



How to respond to a student suicide

Suicide Safer guidance on postvention



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Forewords

Ged Flynn, PAPYRUS and John de Pury, Universities UK

This guidance on postvention provides practical advice on how to give compassionate, confident and timely support when a student death by suspected suicide takes place. It has been developed by those working on the frontline of student support and leading researchers, with key contributions from students, families and organisations with a focus on suicide and bereavement.

It sets out the critical importance of planning for actions and allocating responsibilities and emphasises the role of leadership to ensure a whole institution and whole system response.

The guidance aims, first and foremost, to support the work of student services teams and first responders in higher education settings. It will also be important for senior leadership to consider how to respond compassionately and appropriately to a student death by suspected suicide. Finally, it will be of interest to academic staff as well as students and their families and significant others. Most importantly, we hope that it will help us respond with kindness, to learn from each death and to save lives. We encourage every higher education provider to adopt and implement this guidance as part of our collective commitment to prevent student suicides.

David Malpas, Director of Student Affairs, Middlesex University

Reflecting upon the experience of leading my institution's response to a suspected student suicide, led me to question:

- Have my actions been appropriate, covering all bases?
- Have I acted with sensitivity and compassion?
- What have I missed?
- What could I have done differently and better?

The uncertainty of the last question resulted in consultation of the Postvention section of the PAPYRUS / Universities UK Suicide Safer Universities (2018) framework. The Suicide safer universities guidance sets out what an institution should do. Whilst this was helpful, after a suspected student suicide, 'how' an institution could go about felt to me to be a more relevant question. What I was looking for was practical help and advice, from peers at other institutions in a similar position and I reached out to Universities UK to seek this. This is the origins of the document you are now reading, a practical resource 'by the sector, for the sector', to guide institutions through postvention processes and importantly, the principles that should underpin this. It is clear from the response we have received to the creation of this further guidance, that it is much needed and good postvention is an important element in student suicide prevention'.

About this guide

This guide is designed to offer practical advice and support to senior leaders and staff working within student services. However, it will likely be of interest to anyone working in higher education who may need to be involved in responding to the death of a student. It has been produced by staff with direct experience of responding to student suicides and guided by the perspectives of bereaved parents, and students themselves. It builds on Suicide Safer Universities – a resource produced by Universities UK and PAPYRUS UK to support sector practitioners to prevent student suicides.



Introduction

What higher education institutions do in the immediate aftermath of a death by suicide matters. Those leading a response are faced with the complex and sensitive task of providing support to family members, friends, staff, and a wider community who are often struggling to process and come to terms with what has happened

Postvention is an organised response that provides timely and appropriate support for those affected. Postvention efforts include:

- supporting the grieving and adjustment process and helping those affected by the death to process the immediate and longer-term trauma and grief
- addressing the immediate crisis to stabilise the situation, limiting the potential risk of further suicides and imitative suicidal behaviour
- assisting the community to start recovering from the initial intense trauma and gradually returning to some level of normality.
- reviewing and sharing learning from the death and postvention efforts to improve future prevention and postvention response efforts

In this guide, we set out a three-stage approach to defining your institution's response:

- **Preparation and planning** – including; developing a death response plan, and shaping a postvention team that can be brought together as soon as the institution is made aware of a sudden student death.
- **Responding to student suicides** – including; communicating with those affected, taking steps to prevent future suicides, and putting in place practical and emotional support.
- **Reflecting and learning** – including; carrying out a serious incident review, supporting tributes and memorials, and supporting an inquest.

Postvention principles

- 1** Respond with compassion and respect, being receptive to distress and sensitive to the needs of others.
- 2** Be guided by the wishes of the family/significant others of the person who has died.
- 3** Ensure timely engagement at the right levels, reaching out and connecting early.
- 4** Avoid communicating publicly about methods and use appropriate and sensitive language about suicide to minimise potential knowledge about suicide methods increasing suicide risk for others.
- 5** Avoid sensationalising or normalising suicide and remain sensitive and factual in all communications.
- 6** Recognise that talking about suicide responsibly does not increase the likelihood of further suicidal behaviours.
- 7** Adhere to information sharing protocols providing clear information while protecting the privacy and dignity of those affected and in accordance with legal requirements.
- 8** Be sensitive to cultural and religious perspectives that may affect responses to a student suicide.
- 9** Aim to focus on the identity, life and memories of the individual rather than their death by suicide.





1.

Preparation and planning

Those providing a crisis response when a student has died have to make sensitive and difficult decisions at a time when emotions are high, and when staff themselves are processing their own response to what has happened. For this reason, an effective postvention response needs to be planned in advance. It needs to assign staff clear roles and responsibilities. And it needs to build flexibility for staff to be able to respond compassionately to the individual circumstances in front of them.

Preparing for the unexpected death of a student

“In the aftermath of an unexpected death of a student, we were ‘late off the starting blocks’ in mobilising postvention support. Managing the situation did not seem to fall into anyone’s area of specific responsibility and some of the academic staff in the deceased student’s faculty felt ‘out of their depth’.

I want to be able to say that we did all we could ... but I can’t. This highlighted for me the importance of having identified leadership and a trained Postvention team with roles clearly defined for an effective and timely postvention response.”

Student support manager

In this section and its accompanying resources, we set out how you can:

- plan your institution’s response to a sudden student death
- build and support a team who can quickly put this plan into action
- identify policies and processes that you will need to have in place



Put in place a death response plan

A death response plan is a clearly defined and documented plan of action used in response to the report of a student death. It is agreed in advance by an appropriate and experienced group of staff. There is no ‘one size fits all’ blueprint and the plan for each institution must fit its own context, however you should aim for the plan to provide comprehensive and practical guidance for the staff navigating your institution’s response. That should include, for example, a protocol for communicating the news of a student’s death and contacting their family and others affected. It should also include advice on putting practical and emotional support in place for students and staff. You can find advice about what to consider as part of your death response plan in Section 2, as well as in the ‘Postvention checklist’ that accompanies this guide.

“I suppose what we didn’t have at the time ... was more written guidance around suicide particularly about what to do ... that would, that would’ve been useful I think for me at the time.”

University team manager, Causer, 2020

Alongside your plan, you should create a store of prepared documents and resources related to postvention so that teams can quickly find the support they need. You should also regularly review your plan to keep it up to date. The wider staff body should be made aware that a plan exists and who to contact if they are notified that a student has died.



Appoint a dedicated team to respond to deaths by suicide

A postvention team is a group of staff who can be brought together immediately following the report of a student death. They should be responsible for overseeing the implementation of the death response plan. For more detailed guidance on forming and convening a postvention team [download our guidance](#)

The chair of the postvention team should be a senior member of staff who is on call and able to convene a meeting out-of-hours if required. You may need to identify more than one member of staff who can take on this role so that there is always cover available and be mindful of the need for anyone in this role to lead confidently with empathy and compassion. It is important that the chair is supported to focus fully on this work for as long as is needed to provide a timely and compassionate response. Members of staff who might be expected to take on this role should be given specific training in co-ordinating and leading a critical incident response.

The membership of the postvention team will depend on your organisational structure but should at the minimum include staff who can lead on care for students; care for staff; family liaison; and communications. The team should also include an experienced administrator. As postvention teams will need to act quickly and with no notice, it is critical that members should be identified in advance and given the level of training and support they need to take on their roles. For all staff involved in providing direct support, this should include training on speaking to and supporting people bereaved by suicide, training on working with people experiencing trauma, and guidance on navigating different cultural and religious sensitivities around bereavement and suicide.

In the immediate aftermath of a student death, the chair of the postvention team will likely need to seek support from a wider group of staff and must be given autonomy to act as they see fit. This could include, for example, representatives from the student's academic school or from the institution's counselling service. The chair may also establish sub-groups to take on responsibility for specific aspects of the response, for example liaising with the police, a student's accommodation provider, a coroner, or foreign embassy.

Provide staff with access to emergency funds

Staff carrying out postvention work may need access to emergency funds to provide timely and compassionate support to family members and friends during a time of crisis. This might include, for example, needing to cover costs relating to travel expenses, accommodation, translation services, or staff cover at short notice. There may be some occasions where postvention teams need to secure approval for larger costs or make payments out of hours. There must be a quick and efficient process available for postvention teams to secure approval in these circumstances; with this authority ideally delegated to the postvention team chair.

Support staff to respond to a report of a student death

The first report of a sudden student death could come from many sources, including staff, other students, family members, or social media. For this reason, all staff should receive training in what to do if they learn of a student death. This should include clear guidance to immediately contact the emergency services (if they have not already been contacted) as well as the chair of the postvention team. This training could form part of a higher education institution's wider suicide prevention and response training.

Build partnerships with other agencies involved in responding to deaths by suicide

Many areas across the UK host local suicide prevention forums or other similar multi-agency groups. By playing an active role in these forums your higher education institution can make sure it has up-to-date information about the help available to students and relevant commissioning decisions. It can also quickly draw on advice and support from partners in the aftermath of a student death.

Review policies on bereavement leave and extenuating circumstances

Consider any of your university's wider policies that may be relevant when responding to a student death including those relating to bereavement leave and extenuating circumstances. Students and staff may be cautious about asking for support and should be reassured that they will be treated with compassion and respect.



2.

Responding to student suicides

As soon as the chair of your postvention team receives a report of a student death they should make sure the emergency services have been informed, before bringing together the team to put your institution's death response plan into practice. This section sets out the steps that should form a key part of that plan, including:

- Communicating compassionately with those affected and the wider community
- Putting in place practical and emotional support
- Responding to enquiries from the press and messages on social media

For more detailed guidance on forming and convening a postvention team [download our guidance](#)

2.1 Emergency response

Inform the emergency services

Depending on the nature of the report, you may need to take some immediate steps to establish what has happened and to confirm the identity of the person who has died. You should immediately call the police and paramedics if this has not been done already and if staff were the first to learn of the death, or if it took place on the institution's property.

There will be other contacts who you will need to reach as early as possible. For example, if the person who has died was an international student, or if you have learnt of the death of a student abroad, then you should inform the relevant embassy once it is confirmed that the family or trusted contact have been informed. If the death took place in a student residence run by a third-party provider, then you will need to co-ordinate action to support the students affected, including potentially sourcing alternative accommodation. In Wales, HEIs are required to report serious incidents to the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and other relevant regulators.

The police are responsible for notifying the student's family members or partner, but you may need to assist them by providing contact details. Ask the police to confirm when the student's next of kin have been informed. You should also make sure that the police are given details for a named staff member to pass on to the family in case they wish to make contact. It is unlikely that you would be approached by a student's family members before they have been notified by the police. If this does happen, you should respond compassionately and sensitively but cannot confirm any information. Instead, you should contact the police again and request that the family are informed as a priority.

Establish a 'Single Source of Truth'

The postvention team should quickly establish a clear picture of what has happened, bringing together information from the emergency services as well as any reports from staff, students or family members. This process should include creating one place to store information about what has happened and what actions that different staff members and teams have taken so far. This practice of aggregating data from many sources and systems into one central repository for all staff involved in the response is often referred to as a 'Single Source of Truth'.

Put in place support at the scene

If a student has died on campus or in student accommodation you should consider what immediate help you may need to provide to students and staff on the scene. This includes sending a senior representative to liaise with emergency services and making sure that trained staff such as wellbeing advisers can attend the scene to provide initial support. It is important to keep in mind that a large emergency services presence itself is likely to be distressing and you may need to find an alternative space to provide support for those affected. You may also need to find emergency accommodation for the housemates of the student who has died or help their accommodation provider to do so. Where appropriate, staff present should visually check the scene before they leave to minimise anything that might cause further distress. You can find more advice about providing practical and emotional support later in this section.

