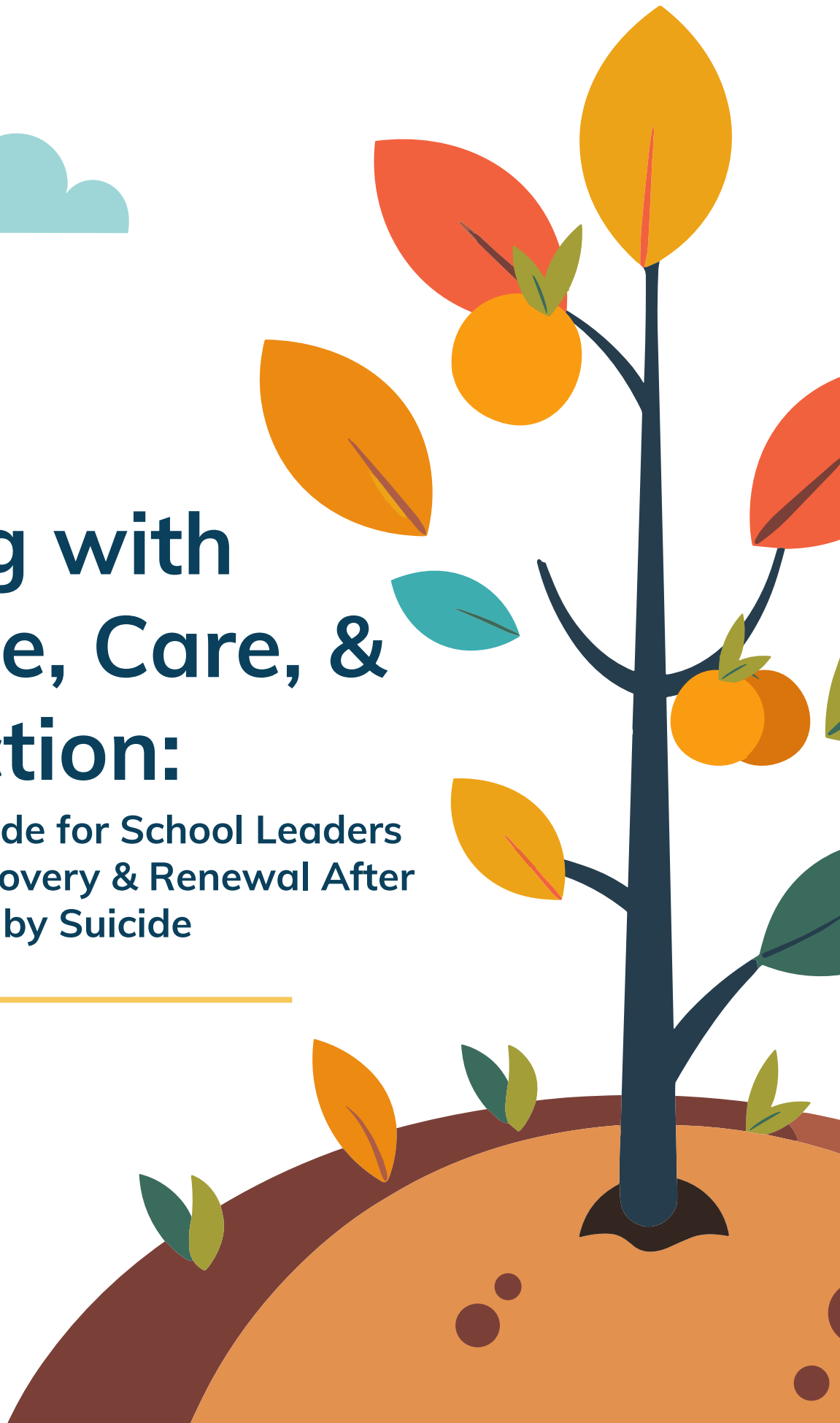


Leading with Courage, Care, & Connection:

A Reflection Guide for School Leaders
Navigating Recovery & Renewal After
Student Deaths by Suicide



Introduction



How might we, as school crisis leaders, hold school communities and cultures in the complexity of memorializing and commemorating students who die by suicide, not only in the acute aftermath but in the years after?

