Dear Alice,

How can students get support after a suicide on campus?

**Answer**

Dear Reader,

Friends, family members, colleagues, and acquaintances of someone who died by suicide may experience a range of emotions, including (but not limited to) shock, anger, denial, or grief, among others. Some folks may want to isolate themselves following such a loss, but social support and connection are consistently recommended as being helpful for the healing process. Reaching out for support throughout counseling services on your campus or through support groups in your community may be helpful. Further, working with the larger community can help to provide wider support and suicide prevention.

For an individual struggling with the suicide of a loved one or acquaintance, finding a space to talk about it can be a helpful way to cope with the many emotions such an event can bring up. If their school has a counseling office, students who are looking for individualized support may find it useful to seek help from a mental health professional on their campus. Additionally, support groups can be a way to unpack the experience with others who have also lost someone in their lives to suicide. To find a nearby support group, one place to visit is Suicide Awareness Voices of Education (SAVE)’s website, which has a database of support groups across the country. For free one-on-one support, Healing Conversations connects individuals to volunteers, who are also survivors of suicide loss, via phone or in-person. Along with support groups, friends, family members, and mental health professionals can all help an individual unpack the grief and emotions they’re experiencing. Further, there are a number of organizations that are working towards mental health promotion as a method of suicide prevention on college campuses, such as Active Minds, The Steve Fund, and The Jed Foundation. They may be able to provide more support on campuses, be it through campus chapters or through work with campus leadership.

When it comes to the larger community response following a suicide, be it a university, school, city, community center, or something else, suicide prevention groups suggest focusing on
postvention. Postvention includes addressing the grief of community members and preventing suicide contagion — the phenomenon where one suicide can influence others to also attempt suicide. Communities may want to consider forming suicide prevention coalitions to support the needs of the survivors of suicide loss, thereby helping to prevent contagion. These coalitions may encourage affected individuals to identify and practice coping strategies such as deep breathing, meditation, and physical activity. They can also connect those who are grieving or struggling with their own mental health to resources and other sources of support, and in the case of schools, take measures to help lighten the workload and potentially grant the student time away. Other considerations during postvention include avoiding open funerals and memorials, if possible. However, if the family and community push for some sort of memorial or collective ritual, it’s recommended that messaging be carefully crafted such that it recognizes the loss without assigning blame or suggesting that suicide is a viable solution to a person’s struggles.

Losing someone to suicide is can be tremendously difficult, and each person and community will process this loss differently and in their own way. There’s no one right answer for how to confront such a horrific tragedy, but seeking and fostering connection and support is a start. It can also be helpful to encourage people to reach out for support with their own suicidal thoughts. For those considering suicide, support can be found through The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline [7] at 1-800-273-8255 (TALK).

Thanks for asking this question — better navigating support and working towards prevention begins with seeking out this type of information.

Alice!

Category:
- Emotional Health [8]
- Counseling [9]
- Grief & loss [10]
- Suicide [11]

Related questions
- Social support [12]
- Self-harm [13]
- Resources for those who self-harm [14]
- Schools supporting students following shootings [16]

Resources
- Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [17]
- Mental Health Services (CUIMC) [18]

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[9] https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/counseling
[12] https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/social-support-0
[16] https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/schools-supporting-students-following-shootings
[18] https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/mental-health-services-cuimc