Case study: Putting in place support at the scene

The Student Wellbeing Team were contacted by a member of the public who had been walking through an area of student housing and encountered a number of students in distress in response to a student death. Team members immediately went to the scene wearing ID, branded jackets, and a 'grab pack' of information, pre-prepared for a response to such incidents. They liaised with the local Community Police Officer and ascertained that there had been a student death by suspected suicide. The student was registered at a different HEI but living in shared accommodation. The team identified students at the scene to establish their link to the student who had died, ascertain the immediate impact and provide support. Given the context and the ongoing presence of emergency services, the Wellbeing Team spoke to a local hotel and secured a room with refreshments to move the students to a more private space.

Support included helping them understand the need for confidentiality until the next of kin was located, listening with compassion as they tried to process their shock, helping them phone family or other support and gain information on others who may also be impacted. The students present were from two HEIs, so the Wellbeing Team contacted counterpart colleagues in the other HEI. Following the incident, a multi-agency debrief took place including the police, the two HEIs and public health. The incident showed the benefit of being able to respond immediately, with compassion, as well as the importance of established relationships with local partners in the emergency services, public health, landlords and other HEIs in the area.

2.2 Communications

Follow a prepared communications approach

Once you have had confirmation that the police have informed the student's family or partner, you should follow a pre-agreed communications protocol in order to make contact with family, friends, other close contacts, and the wider community. The postvention chair should identify leads for different types of communications. It is important to recognise that staff who knew the student most closely, including tutors and supervisors, are likely to be grieving themselves and should not be asked to lead on notifying others.

Communicating following the death of a student

“Faced with having to deliver a compassionate, thorough professional response to the news of a possible student suicide even experienced Student Services staff have an instant emotional reaction as the shock and sadness of the news effects them as caring human beings.

In emotive and pressured situations, it can be extremely helpful to have a pre-arranged guide (written and thought through in calmer times) to focus the mind on the actions that need to be taken. Psychologically having a tangible set of guidance to pick up and hold in hand can be reassuring and clarifies the steps that need to be taken. Airline pilots and surgeons have checklists to hand to refer to for challenging situations and having an external guide helps ensure emotional human beings can deliver the required compassionate, thorough, professional response. I have used a sudden death checklist with my teams, and these are printed out in actual folders in people's offices and staff have found having a tangible checklist they can hold has been very helpful to guide them through what is always a challenging situation.”

Head of student services

The rest of this section contains further information about communicating with and offering support to different groups following a student's death. As part of your postvention planning you may want to keep a copies of guidance and example communications as part of the document store we reference in the first section of this guidance.

You can also [download our example communications](#) to help inform your approach

Follow established guidelines when talking about a suspected death by suicide

Talking about suicide can be difficult. Students and staff may be struggling to make sense of the news, dealing with feelings of guilt or responsibility, and processing previous experiences of bereavement.

“The emotional landscape' after a death by suicide can include anger, blame and guilt, and these are difficult to process and manage in a university setting which isn't set up, really, to deal with them.”

Senior academic, *Causer*, 2021

Staff tasked with notifying people affected should not shy away from having these conversations in a way that is warm and empathetic, and that recognises the specific relationship between the student who has died and the person who is receiving the news. However, there are some general guidelines that are important for staff to keep in mind in any conversation about suicide. These are designed to reduce the likelihood of multiple suicides or imitative behaviour.

- Avoid sensationalising or normalising suicide
- Remain sensitive and factual in all conversations
- Never reference the method of suicide in any conversations
- Do not though be afraid to use the term 'suspected suicide' and avoid euphemisms

It is also important to avoid using language which goes beyond what has been confirmed by an inquest or in Scotland by the Procurator Fiscal's investigation. Until this point a student's death can only be considered a suspected suicide, even if the student has left a note or if means of death indicate that a death by suicide was likely.

You should be transparent about the guidelines you are following so that the wider community understands why you are not sharing certain details.

Be sensitive to different cultural and religious beliefs around suicide

Be mindful that, in some cultures, suicide is not openly acknowledged or is even considered as taboo. It is not unusual in such contexts for family members to prefer to talk about an accident or unexplained death. There are also a range of customs and rituals – largely religious in nature – about how the body of the person who has died should be treated and the arrangements for their funeral. Be mindful, if asked, to recommend a local funeral director, that some firms will be more experienced in supporting particular faith and cultural groups than others.

Communicating with family members and partners

You should contact the student's family members and partner as early as possible through the assigned family liaison lead. As soon as you have made contact, make every possible effort to be guided by the wishes of the student's family, including when it comes to what level of contact they would like from the higher education institution and how they would want to be kept informed.

In this first conversation, describe the situation with all possible compassion and be clear about what is known and not known. Offer practical and emotional support, encourage questions, and make sure that family members have a named contact who they can get in touch with if they wish to. This should be the person who made the initial call, families need consistency at this time, whoever makes the first call must be prepared to be their primary contact for as long as they need it. It may also be necessary to inform them about possible press and social media interest, and to offer help to navigate this. Later in this section, there is more information about navigating media enquiries, and about offering practical support.



Why timely and compassionate communications matter

“It was five weeks after losing our daughter when we called the school to ask if they would speak with us. There had been no contact initiated by the head of school before then which only added to the agony and utter desperation we had been plunged into. We very much felt our daughter's death was an inconvenience, something the University wanted to disappear.

We received a very brief letter from the Principal that contained no invitation to meet to discuss what had happened, rather there was an air that he was fulfilling an obligation rather than sharing genuine concern. Never before had we felt that our daughter was so insignificant – she had been just a number. The absence of any senior management at her 'goodnight' served only to confirm that our daughter's life and death was of no great loss to the University.”

Bereaved parent

In your early conversations, it will be important to understand as much as you can about the different family members who may need support, the relationships between them, and the different lines of communication you will need to keep open. For example, if a student has two parents who are separated, then staff should make sure that both are kept informed in the same way, and each have the opportunity to express their views and wishes about any practical arrangements.

The level of support family members want and need from the higher education institution may change over time. If they decline an offer of support, it is important to sensitively make the offer again at a later point.

Communicating with friends, tutors, and other key contacts

You will likely need to go through a process of ‘contact tracing’ to identify people who were close to the student who has died. There may be a few people in the student’s close circle of friends who would be able and willing to help with this. These contacts could include friends, neighbours in accommodation, shared society members, and academic tutors. They may also include people outside of the higher education institution, for example, colleagues on a work placement, or members of a shared faith or community group. Wherever possible you should try to inform key contacts face-to-face, acknowledge the distress they are likely to be going through, and talk through the support available. There is more information about offering practical and emotional support later in this section.

Communicating with the wider community

News of the death of a student can spread quickly amongst the wider community. Higher education institutions can avoid speculation by providing timely communications to relevant groups of students and staff informing them about what has happened. As with one-to-one conversations, these communications should be empathetic and personal. They should come from a named individual and include references to sources of support being as specific as possible (not just signposting to a counselling team). HEIs in Wales are also required to provide information relating to student welfare in both Welsh and English. You should prioritise replying to any responses as soon as possible, even if this is a simple acknowledgment until you are able to provide a fuller reply.

There are some groups of staff who may not have known the student directly, but who should receive specific communications either because they are likely to be affected or because they may in turn need to address questions. Examples include facilities and security staff, staff working within the institution's counselling service, student union staff and multi-faith teams.

Stop all central communications to the student who has died

You should stop all communications to the student who has died as soon as possible. That includes emails and letters sent from the higher education institution as well as those from any course-specific mailing lists. Bear in mind that in the days following a student's death, their family may access their email account and could find it distressing to see these communications continue. Social media posting should also be paused, as this can be perceived as insensitive.

Plan how to respond to media enquiries

The risk of multiple suicides increases when media reporting explicitly describes the suicide method, uses dramatic or graphic headlines or images, gives repeated, extensive coverage, and sensationalises or glamorises a death. When responding to any media enquires you should keep in mind the Samaritan's Media Guidelines for reporting suicide and their specific guidance for reporting youth suicides and suicide clusters. Follow up on any media reporting about a death that does not respect this approach. Most publications will quickly update their copy. The Samaritans' media advice team can be contacted for advice and support if necessary.

You should also offer support to the student's family and friends to navigate media enquiries. If they have any concerns about approaches from journalists, signpost them to the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO). They operate a 24-hour harassment helpline providing advice to those who have been affected by suicide and do not wish to have contact with the press. IPSO can also issue a notice to the press advising them not to contact named individuals.

Families should also be made aware that the media may request a photograph of their loved one and should this request be denied that they are within their rights to obtain an image from a public source, including from social media accounts. To avoid further potential upset and to retain some control over what is published, we recommend that the family choose the image that they would like their loved one to be remembered by.

[Download examples of press statements](#) that universities and families can issue

Plan how to respond to social media communications

Information about a student's death by suicide may spread quickly over social media. Some posts might be inaccurate, may lack information about sources of support, or may unintentionally risk encouraging imitative behaviour (e.g. by explicitly describing suicide methods). You should be prepared to respond via direct messages or public posts to correct any inaccuracies and make sure that people know where they can turn for support.

When having conversations with students and staff in the immediate aftermath of a student's death, you should encourage them not to post about what has happened on social media while key contacts and loved ones are still being informed.



2.3 Support

Put in place practical and emotional support for people affected

There is no single exhaustive list of the kind of support that people affected by suicide might need or that your university may be able to offer. More important than systems and procedures, is an approach characterised by empathy and compassion. You may also need to be persistent – the right time for support is different for everyone.

While you should try to talk to people face-to-face wherever possible, it can be helpful to follow up with an offer of support in writing after the conversation to give them time to reflect and process. You should also be mindful of what continuing support different groups might need, including in the weeks and months following a student's death, throughout the inquest process, and around key dates such as the student's birthday or the graduation ceremony for their year. When discussing options for bereavement support it is important to offer people as much choice as possible including different channels of support (e.g. face-to-face counselling as well as help that can be accessed by text, email or a helpline).

Supporting family members

When offering support to family members, consider what help they may need to:

- navigate systems including student finance
- handle the student's accommodation and belongings
- manage enquiries from the media
- get in contact with local suicide liaison services
- secure support for siblings at other higher education institutions
- make specific arrangements in the case of a student who has died while overseas
- visit the institution and speak to people who knew the student who has died
- put in place arrangements for the funeral or memorial service
- visit the local police/coroner/hospital teams'

Remember that people experiencing bereavement may find it very difficult to make decisions. Wherever possible you should reassure them that there is no immediate rush to make arrangements, for example about a student's belongings.

“The four hour journey I made to that student room, the utter disbelief, confusion and emotional turmoil in which we gathered with my younger son’s hall of residence flatmates, still resides in my mind and body. That night, I lay in police arranged hotel accommodation wondering who could help us get through the next few days.”

Mosse, 2021

Supporting other students

Students in need of support may include those close to the student who has died, such as their partner, friends, housemates, and classmates. They may also include others who witnessed the events leading to the student’s death, who have previously been bereaved, or who were already vulnerable as a result of a mental health problem. When offering support, you should consider:

- Referral to counselling and mental health services
- Accommodation needs – including where a death has taken place in shared accommodation
- Support to extend academic deadlines or notify tutors of extenuating circumstances
- Compassionate leave from studies

As part of your death response plan, you should alert student services to the anticipated demand for support as soon as possible. It may be particularly helpful to provide them with a list of names of students who you understand to be particularly vulnerable so that they can be prioritised if they seek help at a later point. You should also notify tutors across all courses and ask them to identify actions that they may need to take in relation to academic deadlines, assessments, and extenuating circumstances.

“It was in the middle of my year 2 exams. I have done badly in all of them and I am worried about not reaching 3rd year. I can’t revise and I get anxious and uncomfortable. I then worry about the exam and I get worse. I fear for my education.”

Pitman, 2018

In some situations, there may be students from other higher education institutions who need support, for example where students from multiple local HEIs share the same accommodation. In these circumstances, the postvention team chair should assign a member of staff to liaise with the accommodation provider and other HEIs to provide a coordinated response.

Supporting staff

As with students, staff members who knew the person who has died well are not the only people who may need practical or emotional support. Others include staff who were first responders at the scene, or who work near where the death took place, and those with their own experiences of bereavement or mental health problems. It is also important to recognise that staff involved in carrying out postvention work or delivering wellbeing services may themselves be in need of support.

