
The background of the slide is a spiral-bound notebook with a light beige, textured cover and a dark brown spine on the left side. The spiral binding is visible on the left edge.

Teenage Suicide Postvention in School: Another Look at the Contagion Effect

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Suicide Increasing Among Hong Kong Youth

- Between 1981-1992 suicide among 10-19 years old increased by three times.
- The average age in 1982 was 18.06; in 1992 it was 14.48.
- *Source: Educational Research Journal, 1993, Paul Yip & Angela Yu*

Suicide Death

- Suicide is the leading cause of death in Hong Kong SAR for youth. *Suicide & Life-Threatening Behavior, Fall 2004, Paul Zip*
- Suicide is the leading cause of death in Hong Kong females 15-24, among the highest in the world. *Univ.of HK. Dept of Statistics*

Depression in Hong Kong

- It is estimated that 400,000 suffer from depression in Hong Kong, four times more than 20 years ago. *Source: Chinese University of Hong Kong*
- Hong Kong's rate of 18.2 suicide deaths per 100,000 (2003) is above the world average of 14.5. *Source: WHO, "Preventing Suicide: A Resource for Media Professionals, 2002.*

Valid Concerns...

- Someone who is suicidal might be stimulated to act by what is done.
- Glamorizing, providing simplistic explanations, or glorifying the person or act of suicide may encourage others who are susceptible.

And yet...

- There does not seem to be much recognition that someone who is suicidal may be stimulated to act by what is NOT done.
- “Reporting of suicide in an appropriate, accurate and potentially helpful manner by enlightened media can prevent tragic loss of lives by suicide.” WHO, 2002

Argument Against School Memorials



- They romanticize the act of suicide
- They glorify the deceased
- They may encourage others to gain attention through dying by suicide
- The school may face liability if another student dies by suicide

The National Association of School Psychologists says...



- “...both the National School Safety Center and Lieberman (Richard, PhD, school psychologist and consultant to the Los Angeles Unified School District’s Suicide Prevention Unit) agree that no memorial service should be held at the school because it places the deceased student in the position of being a role model.”
- From *Teen Suicides: Life, After Death*, NASP website, www.nasponline.org

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Lieberman continues,

“...it is not a far stretch for a child who sees a beautiful tree, a yearbook dedication or a memorial plaque to imagine he or she will receive such attention in death.”



Center for Disease Control (CDC), 1988

- Recommendations for a community plan for the prevention and containment of suicide clusters, include:
- “the response should be conducted in a manner that avoids glorification of the suicide victims and minimizes sensationalism.”
- “if the suicide victims are of school age, the deaths should be announced privately to those students most likely to be deeply affected.”
- “After teachers are briefed, the suicide death might be announced to the rest of the students either by individual teachers or over the school loudspeaker.”
- “Funeral services should not be allowed to unnecessarily disrupt the regular school’s schedule.”

The Werther Effect

- Within psychological literature, denotes the tendency of people to die by suicide under the compulsion of imitation rather than for individual motivations.

Term coined in 1974 by David Phillips in *American Sociological Review*, arguing that an individual whose suicide is widely publicized may become a role model for subsequent suicides, particularly among adolescents and young adults. Based on *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, 1774.



Werther Effect Re-examined

- In 1984 Wasserman, I.M. concluded that not all stories about suicides lead to an increase in suicides, but only stories about the suicides of celebrities. (*American Sociological Review*, 49, 427-436)
- Center for Disease Control acknowledges that “the role of imitation or contagion is less well-established than other risk factors” especially noting depressive illness and history of past suicide attempts.

Imitation

- The process by which an act of suicide becomes a compelling model for successive suicide attempts or deaths; an underlying theory to explain the occurrence of contagion.

Contagion

- The process by which a suicide death facilitates the occurrence of a subsequent suicide; assumes either direct or indirect awareness of the prior suicide death.

Cluster

- A group of suicide deaths or suicide attempts, or both, that occur closer together in time and space than would normally be expected in a given community.

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Postvention

- Following a suicide death, planned interventions with the bereaved that aim to alleviate the distress of the affected individuals, reduce the risk of suicidal behavior, and promote the healthy recovery of the affected community.

Social Proof Model of Suicide

- People imitate those who seem similar, despite OR EVEN BECAUSE OF societal disapproval. This model is important because it has nearly opposite ramifications for what the media ought to do about the copycat suicide effect than the standard model does. *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion, Cialdini, 1998.*



Peer Risk for Suicide Attempters and Completers

- High school peers of suicide attempters are particularly at risk for *externalizing* problems.
- High school peers of suicide completers are particularly at risk for *internalizing* problems.
- Different risk mechanisms may be in operation within these peer groups.

Source:

The Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry & Allied Disciplines, Ting-pong Ho (Queen Mary Hospital) and colleagues at The Chinese Univ of HK & Kwai Chung Hospital (2000).

Memorials & Contagion

- There is not a single documented account of a suicide occurring because a previous student received “recognition” through a memorial service.
- There are multiple situations where cluster suicides have occurred when no school memorial services were held. (Not implying causality here, just commenting.)

Reasons TO Hold a Memorial



- There are no recorded incidents of copycat suicide deaths linked to a school memorial.
- Having a memorial service does not *inherently* glamorize the act of suicide, or make the deceased a role model.



Memorial Services, cont.

- By omission, we are devaluing the life of the deceased
- Not holding a service isn't going to stop kids from talking about what happened
- It demonstrates that adults are afraid and need to *control*
- It does not provide productive channels for honoring the life of the deceased



Memorial Services, cont.

- In the void, other actions WILL occur, and
- It opens the perfect opportunity for anger and destructive acting out, thereby
- Not supporting kids in their sadness and grieving, and
- It is a *fear-based* response...

What Holds us Back?

- Liability issues
- Heavy emphasis on academic performance at the expense of life understanding. (*As noted by Cheung Chi-Kim, Dept of Curriculum Studies, Univ. of Hong Kong, in Pastoral Care in Education, 1999, "The Introduction of Personal and Social Education in the Secondary Schools in Hong Kong."*)

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Suicide & School Memorials

- Not suggesting schools **MUST** have a memorial, but rather, that they have a policy and procedures for handling deaths of students and staff based on values, empirical evidence and sound strategy.



Policies & Procedures will:

- Provide a rationale for decision-making so that:
- you aren't making decisions based on the person who died or the method of death, thereby implying that some lives are more valuable than others;
- you can respond to family wishes or whims based on your pre-set policies and procedures, thereby avoiding some of the potential conflict.


P & P cont.

- you can educate your students and staff about the value of life and the importance of community
- you provide your students with productive action and choices instead of a vacuum that they will fill, and
- you make suicide, depression, something that can and should be talked about, because when you don't,
- it leads to even more isolation



Think on these things:

- What is education?
- What is the mission of schools?
- In what ways does a school seek to create community?
- What does a community do in response to traumatic events?
- What does whatever the school does, or fails to do, teach your students?



DO NOT: (from WHO 2000 media guidelines)

- Publish photographs or suicide notes
- Report specific details of the method used
- Don't give simplistic answers.
- Don't glorify or sensationalize suicide.
- Don't use religious or cultural stereotypes.
- Don't apportion blame.



TO DO: (From WHO 2000 Media Guidelines)

- Work closely in presenting the facts
- Refer to suicide as “completed” and not “successful”
- Highlight alternatives to suicide
- Present only relevant data
- Provide information on helplines and community resources.
- Publicize risk indicators and warning signs.