How is suicide postvention currently defined, and what would it look like/sound like/feel like to have a more embodied, equitable, and liberated approach?

Throughout 2021-2024, the School Crisis Recovery & Renewal project gathered educators, crisis responders, suicide prevention and postvention leaders, youth advocates, and other community leaders to explore how to hold space to honor students' lives years after they die by suicide, how practices of commemoration and memorialization collaborate or collide with school postvention, and to name some of the challenges that arrive with creating space and place to honor students' deaths by suicide equally and equitably.

Through several SCRR workgroups and communities of practice, we explored the essential questions above and grappled with current gaps in school suicide postvention practice and policy:

- How might we expand the current timeframe of postvention so that it isn't only about acute contagion and can go beyond response into recovery and renewal?
- How might we center student and educator needs in how we understand and metabolize student death by suicide, as school leaders?
- How might we ground our approaches to suicide postvention leadership through a culturally humble and liberated approach, embracing an analysis of power and structural inequity?

This guide is a “conversation capture” of dialogues and communities of practice and seeks to add clarity and context for future conversations in the field.

This guide curates lived experiences and actions taken by people in your shoes - leaders through postvention, offering reflective questions to support anyone in the school community supporting young people after a death by suicide.

School Suicide Postvention: Recovery & Renewal

In our project's framework, embracing school suicide postvention beyond response and into **recovery** invites us to analyze **1) what safety** (or the lack thereof) looks like, sounds like, and feels like for students and staff; **2) how grief, mourning and memorialization** practices and policies either help or hurt schools heal after the death by suicide of a student; and **3) how we stabilize and integrate the experience of what happened into what can be** after the attempt or death of a student due to suicide.

Renewal invites us to hold the experience of students dying by suicide with a **1) Root cause focus** (What underlying issues impacted the crisis? What ways would holistic supports address that root cause?); **2) Meaning-making** (Who is defining the storytelling? What outcomes do we see from the stories being told? Whose stories are being centered and uplifted and why?); **3) Restoration & Identity Shifts** (What does it look like to move forward without moving on? How are we redefining ourselves and our organizations after the death by suicide of students?); and **4) Repair** (Where might harm have been caused during response and recovery? How do we make it right? How do people define healing as individuals? How do we collectively acknowledge or affirm that healing?).

Why A Reflection Guide?

Our ability to reflect is a key indicator of our capacity to move from crisis response into recovery and beyond into renewal—our individual and collective reimagination of what could be through and beyond the crisis. Reflective spaces and practices can be critical to how we cope, make meaning, and heal ourselves and our school communities.

This guide is a conversation capture of just these kinds of reflective spaces, dialogues, and communities of practice. It is a curation of lived experiences and actions taken by people in your shoes - leaders through postvention - and is intended to add clarity and context for future conversations in the field.

The goal of this guide is to facilitate purposeful reflection and practice in the field of school-based suicide postvention, rooted in the questions and ideas our field has generated over the years. This guide seeks to be a companion for anyone who might find themselves supporting a school community in the days, months, and years after a death by suicide.

The considerations and questions offered here are a necessary companion to [existing resources and best practices](#) in the field of suicide postvention. **This guide responds to a need for community-generated knowledge and collectively refined practice, by and for those who have the most at stake in these critical conversations.**

To that end, this guide is also an invitation for you to participate in growing the field of liberated suicide postvention in schools. By engaging with this guide, following the guidance of your own needs and questions and those of your community, you might find other paths through the woods, you might make your own, or you might open a way for those who come after you.

School Suicide Postvention: A Call for This Work to Be Held Through A Liberated Lens

The educators and school community-based partners who came together in these workgroups and communities of practice committed to looking at suicide postvention in schools through **a liberated lens - where the goal of our postvention responses is to attend to individual and community needs equitably but also contribute to the transformation of the personal and societal conditions that cause harm, marginalize, and dehumanize.**

“School-based Suicide Postvention from a Liberated Lens” is the intentional support and connection for a community grieving student death by suicide beyond the immediate response. It requires making physical space and space in time for the grief process and the acknowledgment, memorialization, and commemoration of the person who died by suicide. Liberated suicide postvention means that our processes of recovery and practices of renewal involve the transformation of the systems and sociocultural conditions that contribute to student death by suicide.