“As academic staff we have little training in pastoral care, and especially no training or support in how to ensure we look after our own mental health to deal with the issues that arise in relation to student mental health... When these events occur, we are ‘knocked for six’ and often expected to be the strong ones in front of students, this can be extremely harrowing without proper support being in place.”

University academic, Causer, 2021

Support staff to access external sources of mental health and wellbeing support – including any help available through employee assistance programmes. Give particular consideration to any staff who responded to the incident, for example, security teams, as well as those heavily involved in supporting students directly. Staff in these circumstances may be experiencing trauma themselves, could benefit from the opportunity to debrief in the immediate aftermath, and may need ongoing psychological support.

“The thoughts take a long time to go away. Even now when I am on the residential site it is always there... so I don't think it ever goes from your mind.”

University domestic cleaner, Causer, 2021

Staff may also need to make use of bereavement leave policies. You should encourage line managers to make a plan with affected staff so that they have regular opportunities to check in for support, and if they wish, to receive communications about the funeral or any tributes or memorials.

Responding to multiple student suicides ('suicide clusters')

A suicide cluster is usually three or more deaths that occur unexpectedly closely in time, place, or both. Young people are at higher risk for suicide clusters. Earlier in this section, we set out steps you can take to help prevent suicide clusters, by taking a proactive approach to responding to sensationalist coverage in the press and social media, and by identifying students and staff who may be vulnerable and making an active offer of support.

If there are concerns about a possible suicide cluster, you should immediately contact your local public health suicide prevention lead. Two suicides occurring in young people in a higher education institution over a short time period should trigger concerns about potential links, even if the deaths appear unconnected. Guidance from Public Health England requires that the suicide prevention lead convene a 'Suicide Cluster Response Group' meeting. This brings together local agencies to assess the situation, agree a proactive response, and identify how to monitor the situation without increasing institutional anxiety.

As part of this response, you should review any particular circumstances that may be making a cluster more likely. This could include access to a particular means of suicide or particular messages and conversations circulating online that may be increasing the risk of multiple suicides. Staff and students should know who to contact if they are concerned about any online messages.

It can be difficult to know when to step down from a cluster response. Some individuals may require continuing support and you will need to remain vigilant around anniversaries, graduation, and the inquest process.

3.

Reviewing, evaluating and learning

Following your immediate response to a student's death, it is crucial to create a space to learn from what has happened and to take action to prevent future suicide. Those who knew the person who has died may also be looking for ways to come together and pay tribute, and your institution can play an important role in supporting them to create these spaces. This section sets out how you can:

- Review the student's time at your institution and identify actions to prevent future suicides
- Support the inquest process with candour and empathy
- Help families, friends, and staff members pay tribute to the person who has died



Case study: Reflecting and learning

Over a two-year period, we experienced a number of student deaths by suicide. Each death had a profound impact on families, students, and staff, and those of us directly involved in the postvention efforts have often reflected since on what was helpful or unhelpful in our responses at the time. We found that having identified staff with the skills and capacity to respond to often challenging and distressing events in a compassionate and sensitive way was of key importance, alongside having procedures and policies in place around the death of a student which helped to facilitate a coordinated and effective response across the institution. Looking back, there were also things we could have done much better, such as more proactively reaching out to work with and support bereaved families.

Suicide-Safer Universities Project Lead, England

Carry out a serious incident review

The purpose of a serious incident review is to capture learning to prevent future suicides and to make sure that the higher education institution is equipped to provide compassionate and timely support in response to any future student deaths. It should be led by a senior member of staff who has not had prior involvement in supporting the student who has died (though they may have been involved in postvention efforts). It's crucial that the way the review is carried out is guided by the needs and wishes of family members and includes in its scope all of their questions.

“The future will be safer if we learn from the past, what went well, what did not, and what we can do differently. If universities are defensive a parent will hear ‘we learn nothing from your child’s death’. If they are open to learning and change, a parent will hear “there is hope for a better future and my child’s death was not in vain...”

Bereaved parent

The 'SAFER' approach is a way of thinking about a serious incident review that has been developed by the LEARN network – a group of families who have been bereaved by suicide. It sets out an approach informed by the experiences of parents who have been through the process.

Student Story – Establish the story of the events that happened in the student's life leading up to their death. Consider academic and non-academic factors and attempt to understand the root causes of what has happened.

Anonymous – Outputs from the review should protect the identity of the people involved including students, family, and friends. Produce an anonymous version that can be shared across the higher education sector in order to help prevent future deaths.

Fault-Free – Do not aim to apportion blame. Everyone involved should be supported to reflect honestly about what has happened.

Effective – Ask whether staff followed relevant policies and procedures, and whether those procedures themselves were effective.

Recommendations – Identify learning points and concrete actions that could prevent future deaths. You should share these widely within your institution and within the wider higher education sector through relevant networks. You should also provide them to the coroner as part of any inquest.

For detailed information about carrying out a serious incident review [download our guidance](#)



Support the inquest process with candour and empathy

In England, Wales, and Northern Ireland sudden deaths are investigated by a coroner whose role is to establish who has died, when, where and how they died. As part of this process, they will convene an inquest – a fact-finding inquiry in a court.

There is no inquest system in Scotland however sudden or unexplained deaths are reported to the Procurator Fiscal who has legal responsibility for the body of the person who has died, usually until a doctor has written a death certificate and given it to the nearest relative. At the time of writing, pilot work has been undertaken to develop a multi-agency process for reviewing all deaths by suicide with the aim of translating learning into action plans at a local and national level.

The role of an inquest is not to blame in a criminal or civil sense. But a coroner can be critical of an individual institution and has certain powers if they identify systemic failings that could contribute to further deaths. Staff may be asked to provide witness statements in advance of the inquest, and these will usually be made available to the student's family. A senior representative and other staff members may also be called to give evidence during the inquest itself. These witnesses often play a key role in helping families to understand the background to what has happened. Families are very rarely legally supported, so think carefully before using legal representation for your institution. Above all, you should approach the inquest process with candour and empathy.

Consider what help family members, students, and staff may need around the time of the inquest. At this point, much more information about the circumstances of the case may become publicly available. Family members may need additional support to manage intrusive media requests, and anyone affected by the student's death may find this period particularly distressing. See Section 2 of this guide for advice about providing support.

For more detailed guidance on preparing to give evidence to an inquest [download our inquest advice](#)

Consider what support you can offer for funeral arrangements

When it comes to providing support for funeral arrangements you should be guided at each stage by the wishes and needs of the student's family. Ask them if they welcome staff and student attendance at the funeral and wake. Be prepared to suggest a member of staff who knew the student who has died to speak at the funeral. If no one knew the student well enough, the head of a faculty or a member of the senior leadership team (eg principal, vice-chancellor), should offer to attend. Where practical, arrange and fund transport for staff and students to the funeral. If the family wish to have a private funeral, then you may need to organise a memorial event on campus to allow staff and students to remember the person who has died and honour their life.

Support families and friends with tributes and memorials

Everyone who knew and cared for the person who has died can play an important role in preserving their identity and memory. Family and friends may appreciate spaces where they can hear from others who appreciated that person's character, talents, and the impact they had on those around them.

“I wanted to have contact with those who knew him; teachers who had written shining references, saw his talent and recognised the unspeakable loss of his early death. I was deeply moved by the letters I received... telling me about their classroom and supervision encounters with Jake, and their affection for him. That he was known, cared about and appreciated... mattered a great deal in those weeks following his death. Later, I received letters from Jake's undergraduate head of department and the university; but it was these warm personal messages from his teachers that meant the most.”

Mosse, 2021

The most appropriate way to pay tribute will always be specific to the person who has died and the wishes of those close to them, however some ways you could support include:

- Offering to connect the family to members of staff who knew them
- Setting up a tribute book (this could be a physical book or hosted online)
- Providing logistical support for events organised by their friends or the student union
- Holding a memorial service on campus for students and staff
- Marking the loss in the wider community – e.g. through a one-minute silence
- Providing academic recognition for the student
- Where appropriate offering the family or guardians their coursework or grades
- Considering an annual award or internship in their name

Families will not always want to be involved in further communications about tributes or memorials and you should make sure to establish and respect their wishes. It is also important to consider the privacy of the student who has died. There may be aspects of their life that they did not want to be disclosed to the people around them and you should make sure that any tributes and memorials respect those wishes.



Acknowledgments

This guide was developed and edited by David Malpas (Middlesex University), Dr Simon Merrywest (University of Manchester), Professor Jo Smith (University of Worcester), Ged Flynn (PAPYRUS Prevention of Young Suicide), and John de Pury (Universities UK). We are grateful for funding received from the Office for Students.

The advice contained in this guide has been produced together with a reference group of more than 50 higher education professionals, suicide postvention experts, parents, and students. We are grateful to the many individuals who contributed their time, knowledge, and expertise through writing chapters, giving feedback, and providing advice. You can find a full list of contributing authors and reference group members at Appendix 1 (p 33). We are grateful to Professor Steve West and Professor Jo Smith for chairing Reference Group meetings, and to Roz Dupigny (Middlesex University) for providing administrative support to the Reference Group.

The editors wish to, particularly thank and acknowledge the input from members of the Student Minds Student Advisory Committee: Daisy Shearer, Elizabeth Mullenger, Mia Brady, Dan Marshall, and Ruth Day.

Tools to accompany this guide

Postvention checklist – A step-by-step checklist that sets out specific actions to take in the immediate aftermath of a student’s death, in the following days, and in the longer term.

Forming a postvention team – A short resource for those involved in setting up and running a postvention team. It includes role descriptions, person specifications, and a template first meeting agenda.

Communications following the sudden death of a student – Examples of the kind of communication that you may need to send to the wider community and in response to media enquiries.

Carrying out a serious incident review – A guide to setting up and running a serious incident review, with template forms to help you capture information, and structure your findings.

Giving evidence at an inquest – An overview of what to expect when giving evidence at an inquest, including practical advice to help staff prepare and present their evidence.

Communications considerations – This list covers some of the areas you will need to consider in your approach to communications after the death of a student.

Responding to a suspected student suicide: support for security staff – This resource outlines the support that should be put in place for security staff.

Appendix 1:

Membership of the Reference Group and Independent Review Group

Author contributors from the Reference Group included:

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| Dr Hilary Causer | University of Surrey |
| Isabella De George | Positive Changes in Placements |
| Clare Dickens | University of Wolverhampton |
| Fiona Drouet MBE | EmilyTest Scottish charity and member of National Suicide Prevention Leadership Group, Scotland |
| Dr Deirdre Flynn | Marino Institute of Education, Dublin |
| Lorna Fraser | Samaritans |
| Evan Grant | Cameron Grant Memorial Trust |
| Rebecca Hayhurst | Unite Students |
| Prof Ann John | Swansea University |
| David Malpas | Middlesex University |
| Dr Ian Marsh | Canterbury Christ Church University |
| Dr Simon Merrywest | University of Manchester |
| Prof David Mosse | SOAS University of London |
| James Murray | Kooth |
| Sally Olohan MBE | University of Westminster |
| Geoff Rickson | Samaritans HE Postvention Advisor |
| Lisa Roxby | PAPYRUS Prevention of Young Suicide |
| Prof Jo Smith | University of Worcester |
| Nic Streatfield | University of York |
| Michelle Stebbings | Support After Suicide Partnership |

We also received advice and feedback from the following Reference Group and Independent Review Group members:

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Aled Blake | University of Wales |
| Simon Blake | MHFA and Chair of the Support After Suicide Partnership |
| Sarah Cavendish | University of Leicester |
| Tahmina Choudrey | Middlesex University Students' Union |
| Dr Alexandra Pitman | UCL Institute of Mental Health and Camden and Islington NHS Foundation Trust |
| John de Pury | Universities UK |
| Emma Douthwaite | Office for Students |
| Roz Dupigny | Middlesex University |
| Hamish Elvidge | The Matthew Elvidge Trust |
| Ged Flynn | PAPYRUS Prevention of Young Suicide |
| Mark Fudge | Charlie Waller Trust |
| Amy Hatt | Department for Education |
| Ryan Stokes | HEFCW |
| Benjamin Hunt | Office for Students |
| Kris Irategeka | Middlesex University Students' Union |
| Tim Jones | University of Worcester |
| Estelle Kane | Office for Students |
| Lauren Knight | Universities Scotland |
| Keith King | Samaritans |
| Sharon Mallon | Open University |
| Lily Makurah | Office for Health Improvement and Disparities |
| Helen McNeely | Queen's University Belfast / AMOSSHE |
| Jacqui Morrissey | Samaritans |
| Amy Norton | Office for Students |
| Gerry Rice | University of West England |
| Prof Ross Renton | Anglia Ruskin University Peterborough |
| Dominic Smithies | Student Minds |
| Alan Stuart | The Calzy Foundation |
| Prof Steve West | University of West England |
| Jill Stevenson | AMOSSHE |
| Vicky Groves | Heads of University Counselling Services |

Appendix 2:

Further resources and support organisations

Preventing and responding to student suicides

Step-by-Step (Samaritans)

Samaritans offer a free postvention support service to education settings, including HEIs, called 'Step by Step'. It provides practical support to help HEIs prepare for and recover from a suspected or attempted suicide. This includes expert advice, guidance and downloadable resources to support grief in students and staff and minimise the risk of further suicide.

