facilitate with that teacher so that they have that support, so in the days when they need to step away for a few moments, they know that they're not letting their kids down, that they're going to be there for support. And in general, just having substitutes on campus or just available to support. Now, this...of course, some of this applies to the in-person setting, which we're all kind of headed back towards. But many of these suggestions still apply to a virtual setting.

Another step that often gets missed is that staff meeting to prepare them for these conversations with youth, to remind them of the resources available and how to refer students. One of the situations, though, is, if we call a staff meeting at 6:30, some folks may not have childcare at that time, or security staff, bus drivers, food service workers, custodial staff, the classified staff may not be available. So if possible, staggering debriefing meetings or prep meetings with the staff throughout the day, so that everyone has an opportunity to participate, as well as making sure that you have a debrief meeting afterwards.

When talking to parents who have lost a child to suicide, one of the most traumatic experiences that they have is the day after losing their child to suicide, is they get a robocall from the school attendance system saying that their child is absent. Immediately identifying somebody, assigning somebody to remove their child from the absentee system, and also if possible, any state testing or any results that may be mailed to that child, reaching out to the family at some point and letting them know that you've requested that those responses be mailed to the school, and when you receive them, you will contact the family to see if they're ready. Because again, receiving mail for your child can be an extremely traumatic situation for those parents.

And then finally, this is just again one last practical suggestion, is securing that file. Whether staff or students, people can get curious, and people can get nosy. Reaching in, grabbing any paperwork on that student, and securing it in a safe place in the principal's office, head counselor's office, school psychologist's office.

A lot of times, when it comes to suicide prevention, fear immediately takes hold, and we worry so much about doing the wrong thing that we forget that there is a right thing, or there's options of right things, and there are blueprints, and there are people who have worked tirelessly in this field for decades to give us some guidance on what to do. And I'm hoping to impart not just knowledge today with you, but also a comfort, and embracing your own abilities that everyone of us has a role to play in suicide prevention.

NARRATOR

Stan's presentation underscores that hope is more powerful than pain, and that the upward trend in youth suicide can be reversed. The strategies he shared are based on evidence and research conducted by the National Alliance for Suicide Prevention, the Centers for Disease Control, the National Institutes of Health, and the American Association of Suicidology. For more information about this event and other related events on student health and wellness in California's Central Valley, please visit the REL West website.