From Postvention to Prevention and Back Again

A participant’s takeaway from one early SCRR 2021 community of practice session was that “postvention and prevention exist on a continuum. The way we do postvention, and especially the reflection inherent to ‘renewal,’ can inform and improve our prevention.” In other words, through intentional processes of recovery and practices of renewal, we have the opportunity to grow a more conscious, less fearful, relationship between how we navigate the aftermath of death by suicide and how we work to positively transform the conditions that contribute to suicidal behavior.

Together, we orient toward a world where no one is forced to walk a path through loss and grief that does not honor their being and serve their healing. We envision a landscape of liberated school postvention - where we move from protocol and checkbox responses to being led by culture, heart, and community.

Before We Begin

Losing students to suicide - or even the idea that students are feeling like this world is so painful that an exit is the only solution - is painful, scary, and heartbreaking.

You are here because you either have lost students to suicide or know that you might. You are here perhaps because you have led school communities through loss due to suicide and it did not feel right, enough, or congruent with your leadership values. Perhaps you were a student who lost a friend or family member and now as a school leader, you want to do things differently than what you experienced.

You are here and we are here with you.

Before we begin, we encourage you to take a couple of minutes to identify your School Suicide Postvention Leadership “Why”:

- What has brought you to this guide at this time in your life and the world?
- For whom are you choosing to learn, grow, and expand your capacity to heal and lead? Is there a student or family to whom you want to dedicate your work?
- What conditions do you yearn to see transformed to honor students who have died by suicide and prevent future deaths by suicide?

Whatever brings you here, we know that there are many toolkits and “how-tos” to walk you and your team through the technical steps. We hope that this guide offers not only a couple more how-tos as ideated by your SCRR peers across the country, but also questions that bring you and your team to your “how-be”s: how you can center your humanity in leading schools through really tough moments.



Attuning to the Ecosystem of School Crisis Recovery & Renewal Leadership

Processes and practices of school crisis response, recovery, and renewal live in a cyclical and often simultaneous relationship with one another. While the timelines of our crises are often overlapping, it is useful to discern between our practices of response, recovery, and renewal, so that even when we need to do multiple things at once, we are aware of what it is we are doing. This discernment is a kind of attuning - to sense into the collective and individual needs, orient towards curiosity and flexibility, and move with intention.

School crisis **recovery** leadership invites us to centralize mourning and commemoration. **Renewal** leadership asks us to return to pain points in our communities years after the event to continue the meaning-making amongst community members long term.

After the initial response to a student's death by suicide takes place, school systems often default to a feigned sense of normalcy, a collective "now what?" that often leads to moving on and a silence relating to the loss. As school crisis leaders, the ongoing conversation is where power, agency, and growth can happen. But it is important to distinguish between when our individual and collective systems are still responding to the loss, and when they are beginning to recover from that loss. So, how do we know when we are individually and collectively moving toward postvention recovery and renewal?

We might ask ourselves:

- How activated are our nervous systems? How can we tell?
- Are we still attending to immediate safety needs?
- What is our capacity for reflection?
- How safe do we feel - physically, emotionally, etc.?
- How connected do we feel to those around us? How easy or challenging is it for us to trust others?
- What kind of story are we telling ourselves and others about what has happened?

When the people who make up our school systems can answer these questions in a way that reflects more regulation, stabilization, and coherence, we can then begin to move toward meaning-making and healing. Note: there is no judgment, blame or shame to be in response mode. Some schools are navigating what might seem like endless loss and there is no space to move into recovery and renewal. We offer reflective questions as kernels of hope and possibility that are there for you when you are ready and able. We also note that how we move from response into recovery and renewal is both systemic and individual, in part based on proximity to loss. Some people in the system may get to a place of being able to make meaning and renew before others, and those individuals might be able to support those continuing in the response place.