Suicide Safer Universities

Guidance for university leaders and practitioners on developing a suicide prevention strategy. It covers topics including steps to prevent student suicide, intervening when students are in difficulty and best practice for responding to student suicides.

Support in the aftermath of a bereavement

Cruse Bereavement Care

Cruse Bereavement Care offers free, confidential support, face to face, via email, web support and a nationwide bereavement support helpline for anyone who is bereaved. They also have services specifically for bereaved children and young people.

Winston's Wish

A charity for children and young people bereaved by the death of a parent or sibling providing practical support and guidance throughout the grieving process, including a national helpline.

Child Bereavement UK

Child Bereavement UK supports bereaved children and young people aged up to 25yrs and anyone affected by the death of a child of any age. They provide confidential support including a national helpline, email responses and live chat via their website.

Support following a death by suicide

Samaritans

Samaritans provides confidential emotional support in the UK and Ireland day and night, 365 days a year for anyone who is struggling. Whoever you are and whatever you're facing, they're here to listen so you don't have to face it alone. Samaritans can be contacted by telephone, email, letter or face to face in many local branches.

PAPYRUS

PAPYRUS provides a confidential support and advice service to young people, aged up to 35 yrs, who may be at risk of suicide and to those concerned about a vulnerable young person. Support can be accessed via their confidential helpline (HOPELINEUK), by email and text.

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide

SOBS is a national charity which offers free support to adults (aged 18yrs+) bereaved by suicide via a helpline, self-help groups and a peer support online forum.

Help is at Hand

This guide contains information about what may happen after a suicide or sudden traumatic death, including; feelings and emotions that bereaved people may experience, coping advice, sources of support and useful reading material. The booklet also provides information for professionals to assist in providing help and finding support for themselves. There are versions available for England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

After a Suicide (SAMH)

This Scottish Association for Mental Health (SAMH) booklet provides contact details of relevant organisations in Scotland.

Reporting a death by suicide

Notifying agencies/organisations when someone has died (Suicide Bereavement UK)

Suicide Bereavement UK has compiled a checklist of organisations/professionals who may need to be informed when someone has died and is available as a downloadable form.

Tell us Once (Gov.uk)

The 'Tell Us Once' is a free government service through which you can report a death in Scotland, England and Wales (this service is not available in Northern Ireland). This enables most government departments to be automatically informed of a person's death.

Communicating following a death by suicide

Media Guidelines (Samaritans)

Samaritans' media guidelines for reporting suicide and online resources reinforce industry codes of practice, supporting the highest standards of coverage of suicide.

The inquest process

Coroners Support Service

The Coroners' Courts Support Service is an independent voluntary organisation offering emotional support and practical help to bereaved families and witnesses attending an inquest at a coroner's court in England and Wales (this service is not available in Scotland or Northern Ireland).

Inquest Handbook

This free guide for bereaved families, friends and advisors gives detailed information on the investigation and inquest procedures after a death in England and Wales.

Official guidance

The Ministry of Justice have produced their own guide to coroner services in England and Wales. Similar guidance is available from the Coroner's Service for Northern Ireland, and the Procurator Fiscal Service in Scotland.

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Woburn House
20 Tavistock Square
London, WC1H 9HQ

☎ +44 (0)20 7419 4111

✉ info@universitiesuk.ac.uk

🖱 universitiesuk.ac.uk

🐦📘📷 @UniversitiesUK



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POSTVENTION GUIDANCE: RESOURCES

Postvention checklist

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| Initial incident response | 4 |
| Next day and subsequent events | 15 |
| Longer term actions | 22 |

About this checklist

This checklist is intended as a tool for staff to take with them when they are dealing with a sudden death to help ensure a professional and compassionate response.

Who should use this checklist?

The checklist is written for the staff member(s) leading the response to a student death. Where actions are required from specific roles, these are clearly indicated.

Before using the checklist

The checklist is designed to be adapted for local requirement. There will be different contexts – for example when a death occurs off campus or overseas. Roles and job titles are indicative. It is recommended that staff members leading the response read through and adapt the checklist to these local conditions.

How to use this checklist

- **Actions:** this column outlines the key steps at each stage of the response, with some prompts of who to involve and key questions to be addressed.
- **Considerations/resources:** further advice and points to reflect on during the response, with some signposting to further resources.
- **Completed/notes:** allows recording that the action has been completed and space to capture key information for further follow up.

Case study

"Experienced student services staff will themselves have a strong emotional reaction to a student death but at the same time want to coordinate a compassionate and professional response. Checklists are an established way to deal with challenging situations – used by airline pilots and surgeons – to reassure users and to set out the steps that need to be taken. I use a sudden death checklist with my teams; these are printed out and kept to hand. Staff have found having a checklist they can hold has been very helpful to guide them through what is always a difficult and highly emotional situation."

Head of Student Services



Initial incident response

Taking the call

| Actions | Considerations/resources | Completed/notes |
|---|--|-----------------|
| <p>If you receive a call from higher education institution Security/ other source informing of a sudden student death, ask:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 time/date/location of incident 2 is the incident still live and ongoing? 3 have the emergency services been called? 4 name, date of birth and if possible, course, and student number of the student(s) involved 5 how the caller became aware of the incident 6 for the caller's name, position, and take their contact details and any other relevant contact numbers 7 if any staff members involved or aware of the incident? <p>Read back to the caller all the information you have written down to ensure you have understood correctly.</p> | <p>Receiving the information of a student death is a difficult message to hear. It is vital that staff know what information they need to collect from the notifier. Particularly if an incident is ongoing (and if there is risk to others), who the deceased is, when and where they died and the details of the notifier and their relationship to the deceased. Likely to be friend, family, Police or Coroner's Office.</p> | |
| <p>If the call is not from higher education institution Security, call them to let them know about the student death.</p> | <p>Security will advise on who will call the Police (if this has not already happened).</p> | |

Collating and sharing information

| Actions | Considerations/resources | Completed/notes |
|---|---|-----------------|
| <p>Ask the Student Records Team to collate information from the higher education institution record system on the student(s) affected:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 name, course, year, and student number of the student(s) involved 2 addresses of the student(s) involved 3 details of the students they live with 4 information on the student's previous contact with Student Services 5 next of kin details | <p>It is the role of the police or hospital to inform the next of kin of the death. No contact should be made with the next of kin until it is known that they have been informed.</p> | |
| <p>Inform the Director of Student Support of the sudden student death (if not available inform another member of the operational management team).</p> <p>This person will inform the senior management team (likely the Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Chief Operating Officer).</p> <p>The Director of Student Support to inform the Director of Communications, the relevant Dean and inform Students' Union Chief Executive/General Secretary.</p> <p>The Director of Student Support will also inform the Director/ Head of Health and Safety.</p> | <p>It is a good idea to create a notifications flowchart so accurate information can be shared and cascaded appropriately.</p> <p>Knowing which senior leader(s) chair the Major Incident response is vital. This information (needs to be more than one name and phone number) should be attached to this checklist.</p> <p>Assess any health and safety implications of the incident. Follow the reporting procedures laid down by the Health and Safety Executive. In consultation with the Police, or other statutory authority, implement any changes in working practice where necessary.</p> | |

| Actions | Considerations/resources | Completed/notes |
|---|--|-----------------|
| <p>The Director of Student Support to find out if the deceased was known to support services, including Residential Life teams or Security.</p> | <p>Knowing if the deceased was known to counselling/mental health teams, disability teams, residential life teams, student conduct teams will help piece together what was known about the student.</p> <p>If the deceased's accommodation is accessed by swipe card, the database should be reviewed to try ascertain their last known movements.</p> | |
| <p>The Director of Student Support to ask the relevant Dean for a summary of recent academic progress, any recent School interactions with the student, any known concerns, any recent mitigating circumstances applications (with the outcome), dates of any forthcoming deadlines/assessments, next scheduled academic session for the student.</p> | <p>Knowing the deceased's academic progression will help piece together what the higher education institution knew about the student.</p> <p>Knowing when the deceased is next due in an academic session informs the student notification timeline.</p> | |

At the scene of the incident

| Actions | Considerations/resources | Completed/notes |
|--|--|-----------------|
| <p>If the sudden student death is on campus and it is safe to do so, a senior Student Services professional should attend the location with a colleague and/or Security.</p> | <p>Check with Security or, if in halls the Accommodation Manager, regarding site accessibility.</p> <p>Always tell your manager where you are going and the Major Incident Controller (if appropriate).</p> <p>Ensure you take your higher education institution staff badge, pen, and paper, that you have a mobile phone (and others know the number) and a corporate credit card if you have one.</p> | |
| <p>Take printed student support information.</p> | <p>Likely to include promotional material for your wellbeing/ counselling teams and for chaplaincy support. You could even have a 'response to a sudden death' support leaflet. This information could include local or national bereavement charities or suicide prevention helplines/websites.</p> | |
| <p>Make yourself known to emergency services/security/other staff members. Explain that you are from the higher education institution and your primary task is to support the students and staff affected. Follow the advice and guidance of the emergency services.</p> | <p>Be mindful that the emergency services response to a sudden death can be significant, with multiple marked emergency vehicles. The circumstances can even mean that the fire brigade and other specialist teams will also be in attendance.</p> | |

| Actions | Considerations/resources | Completed/notes |
|--|--|--|
| <p>Ask Police/Coroner's Officer at the scene for confirmation that the Police have informed the next of kin. If this cannot be confirmed provide your details and ask for you, as a representative of the higher education institution, to be informed when this has taken place. Take details of the Officer you have spoken to eg their name, collar number, station/department.</p> | <p>It is the responsibility of the police to inform the next of kin, but always reconfirm with them that this has happened before making contact directly.</p> | |
| <p>Ensure that security secure the area.</p> <p>Report into Supervisor.</p> | <p>In the event of a death on campus keep the area clear while the body is being removed.</p> | |
| <p>If safe to do so, support moving affected students/staff away from the incident site to a safe recovery space. Remember to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • speak calmly, be patient and sensitive • acknowledge that they have experienced a shock and that their emotions will be heightened • normalise their responses as this is likely to be reassuring • encourage students/staff to utilise their own support networks whilst advising of on campus support measures | <p>Your goal is to reduce distress, assist with current needs and establish facts. Practical help is likely to be the most useful support at this time.</p> <p>Flatmates of the deceased should be identified as quickly as possible and directed to the recovery space in which to gather.</p> <p>The staff member supporting this group be available for discussion and to answer questions as openly as they can. They should also work with this group to start to build a picture of other friends of the deceased who may need to be informed and require support.</p> <p>At times of shock it is usually most helpful for people to be with those they know well (friends & family) and if appropriate this is to be encouraged.</p> <p>Consider too how to communicate with students who may be returning to accommodation and will be unaware of what has happened.</p> | <p>Note down where the designated recovery space is:</p> |

| Actions | Considerations/resources | Completed/notes |
|--|---|-----------------|
| <p>Work with representatives on scene to exercise as much discretion as possible (eg restricting access to areas or using alternative routes to allow access for undertakers).</p> <p>Before leaving the site, staff need to ensure that the location of the student's death has been sensitively checked for any materials that may cause distress to others (eg items discarded by the ambulance service).</p> | <p>The presence of emergency services and particularly an undertaker can create anxiety or be upsetting for other students/members of staff.</p> <p>Although it can be challenging as emotions are high, you should refrain from informing students of what has happened, other than to confirm that a student has died, as it is unlikely the facts have been collated or the family/next of kin have been informed.</p> | |
| <p>Arrange for the Chaplain to attend the recovery space to offer comfort and support (and prayers if appropriate) to students affected.</p> | <p>While not all students are religious having a spiritual leader is usually comforting and helpful for students when processing a fellow student's sudden death.</p> | |
| <p>At this stage, practical help is likely to be the priority for students impacted. Listen to their needs and ascertain how the higher education institution can help. Working with other staff members, if appropriate arrange:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • blankets • water • tea/coffee • food (not just chocolate/crips/snacks) • help with contacting others • academic needs, eg informing academics if classes, deadlines that day will be missed. Provide students with details of the mitigating circumstances procedure • alternative accommodation (if required) | <p>Liaise with student accommodation team if temporary accommodation is required. Ideally flatmates should be housed together on the same site to maintain familiarity.</p> <p>Assistance should be provided to move sufficient belongings for a short stay. This should include access to food and other essential supplies.</p> <p>It is a good idea to have existing arrangements with local hotels in case emergency accommodation is required (the higher education institution may want to offer the deceased's family accommodation)</p> <p>Some students may wish to return home. Assistance such as taxis to be offered.</p> | |

| Actions | Considerations/resources | Completed/notes |
|---|---|-----------------|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Collect details of all students who may be impacted. Collect names and contact details. 2 Ask for course details and tutor names. 3 Offer to contact academic staff if lectures/deadlines/exams may be missed due to incident. 4 Make sure all students/staff have support to go to after the incident. This is likely to be with family and friends. 5 Ask if there are any other students/staff close to the student(s) affected who may need support. If so, get their contact details (eg friends of the deceased, housemates, partner, club & society friends). 6 Make a written note of any questions they have, concerns they raise. 7 Inform Human Resources if staff close to the student are named. 8 Arrange a follow up call or meeting the next day with those affected. 9 Advise the faculty the student was a member of, so they are prepared to respond to support needs. | <p>For any sudden student death, it is vital that the higher education institution collects the names and contact details of all students who may be impacted. This is due to increased risk to others should the death be a suspected suicide.</p> <p>At the scene or ideally in the recovery space staff should ask the flatmates who the deceased was friends with, whether they were part of any club or society, where they worked and any other people the deceased was close to.</p> <p>These names should be given to a team of appropriately qualified staff (likely psychological professionals and academic tutors) who find contact details and are ready to contact the students once it has been confirmed the next of kin have been notified.</p> <p>Use the resources in Public Health England's practice resource, Identifying and responding to suicide clusters.</p> <p>Irrespective, all flatmates of the deceased and anyone else immediately identified as a friend should be provided with details of how to access welfare support before staff leave the site.</p> | |

Sharing news with students

| Actions | Considerations/resources | Completed/notes |
|---|--|-----------------|
| <p>Inform all students likely to be specifically impacted by the sudden death of the student and offer the same support as above. Consider in advance how/when you might communicate with colleagues if the death happens out of hours or at the weekend.</p> | <p>Staff should be factual in their notification to the students and not speculate; avoiding presumptive statements about it being a suicide. They should remain empathic, and both remind students of support and that seeking support from friends and family is likely beneficial after a bereavement.</p> | |
| <p>Make all reasonable attempts to quickly identify and speak to students who may be particularly impacted by the sudden student death.</p> | <p>Consider finding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • anyone who witnessed the events that led to the student's death • other friends from the same accommodation • anyone believed to be in a relationship with the deceased • family members who may also be studying/working at the higher education institution • those who may have been impacted by witnessing the emergency services response • others on the same programme (particularly the same tutor group/practical class partners) • members of sports clubs/societies of which the deceased was a member • anyone who can be identified as a contact of the deceased through social media | |

| Actions | Considerations/resources | Completed/notes |
|---------|---|-----------------|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• any student working in the same paid employment as the deceased• anyone posting about the death on social media or contacting higher education institution staff <p>Students in geographic proximity to the deceased are likely easily identified. Students with social and psychological proximity may require more tracing.</p> <p>If any of the people named are students of a different higher education institution consider notifying the Student Services department at their higher education institution.</p> <p>Identify the school the student was studying in to try to ascertain any close friendships and notify. Key considerations will be notification, access to welfare support, normalisation of managing difficult emotions and encouragement to discuss with family and friends.</p> | |

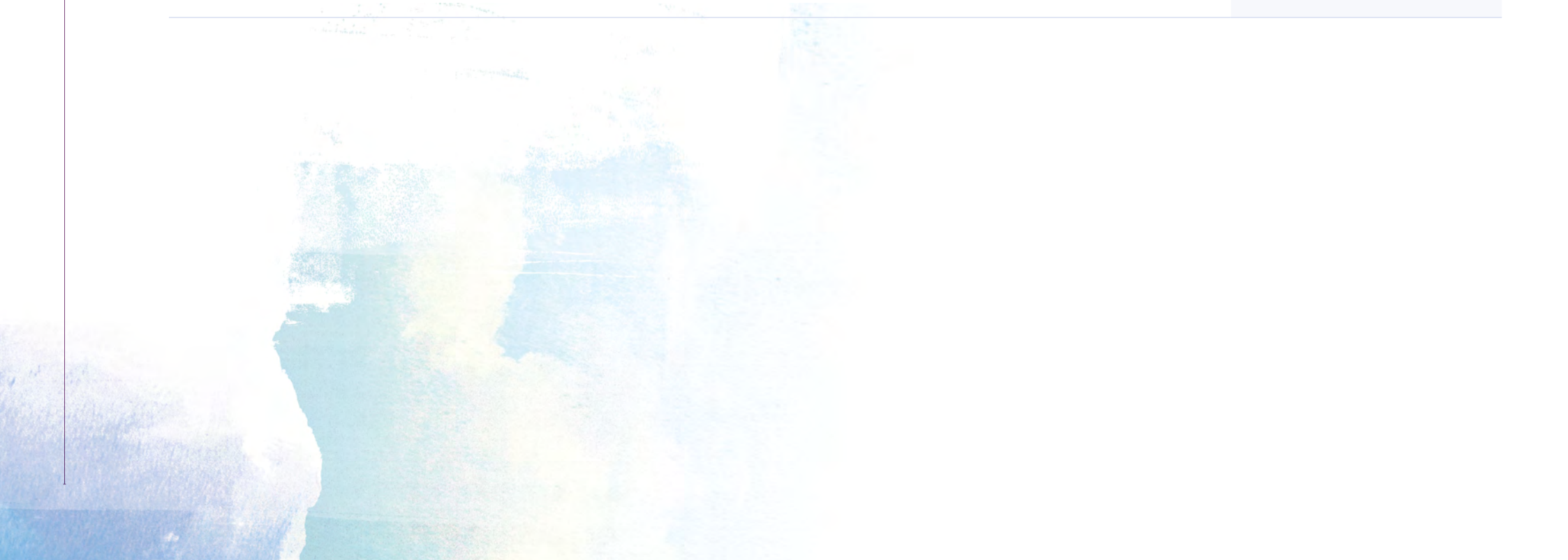


Sharing news with students

| Actions | Considerations/resources | Completed/notes |
|---|---|-----------------|
| <p>If not already done, inform local managers of the incident (if appropriate) and ask them to prepare to respond as required. Local managers could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chaplain • Director of Communications • Dean • CEO and President of the Student Union • Accommodation Manager • higher education institution Registrar • Head of Student Records • Head of Human Resources • Head of Library | <p>Staff should issue a ‘no comment at this time’ to any external enquiries about the incident and refer all enquiries to the media relations team.</p> <p>Staff should not mention the incident on social media at this time.</p> <p>Human Resources should provide support to staff affected by the sudden student death.</p> | |

End of the day

| Actions | Considerations/resources | Completed/notes |
|--|--|-----------------|
| <p>Ensure you speak to a colleague about your experience today of supporting the affected students/staff.</p> | <p>It is important that as a supporter you receive support from others and that you make sure you look after yourself.</p> | |
| <p>End the day with Major Incident Team meeting/senior staff meeting to review all information gathered and actions taken. This meeting will generate actions for the following day.</p> <p>Decide which staff member will liaise with the family of the deceased.</p> | | |



Next day and subsequent events

| Actions | Considerations/resources | Completed/notes |
|--|---|-----------------|
| <p>Prepare an initial short summary of the student's time at the higher education institution, highlighting anything that requires attention. This would include details of their academic progress and attendance, interruptions or mitigating circumstances requests and any interactions with support services (including wellbeing, security and residential teams).</p> | <p>Whilst this takes time to produce so early on, it makes responding to requests for information (eg from the family and the coroner) much easier.</p> | |



Support for staff and students

| Actions | Considerations/resources | Completed/notes |
|--|---|-----------------|
| <p>Arrange ongoing support for students affected. Usually this will be led by Director of Student Services.</p> <p>Reinforce the support on offer and explain this is ongoing, not time limited.</p> <p>Make appointments and contact specialist staff if the students are wanting to access services.</p> | <p>How to best respond with support will depend on each situation and the needs of the students. Considerations include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • offering an early opportunity in person to discuss the news encourage anyone involved in the response to ask questions, provide additional information/context • offering a group session and/or one-to-one appointments with Wellbeing/Counselling • ensuring advice and support is available to students who may be asked to give statements to the police (eg sitting with them during this process) • a drop-in support session may also be helpful for a wider group (eg in residences) as may proactive calling in an accommodation or course cohort • ensuring that the Residential Life team are aware of any students impacted who live in accommodation • answering questions about what has happened and the background as honestly and fully as possible (being mindful of the balance between openness and sharing personal information). The wishes of the family will also be an important consideration • signposting to a range of resources relating to dealing with bereavement and suicide (for those students aware of the circumstances) Help is at Hand.pdf (www.nhs.uk) • ensuring that details of how to access support out of hours are clear eg Samaritans, Papyrus and other local support networks in your region whilst being mindful of potential accessibility challenges Check whether students affected by the news have any upcoming deadlines or assessments. Ensure that their school are aware that they may have been impacted and highlight the mitigating circumstances process to the students. • beginning a book of condolence and promote this to the community | |

| Actions | Considerations/resources | Completed/notes |
|--|--|-----------------|
| <p>Arrange ongoing support for staff affected. Usually this will be led by Human Resources and the Dean of School.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider the impact on those dealing with the response to a student death. Ensure all those involved in the response are aware of how to access support and encourage them to take time for self-care (this includes both academic and professional staff). • Offer an early opportunity for staff to discuss the news with all relevant colleagues and encourage anyone involved in the response to ask questions, provide additional information/context. • Answer questions about what has happened and the background as honestly and fully as possible (being mindful of the balance between openness and sharing personal information). • Identify any colleagues who may benefit from enhanced support (eg anyone who found the deceased or attended the scene) or where temporary backfill may be appropriate. • Ensure line managers are aware of the potential impact on their team member. • Ensure that staff involved in the incident response are personally thanked. Despite the circumstances, it is still important to recognise the role played by colleagues and others. Ensure that any messages of thanks from family and friends are also relayed in a timely way. • Consider a group staff debrief support session. • Offer staff appropriate one-to-one support. • All staff involved in the incident response should be contacted after one week and one month of the initial incident to check on their wellbeing. • Be mindful of staff who may have been working with the student as part of a placement (including those who are not employees of the higher education institution). | |

Sharing information

| Actions | Considerations/resources | Completed/notes |
|--|--|-----------------|
| <p>The Director of Student Services in conjunction with the Director of Communications, and in consultation with the Dean(s) agree a student notification procedure.</p> | <p>Wider communication should usually only be completed after speaking to the family of the deceased.</p> <p>Ensure appropriate student support literature is shared.</p> | |
| <p>The Director of Student Services should contact the Registrar to make sure they are aware of the student death.</p> | <p>Ask Registry to follow their student death procedure. This is particularly important so no communication goes out to the student (eg attendance monitoring, fee requests etc)</p> | |



Contacting the family

| Actions | Considerations/resources | Completed/notes |
|---|--|-----------------|
| <p>Once confirmation is received that the family of the deceased student has been informed, contact from the HEI should occur. This contact will likely come from the Director or Head of student services. They should offer condolences, support, local accommodation if necessary. They can also arrange for the family to speak to the Chaplain (or other faith leader) if appropriate.</p> | <p>Being led by the family's needs is a key aspect of this role and responses will need to take into account the situation.</p> <p>The following are likely to take place (or be considered);</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expressing condolences on behalf of the Vice-chancellor and the wider community (and send a letter from the Vice-chancellor in due course). This should be based on a template, but with appropriate personalisation. • Informing them that you are a senior member of the higher education institution who will act as the sole family liaison officer. • Sensitively exploring immediate familial relationships (eg confirming names of the parents and any siblings, whether parents are separated etc). • Learning anything further about the circumstances of the student's death or the background from the family's perspective. • Supporting direct contact with other students who knew the deceased. • Considering a posthumous award and attendance at a future graduation ceremony. • Providing information about local undertaker/reparation services. • Sensitively supporting with the packing and return of belongings but never give a sense that the room is required back. • Supporting with releasing the family from the student's accommodation contract (this is automatic in higher education institution accommodation), but ensure all payment requests are immediately froze. • Considering a refund of tuition and accommodation fees. • Supporting with notifying funding bodies or relevant organisations (eg Student Finance England (SFE) and Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA)). | |

| Actions | Considerations/resources | Completed/notes |
|---------|--|-----------------|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing an initial factual view of the circumstances and background to the student’s death from the higher education institution’s perspective. • Explaining the higher education institution’s relationship to the Police/Coroner’s team and outline any information provided to them. • Summarising the key actions that have been taken in response to the news about the student’s death. • Discussing the approach to communicating with fellow students. • Exploring whether the family are aware of any close friends of the deceased, who are members of the higher education institution who may require support. • Exploring if the family are religious or have any spiritual requirements – link to relevant chaplain is appropriate. • Offering short term accommodation for family members if required. • Offering advice and support with handling media enquiries (where applicable). • Answering as fully and openly as possible any immediate questions about the student’s time at the higher education institution. • Seeking to understand (and provide an initial response where possible) to any immediate concerns raised by the family. • Providing a follow up email summarising the initial actions that have been agreed, provision of full contact details and a reiteration of the offer to make contact as and when further assistance might be required. • Providing details of any local or national support services. • Providing any requested copies of work produced by the student and an academic transcript. • Supporting direct contact or reflections from higher education institution staff who knew the student particularly well. | |

| Actions | Considerations/resources | Completed/notes |
|---|--|-----------------|
| <p>The Wellbeing/Counselling team to contact the Students' Union Officers to reiterate that support is available for all students and explain process of accessing support.</p> | <p>Promote usual emotional support services and/or extend support sessions for students.</p> <p>It may be a good idea to temporarily reprioritise access to the wellbeing/counselling teams to the accommodation/School most impacted by the student death to increase access and visibility.</p> | |
| <p>With new information likely to have come in, continue to identify and speak to students who may be particularly impacted by the sudden student death.</p> | <p>Key considerations will be notification, access to welfare support (on/off campus), normalisation of managing difficult emotions and encouragement to discuss with family and friends.</p> <p>Use the sudden death leaflet and death email template to ensure students have access to the online support available eg local Cruse Bereavement Care support.</p> | |
| <p>The Mental Health Team to consider how news of the sudden student death may affect existing clients and proactively contact those where the news of a sudden death may specifically affect them.</p> | | |

Longer term actions

| Actions | Considerations/resources | Completed/notes |
|---|--|-----------------|
| <p>The family liaison lead will maintain contact with the family and find out details of the funeral and whether students/staff can attend.</p> <p>If so, consider arranging and funding transport for the funeral and accommodation as required.</p> | <p>It is often also appropriate for a senior member of the higher education institution to attend the funeral to represent the wider higher education institution community.</p> <p>Be mindful of trying to maintain contact with the family once the formality of the funeral and the intensity of the initial incident response has passed. Ideally, this should include the family's involvement in the post incident review.</p> | |
| <p>The Director of Student Services will continue to liaise with the Coroner's Office, providing them with a statement and other records as required. Staff may also be called to give evidence during the subsequent inquest.</p> <p>Understand when the inquest will occur and inform in advance those identified as being friends of the deceased, staff who responded to the death and others known to have been impacted. The Communications Team should also be informed. Once the inquest has concluded, record the official cause of death.</p> | <p>A key consideration is to ensure that those impacted by the death should not learn about the conclusion of the inquest or information revealed during it through the media.</p> | |
| <p>Support Services to contact affected students a week after event and offer to keep in touch at least weekly. Offer comfort and practical help. Offer referral for more specialist support if required.</p> | <p>It is important to normalise a persons' response to a bereavement to reassure them that their response is an expected response to bereavement/trauma.</p> | |

| Actions | Considerations/resources | Completed/notes |
|---|---|-----------------|
| <p>The Chaplain, if appropriate, will liaise with the family regarding appropriate memorial events.</p> | <p>Would the family like any kind of ceremony at the higher education institution? If so, what kind? prayers/memorial/full funeral?</p> | |
| <p>A post incident review, led by a senior member of staff, will be undertaken in the event of every suspected suicide and put into practice any learning points to support the reduction of the future risk.</p> | <p>The review process should be positive and not be used to identify fault or blame. Every effort should be made support those involved and encourage a culture of honest reflection, identification of relevant learning points and of positive and tangible actions that directly reduce the risk of a recurrence.</p> <p>Each review should therefore:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be conducted with honesty • involve the family of the person who has died • be completed as soon after the incident as practical • be objective and focused on identifying positive actions • be focused on addressing specific questions raised by those impacted by the incident • be proportionate in its scale <p>The review outcomes should focus on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • what happened, to whom, when and where • identifying any learnings or reflections that can be drawn from what has happened • developing a clear action plan and owners for improvements, including how any learning will be implemented | |

| Actions | Considerations/resources | Completed/notes |
|--|---|-----------------|
| <p>Working with other colleagues, the Head of Student Services will liaise with the family is a posthumous award is to be presented and a formal transcript should be provided.</p> | <p>Families often also take comfort from receiving copies of work produced by the deceased.</p> <p>Discuss with the family whether they would like to receive the award at a graduation ceremony and offer accommodation and hospitality should they choose to.</p> | |
| <p>Ensure that staff involved in the incident response (immediate and longer term) are personally thanked. Despite the circumstances, it is still important to recognised the role played by colleagues and others. Ensure that any messages of thanks from family and friends are also relayed in a timely way.</p> | | |
| <p>Be mindful of the potential for clustering of deaths and consider whether any given death has features that may indicate it is or has the potential to develop into a cluster. Take further preventative actions as necessary (eg access to means, additional targeted interventions).</p> | | |
| <p>Be mindful of key anniversaries (eg date that the student died or would have been due to graduate). This may act as a trigger for those impacted by their death.</p> <p>Those most impacted should be proactively contacted to remind them of the support available.</p> | <p>With the passage of time this is easily forgotten, so diarising these as part of the immediate response can provide a prompt.</p> | |



POSTVENTION GUIDANCE: RESOURCES

Forming a postvention team

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The postvention team

The following is a summary of the people who should make up your postvention team, including their roles, responsibilities and competencies. This resource is for those involved in setting up and running a postvention team. It includes role descriptions, person specifications, and a template first meeting agenda.

Postvention team (PVT) chair

Pre-nominated senior member(s) of staff. A PVT Chair must always be available on call and able to attend campus if required. We advise identifying a couple of individuals to potentially take on this role, particularly to cover circumstances where someone may be on leave, sick or unable to immediately respond.

They should be a clear thinker who can provide direction with authority and empathy.

Responsibilities:

- Responsible for leading the whole postvention response.
- Promptly convenes PVT meetings as necessary.
- Engages key people following a critical incident and facilitates support.
- Chairs meetings.
- Co-opts additional sub-team members as appropriate.
- Establishes and maintain a supportive and ethical relationship with those directly impacted by a critical incident.

Care for students lead

Responsible for caring for and communicating to students who are affected. This is typically the Director of Student Services or equivalent with support from service colleagues, academic staff and the students' union.

Responsibilities:

- Liaises with the student's academic school to ascertain timetables for contacting students in person and addressing issues such as impending assessment deadlines and arranging mitigating circumstances.
- Engages with other students following a critical incident and facilitates academic and pastoral support and guidance.

Care for staff lead

Responsible for caring for and communicating to staff who are affected including outsourced accommodation providers and security. This is typically a senior manager with support from human resource services.

Responsibilities:

- Engages with staff following a critical incident and facilitates support.

Family liaison lead

Responsible solely for communicating with the family. Ideally, someone who knew the deceased. This member of staff will require bereavement support training as well as support for themselves, including a deputy to work with.

A sensitive and compassionate manner is crucial to secure confidence and trust of families.

Responsibilities:

- Engages with family following a critical incident, facilitates support and provides a single consistent point of contact for family.
- Provides information of additional services available for families, including signposting to support, so that they can access all available services and help.

Communications lead

This is typically the Director of Communications. They are responsible for coordinating the internal and external communications about the incident.

Responsibilities:

- Deals with internal and external communications, including any interest from the media.
- Monitors press and social media coverage.
- Supports other teams in all aspects of communication.

Administrator

Typically, this should be an executive level administrator.

Responsibilities:

- Keeps a detailed written record of all actions taken and decisions made by the PVT.
- Maintains a single referential information repository, which then serves as the 'single source of truth'.

Competence requirements of postvention team members

- resolute, compassionate and committed
- emotionally aware
- takes ownership
- inclusive, enabling and visionary leadership
- works collaboratively, but able to work independently
- delivers, facilitates, supports, and inspires
- intelligent, creative and informed practice
- can analyse information critically
- innovative and open-minded

Postvention team agenda

This is an example agenda for a Postvention team meeting.

- 1** Welcome – strategic objectives
PVT leader to be clear from the outset as to what is to be achieved
- 2** News update
What do we currently know? Informs single source of truth
- 3** First meeting confirm sub-group roles / subsequent meetings sub-group updates Support for students affected
- 4** Support for staff affected
- 5** Family liaison
- 6** Communication
Depending upon the incident additional sub-groups maybe required, for example, police liaison, coroner liaison, embassy liaison
- 7** Transition to business as usual
- 8** Review strategic priorities
- 9** Potential risks
- 10** Potential timescale for business as usual
- 11** Critical Incident Review
- 12** PVT care for ourselves / care for each other
- 13** Any other business



POSTVENTION GUIDANCE: RESOURCES

Communications following the sudden death of a student

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| Press template for use by the family | 3 |
| Draft letter for students who knew the person who has died | 4 |
| Draft letter for teaching and support staff | 5 |



This resource is for those involved in sending out communications after the sudden death of a student. Here you will find examples of the kind of communication that you may need to send to the wider community and in response to media enquiries.

Each of the following are provided as examples. It is vital that they are personalised according to the particular circumstances, to ensure they are appropriately human in tone and that they are not identical to communications issued around previous deaths. They should also be signed by or quote named staff, never using 'Student Support Team' or 'A spokesperson said'.

Press template for universities

A press statement should be drafted in the event that the higher education institution is asked to comment on a recent death. You should keep the information to a minimum and not include any detail in terms of the cause of death or location etc. It can be a number of months, sometimes years, before a suicide is confirmed, so avoid speculation within the statement.

We are deeply saddened to hear about the death of (name if agreed by the family) one of our students/staff members. Our thoughts are with his/her/their family and friends at this difficult time.

As a valued member of (name of higher education institution), we know the loss is being felt by many and we are doing everything we can to support friends, family and the wider student and staff community.

We encourage anyone who has been affected by this news to contact our wellbeing team (or other appropriate support service) or reach out to other support services (See suggested support services listed in the Resource list in the Appendix of the [How to respond to a student suicide](#) document).

Resources and advice

If the family and friends have concerns about approaches from journalists, it may be helpful to advise them to contact IPSO (Independent Press Standards Organisation), the UK's main press regulator and/or offer to help them to connect. IPSO operates a 24-hour harassment helpline providing advice to those who have been affected by a suicide and do not wish to have contact with the press. IPSO can issue a notice to press advising them not to contact named individuals and can give advice around reporting in relation to the Editors' Code. IPSO can be reached at: inquiries@ipso.co.uk

If a death is covered by press as a suicide it can be helpful to remind journalists of the risks associated with media coverage of suicide, particularly with a young audience, and signpost them to Samaritans' [Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide](#)

Social media is less regulated than the mainstream media, but should be proactively monitored by your team, with inaccurate posts clarified and individual concerns by students addressed through direct messaging.

Press template for use by the family

NB: This draft statement can be given to the family of the deceased if they need any additional support when dealing with the press. We recommend that the family are made aware that the media may request a photograph of their loved one and should this request be denied that they are within their rights to obtain an image from a public page or forum such as social media. To avoid further potential upset and to retain some control over what is published, we recommend that the family choose the image that they would like their loved one to be remembered by.

On (date) we lost our (son/daughter/brother/friend etc) who was loved and will be missed by so many.

We have been overwhelmed by the support shown and the many kind words that have been shared by those who knew (name).

As we try to come to terms with what has happened, we request that we are given the space and privacy needed to grieve as a family.

Draft letter for students who knew the person who has died

We recommend that this letter is sent following a face-to-face conversation where possible, particularly where the student was well known to others (eg accommodation, class/tutor groups, sports teams). The purpose of the letter should be to reiterate the higher education institution's support at this time and to signpost students to further services and support. The level of detail included will need to be in accordance with what has been agreed with the family of the deceased.

Dear (student)

We are all shocked and saddened by the death of (enter name, if permission has been granted). Our thoughts and condolences are with (his/her/their) family and all who were (his/her/their) friends.

We know that this is an incredibly difficult time for everyone who knew [name], and for those who did not know (name) well, it is still a huge shock to lose someone in our community so suddenly and tragically.

You do not have to go through this alone. There are people who can help:

(Insert details of services available.)

You can also visit supportaftersuicide.org.uk, (insert other key websites/helplines) to find out more about how to support yourself and others.

(name's) family has asked that we, as a community, respect their privacy at this time, especially when sharing news on social media. Making sure you post safely and responsibly can also encourage others to seek help. If you are concerned about anything you see or hear on social media, or about your own or the safety of any of your friends, please contact (postvention/mental health services). We want to make sure that everyone who is struggling at this time can get the help they need.

(Insert any details about memorial service, funeral or when students will be updated on this)

Draft letter for teaching and support staff

Those teaching staff closest to the student should be informed face to face in the first instance. The purpose of this letter is to inform wider staff groups, to offer support to them and to give details of possible student reactions and how to support.

To all (name of higher education institution) staff

We are shocked and saddened by the sudden and tragic death of (name if permission is granted, or) one of our students. Our thoughts and condolences are with his/her/their family and friends.

All students have been informed and support has been made available. We are monitoring student reactions carefully and will put in place additional support where needed. Currently, students can access support through:

(list support services available)

This is an incredibly difficult time for everyone in our community. We would ask that you remain aware of how your students are reacting to this news over the coming weeks and months and continue to signpost them to support. If you are concerned about the safety of anyone, please contact (postvention/mental health support).

(name's) family has asked that we, as a community, respect their privacy at this time, especially when sharing news on social media. Making sure you post safely and responsibly can also encourage others to seek help. If you are concerned about anything you see or hear on social media, or about your own or the safety of any of your friends, please contact (postvention/mental health services). We want to make sure that everyone who is struggling at this time can get the help they need.

We have a plan in place to support everyone who has been affected by (name's) death. That includes supporting our entire staff, so if you or a colleague is finding the news difficult to cope with, we are here for you. Please contact (insert name/service) to talk any time.

This will be a challenging time for us all over the coming weeks and months, but please be assured that (name of higher education institution) will provide whatever support is needed for as long as it is needed.



POSTVENTION GUIDANCE: RESOURCES

Carrying out a serious incident review

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| Underlying review principles | 2 |
| What is a serious incident? | 3 |
| Review process | 3 |
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| APPENDIX 1: Serious incident background information form | 6 |
| APPENDIX 2: Serious incident reflective feedback form | 13 |
| APPENDIX 3: Serious incident final report structure | 16 |

This guide is for those setting up and running a serious incident review, it features template forms to help you capture information, and structure your findings.

Any serious incident involving a student will have a far-reaching impact, even beyond those who have been directly involved. This may extend to other students, members of staff, friends and relatives and those working in partner organisations. In addition, serious incidents have the potential to affect reputation and with that, confidence, in the higher education institution or areas therein.

Purpose of the procedure

This procedure is for use whenever a serious incident has occurred and is intended to support learning to minimise the chance of a recurrence or a similar incident involving another student. The procedure is aimed at:

- analysing what happened, to whom, when and where
- identifying any learnings or reflections that can be drawn from what has happened
- developing a clear action plan and owners for improvements, including how any learning will be implemented

Underlying review principles

The review process should not be used to identify fault or blame. Every effort should be made to support those involved and encourage a culture of honest reflection, identification of relevant learning points and of positive and tangible actions that directly reduce the risk of a recurrence.

Each review should therefore:

- be conducted with due candour
- Ideally, involve the family of the student
- be completed as soon after the incident as practical
- be objective and focused on identifying positive actions

- be focused on addressing specific questions raised by those impacted by the incident
- be proportionate in its scale

What is a serious incident?

Serious incidents are when individuals have or have nearly come to serious or lasting harm or where they have or have nearly caused harm to others. It is impossible to provide a definitive list of events that might be reviewed under this process however they may include:

- the death of a student or group of students through any apparent unnatural means
- a serious incident of self-harm, where there appears to have been clear intent to attempt suicide
- other incidents of serious harm being caused to a student or groups of students through unnatural means
- serious harm caused to others by a student at the higher education institution
- a serious safeguarding issue eg, a child or young person aged under 18 reports abuse

Review process

Each review will be led ('Lead Reviewer') by a senior member of staff, who has had no prior involvement with the student(s) involved.

Stage 1: Initial incident

The priority must be responding to the specific incident and supporting those involved either directly or indirectly. However, the Lead Reviewer should be confirmed as soon as possible after the incident has occurred, so that they can be appraised of what appears to have happened and start the process of collecting relevant information.

Stage 2: Information gathering

Once the initial incident has been resolved or the situation is stable, a wider process of information gathering should begin, using the template at [Appendix 1](#). This stage should normally be completed within two weeks of the incident or as soon as possible thereafter. In cases such as the sudden death of a student, external agencies will require some of this information within a matter of days. Information may be gathered from a range of different sources including, but not limited to:

- staff who dealt with the initial incident
- staff who may have been providing support to the student either recently or in the past
- academic and PS colleagues in the relevant school
- fellow students
- immediate family and other relatives
- staff in partner organisations (e.g. NHS services)

In addition, the Lead Reviewer will seek initial reflective feedback from relevant individuals using the template at [Appendix 2](#).

Stage 3: Incident overview

Having collated information, the Lead Reviewer will produce a chronology of events, which summarises relevant context and interactions between the student and others prior to, during and after the incident. In the case of the death of a student by suspected suicide, this should be long form document that sets out in detail all aspects of the student's time at the higher education institution. To produce these summaries, it may be necessary to seek information from additional people by email or interview. In the spirit of the principles underlying this procedure, any interview will be informal in nature. The Lead Reviewer will also collate reflections submitted by those asked to input into the case on any learnings that can be drawn.

Stage 4: Reflection of whole incident and identification of learning and action points

On completion of the chronology the Lead Reviewer will convene a small review group (normally of up to five people) who will review all relevant documentation and will meet to:

- 1 Consider whether there remain any outstanding questions or gaps in knowledge relating to the incident that should be filled through a further process of clarification or investigation.
- 2 Having filled any knowledge gaps, to confirm that the chronology adequately addresses, what happened, to whom, when and where.
- 3 Identify, through review of the reflections gathered from others and through their own experience, learnings that can be drawn from the incident.
- 4 What actions should be taken to put in place improvements for the future, which are aimed at minimizing the chance of a recurrence or a similar incident involving another student.
- 5 Ensure that the resulting action has clear owners and time scales for delivery attached to each action.

It is the responsibility of the Lead Reviewer to determine the membership of the review group based on the nature of the incident. It will usually be comprised of higher education institution staff, but consideration should be given where relevant to how to receive input from others (eg other students, friends and relatives and staff in other organisations).

Stage 5

The Lead Reviewer will be responsible for completing a Serious incident review: final report (Appendix 3) and for ensuring that a summary of outcomes is also reported through the higher education institution's safety and wellbeing governance.

Wider opportunities for enhancement

Each review is not a standalone process, and the outcomes should always inform further refinement of prevention and intervention strategies. In addition, data and review outcomes should also be compared and examined to build a wider profile of vulnerability and enhancement opportunities.

Appendix 1

Serious incident background information form

Name(s) of student(s)

Date of birth

Gender

Course

School

Mode of study

Level of study

Year of entry

Year of study

Fee status (eg home/international)

Status (eg active/suspended/withdrawn)

Home address

Term-time address

Disability declaration

Date, time and location(s) of the incident

Type of incident

Summary of the incident

Was the student's emergency contact or another 3rd party contacted prior to or after the incident?

If yes, then summarise these interactions.

Staff directly involved in responding to the incident

Students directly involved in responding to the incident

Name and contact details for any outside agencies involved in responding to the incident

Any other 3rd parties involved in the incidents (including contact details)

Names of any staff or students who may require ongoing welfare support as a result of the incident:

Details of any communications issued:

Details of any media and social media coverage:

For non-academic areas of the higher education institution:

What contact did the individual/s have with your service/team?

Please produce a timeline of interactions in chronological order, noting in particular any concerns that had been raised about the student and the action taken as a consequence:

- i The student's application form and any declarations made at registration should be collated.
- i Where a death by suicide is suspected, review of emails and any other information relating to the student will be required.

For academic areas of the higher education institution:

What contact did the individual/s have with your professional services colleagues?

What contact did the individual have with their academic advisor?

Please produce a timeline of interactions in chronological order, noting in particular any concerns that had been raised about the student and the action taken as a consequence:

Please provide a summary of this student's attendance:

Please provide a summary of any applications for mitigating circumstances, noting whether these were successful and the mitigation applied:

Please provide a summary of this student's academic performance:

i Where a death by suicide is suspected, a full disclosure of emails and any other information relating to the student will be required.

Appendix 2

Serious incident reflective feedback form

The Lead Reviewer shall determine who will be asked to complete a reflective feedback form, but as a guiding principle they should be as inclusive as possible and by default any member of staff who has provided direct support to the student, where that is deemed relevant to the incident itself, will be asked for their reflections. The Lead Reviewer will also offer the opportunity for a confidential 1:1 discussion with each individual, in lieu of or in addition to completing this form.

Please highlight any areas of good practice related to the support provided to this student during their time at the higher education institution:

Please highlight any specific staff or other individuals who have positively and proactively supported student:

When considering your own interactions with this student, do you have any reflections about:

- ways in which you positively contributed to the student's time at the higher education institution:

- anything you may with the benefit of hindsight have chosen to do differently:

- information that was not known to you, which may have influenced your actions/decisions had this not been the case:

- any concerns, no matter how directly related, that you had prior to the incident

Considering what you know about this student, the background to the incident and the incident are there any lessons that you believe can be learned from this case?

In addition to these lessons, are there other specific actions that you believe should be taken as a result of this incident in order to reduce the risk of a recurrence or of a similar incident?

Please include any further information you would wish to highlight related to this incident:

Appendix 3

Serious incident final report: structure

- student name
- student ID number
- date of review
- name of lead incident reviewer
- summary of chronology of events
- outcome of the incident (including details of any injuries)
- remaining knowledge gaps
- identify areas of good practice and positive support provided to the student by specific staff or other individuals
- identify lessons learned from review of this incident
- agreed actions to reduce the risk of a recurrence or of a similar incident (must have clear owner and delivery date)
- any additional communication required (eg with other teams within the higher education institution who may be required to take action as a result of this incident).



POSTVENTION GUIDANCE: RESOURCES

Giving evidence at an inquest

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This resource provides an overview of what to expect when giving evidence at an inquest, including practical advice to help staff prepare and present their evidence.

Purpose of an inquest

An inquest into the death of an individual is held in the jurisdiction in which they died (rather than where they were living at the time) and the purpose is to factually answer four questions:

- 1 Who died?
- 2 When did they die?
- 3 Where did they die?
- 4 How did they die?

Its role is not to apportion blame in any criminal or civil sense. However, a coroner can be critical of an individual or an organisation in their findings of fact and has certain powers if, during an inquest, systemic failings are identified which if left unchecked have the potential to contribute to further deaths.

Being called to give evidence at the inquest of a student is a daunting and potentially unsettling process for many; not least because it is likely to be your first and only time that you have been called upon to do so.

Although an employee of the higher education institution, your primary role as a witness is to speak with complete honesty and to the best of your knowledge and to ensure that the coroner and the family of our student receive full answers to the questions they pose.

Arrival

A coroner's court is a formal setting, so dress appropriately in smart clothes. Whilst mobile telephones are not banned, they should be in silent mode throughout and not used in the court itself. Aim to arrive at least 20 minutes before the scheduled start time and check in with the court clerk who will be able to answer any practical questions.

The start of the hearing

Prior to the hearing, the clerk will show everyone into court. The family of the deceased always sit on the front row, facing the coroner and, understandably, they have primacy in any proceedings. The higher education institution will usually sit apart from the family, along with any other parties who have been called. If a given party is being legally represented, their barrister will also sit on the front row. Prior to the coroner entering court the clerk will ask everyone to stand.

Typical running order

The coroner has discretion over the order of the inquest but will usually start by hearing from the family of the deceased. At least one member of the family will have prepared a written statement but usually also gives evidence in person about the life of the deceased, their interests and anything that might be relevant to the coroner's enquiries.

Often the hearing will then turn to the circumstances of the death, which may include hearing from a Police Coroner's Officer who attended the scene or by taking written or oral evidence from the pathologist. For many people attending, not least the family, this can often be the hardest part of the hearing and it is important to stress that anyone is welcome to step out of the court at any time if they find some of the evidence hard to listen to.

Typically, a coroner will usually then turn to the deceased's time as a student. Many coroners will call a representative of the higher education institution who can give evidence based around a pre-submitted statement covering the entirety of the student's time at higher education institution. The coroner may then go on to hear from colleagues who had specific interactions with them. In some instances, other parties who had interacted with the deceased may be called to give evidence (eg the NHS) and the coroner will again hear from relevant witnesses.

Once all the witnesses have given evidence the coroner will usually summarise the decision-making process that they have to go through and the possible conclusions that they can reach (they will usually invite the family and other properly interested persons (see below) to make comment or submission about the possible conclusions at this point).

The court is then usually adjourned (30–60 minutes) to allow the coroner to consider their conclusions. When the hearing resumes the coroner will usually read a statement which sets out the facts that have been determined against each of the four questions set out above. They will then announce their

overall conclusion (eg suicide or accidental death). For the coroner to reach a determination of suicide they must be satisfied that the deceased both took their own life and intended to do so. This determination is also made on the balance of probabilities.

Approach to legal support

Only in rare cases are a family legally represented in a coroner's court and so are without access to advice or for someone to speak on their behalf. Careful consideration should therefore be given to the use of legal representation by the higher education institution as this can easily be perceived as defensive (in what is not supposed to be an adversarial process).

Properly Interested Persons

In an inquest some parties may be granted the status of Properly Interested Persons (PIP). This means that their involvement with the deceased is deemed sufficiently close that they have a right to receive all materials that will be referred to during the inquest and to ask questions of the witnesses. Families are automatically made PIP, but all other parties must apply to be afforded such status in advance, unless the coroner has already made such a determination.

Giving evidence

The coroner will call each witness forward in turn. You may choose to swear on the Bible or another religious text (which you hold in your right hand) or you may prefer to read a non-religious affirmation. You are allowed to take any notes with you into the witness box and you should always take any statement that you have written. You must not though take (or refer to) any materials that have not previously been mentioned in documents sent to the court.

Formal titles are used in Court. The coroner should be addressed as 'Sir' or 'Ma'am' (to rhyme with 'calm'). You should address the family as Mr. and Mrs. [surname] and refer to colleagues using their formal title (e.g. Dr. Jones).

The coroner will start by asking you to confirm your full name, job title and professional address. They will then lead off on questioning you, usually using any statement you have written as a guide. When the coroner has no further questions, they will ask in turn the family and then any other party with PIP status

whether they have questions for you. Once there are no further questions then the coroner will usually tell you that you are 'released' from the hearing. This means that you are free to leave if you wish, but equally you are welcome to stay until the inquest concludes.

The witness box is usually positioned to the side of the benches that the coroner and the family are sitting on, but always angled towards the coroner. This positioning makes it easy to inadvertently direct the answers to all questions only at the coroner, however, try and make eye contact with both the coroner and the members of the family when giving the answers (regardless of who asked the question). Understandably you may feel nervous before and whilst giving evidence, but aim to speak as slowly and clearly as you can. It is very rare that the tone of the questions put to you will be anything other than respectful. In the unlikely event that this is not the case try as much as possible to maintain composure; remembering that you are entitled to ask for a break in proceedings to gather your thoughts.

Press and public attendance

Almost all coroner's hearings are held in public and so anyone has a right to attend. It is not unusual to see trainee nurses, solicitors or paramedics in attendance. On occasion at least one reporter will be in court. There is no way of knowing in advance if this will be the case, but try and proactively engage with them at the end of the hearing and respectfully ask that they seek comment from the higher education institution's media team before publishing any story.

Speaking to the family

One of the more challenging aspects of an inquest can be speaking to the family; not least because it may not be clear before the hearing what the family's view of the higher education institution is. Even that notwithstanding, for the family an inquest is an emotionally charged and draining experience and so it is not unusual for them to not immediately speak to other people present at the inquest. None the less, try and speak to the family at the end of the hearing to offer further condolences on behalf of the higher education institution and to offer to answer any further questions they may have.

Further questions and sources of support

Attending an inquest, particularly the first time, can be a draining experience and may have a short-term emotional impact on you. This is not something to be embarrassed or unduly concerned about, but be prepared for this and ensure time available after the inquest to 'recover' and consider accessing appropriate support if necessary.



POSTVENTION GUIDANCE: RESOURCES

Communications considerations

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This list covers some of the areas you will need to consider in your approach to communications after the death of a student.

Urgent admin

Removing the deceased from university mailing lists is a priority. Families may be accessing the student's email account after they have died, and it can be distressing to continue to receive emails that have been sent to other students or from colleagues who are unaware they have died.

All communications

- Unless there are over-riding reasons why not, communications should only ever be issued after discussion with the family of the student who has died.
- All communications issued about the death of a student must be:
 - as personalised as possible
 - be warm and empathetic in tone
 - be from a named individual (with their contact details included)
 - and include reference to sources of wellbeing support.
- Speculation or a perception of 'covering up' can be reduced by a timely communication informing relevant individuals and groups that a student has died.
- Ideally, even initial communications should include a brief recollection from a member of staff who knew the student well (eg academic advisor) reflecting on them as an individual.
- Communications should be tailored to the recipient(s) based on their relationship to the deceased.
- Verbal communication (including video and telephone calls) will always be preferable to email communication. Written messages should include an offer to discuss verbally.

Students

- Before the next of kin have been informed, known friends should be definitively asked not to communicate anything about the incident.
- Sensitively ask all students identified through the incident response to be mindful of the impact of what they communicate and to who. Specifically that they should not be posting details or speculating on the cause/method.
- If a death occurs out of usual term time consider how best to communicate with and support students.

Staff and other groups

Even if not directly impacted by the death, communications should be considered to other groups of staff to ensure they are aware of what has happened and where to address any questions. Examples include:

- residences staff who may hear second hand that a student in their hall has died (particular care should be taken to speak to staff responsible for cleaning or providing residential life support to the relevant flat)
- academic and support staff in the student's school/programme of study
- communications colleagues who may receive enquiries about what has happened
- head of Counselling and Mental Health Service and Disability Support Service
- If the student has been under the care of the NHS, make sure that the relevant team is aware the student has died.

Responding to communications

Responses to communications about the death of a student should ideally be responded to (even if this is just a holding response) the day that they are received. There is seldom a higher priority than responding to such a situation).

Social media

Be mindful that information about a suicide might spread quickly on social media. It might be inaccurate and lacking in signposting to support for those who have been impacted. Social media posts should be proactively monitored and directly challenge or correct anything that is factually inaccurate either by public or direct messaging.

Media

Follow up on any media reporting about a death that does not respect the Samaritan's Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide and their Guidance for Reporting Youth Suicides and Suicide Clusters. Most publications will quickly update their copy. The Samaritans' media advice team can be contacted for advice and support if necessary (mediaadvice@samaritans.org)

Security staff are the first responders when a death occurs on campus in or out of business hours. They are also often the first to get a report of a death especially out of hours.

They need clear guidelines on:

- 1 Who to notify (both in and out of hours – eg ambulance/ emergency service, police, Chair of Postvention Team/Postvention Coordinator).
- 2 How to preserve the scene of the death/incident.
- 3 How to deal with those present. This may include students, staff and or members of the public, some of who may be distressed. The area needs to be cleared / witnesses need to be kept nearby, names and contact details ascertained, the police will require these and may wish to interview witnesses, including staff, students and or members of the public.
- 4 Who to call eg counselling or Head of Student Services to get assistance managing the distress of those present.
- 5 How to record the incident.

At the scene of the incident

It may help for security staff to have counsellors or other designated and trained first responders adjacent to the scene to take care of distressed students, staff, and public and to be available to security staff too for psychological first aid.

Support before end of day/night

Security staff should be offered support such as; one to one psychological first aid and/or a group debrief. Additionally, security need to be given written details of where they may seek follow up or additional support, either at the higher education institution Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or the College Student Counselling Services.

Follow up support

Following up with security staff at intervals post-incident is recommended, ie not assuming that one group debrief is all that's needed, or that post-trauma response won't change over time. Support should also be offered at the time of the inquest where their attendance is required.

It is important to remember that in responding to an immediate completed or attempted suicide security staff will be impacted emotionally, physically and cognitively. Additionally they may have to enter into a very traumatic scene and witnesses a body or body parts which are highly mutilated and may be unrecognizable – due to injuries sustained in a suicide eg gunshots/ falling from a height/ murder-suicide. Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may be an outcome and the Higher Education Institution (HEI) owed a duty of care to its security staff to mitigate the impact in so far as possible.

The security staff also need to be kept informed as to the outcome of an attempted suicide. If a student is taken to hospital. While respecting confidentiality they should be told the outcome as soon as possible. They have invested a professional and personal effort in their response and carry a concern for the young person the family and the other students as well as their own part in trying to save a life.