The Tree of School-Based Suicide Postvention Leadership

"Grief is a process, not an emotion."

-Malkia Devich-Cyril (2021)

"When we enact grief with intention, and in concert with other people, we can find and create moments of relief, comfort, and even joy -- and those moments can sustain us."

-Mariame Kaba and Kelly Hayes (2023)

Just as the trees in a forest grow from soil enriched with the compost of fallen trees, our school communities are grown and shaped by how we grieve experiences of death and loss. Composting - the breaking down of organic material into nourishment for new growth - is simultaneously a destructive and creative process. So too with the recovery and renewal that are inspired by and intertwined with grief.

So, let us imagine school-based suicide postvention leadership as a tree in the woods. Just as a tree relies on every part of its structure to grow and thrive, effective liberated suicide postvention leadership relies on a comprehensive approach that considers personal and shared context, culture, language, policies, practices, and desired outcomes.

This tree of school-based suicide postvention leadership has six parts: soil, seeds, roots, trunks, branches, and fruit.

For each part, we will offer **leadership considerations, advice from the field, and invitations to reflect** that will support you and your team/colleagues as you prepare to walk this path.



1- SOIL

Reflecting to understand the dynamic sociocultural context in which a school community is situated and how this context lives in relationship with the internal culture of the school community as well as your identity and mindset as a school leader.

Leadership Considerations

Understand the Context, Cultivate the Conditions.

School-based Suicide Postvention Leaders can better understand the context within their school community and begin cultivating conditions for liberated postvention by tending the **SOIL** through:

Study Ownership Inquiry Leadership

STUDY: Engage in ongoing learning about the specific intersections - political, cultural, environmental, and social - that converge in your own identity and your school community to identify how these might shape your staff and students' lived experiences and needs around loss, grief, and healing. This is about gaining knowledge and understanding of yourself and your context.

OWNERSHIP: Recognize and seek to understand the ways your institution reflects and upholds structural and systemic oppressions that harm your students and communities, and take ownership of your responsibility to disrupt and positively transform these conditions. This is about boldly looking for harm caused in systems you partake in, and committing to disrupting those injustices.

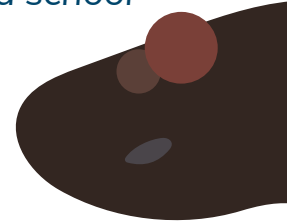
INQUIRY: Engage your school community in ongoing inquiry to deepen your shared knowledge and collective understanding of the sociocultural context of students' lives and illuminate legacies and possibilities of empowerment and healing. This is about critical reflection, tying together what you've studied and taken ownership over, to collectively reflect and make change.

LEADERSHIP: Liberated postvention work requires that we surrender any lingering ties to a purely hierarchical, top-down, savior/martyr approach to leadership. We need to lead relationally and collaboratively, and we need to equip our school communities with the knowledge and skills that position them to participate in these more distributed models of leadership. This is about power sharing and removing barriers for people to fully engage in their own healing work.

What is the SOIL of your school's hurt and harm?

At the heart of school postvention leadership is the understanding of students' experiences, identities, and social realities. This includes acknowledging the impact of factors such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation on students' mental health and their reactions to a peer's death. For example, students from marginalized communities may face additional layers of trauma due to systemic inequities and may require targeted support that addresses both their immediate grief and the ongoing challenges they face. Crisis leaders must cultivate a deep understanding of their student population, not only through demographic data but by actively listening to student voices and engaging with them empathetically.

Moreover, **too often overlooked are the experiences of educators and school staff navigating student death by suicide.** They are often called upon to mobilize to support students and families in the immediate aftermath of a suicide without guidance or space to process their own experience. Or,



they are forced through school/district policy to not respond to the loss - instructed to not mention the death and return to “normal.” These circumstances and others often reported by educators neglect to acknowledge and support their experiences of loss and grief and their needs for space, guidance, and effective postvention policies. BIPOC educators and staff experience additional burdens in managing the racial hostility and discrimination experienced by BIPOC students and by themselves.

Lastly, **while school leaders are certainly not personally and individually responsible for the suicide death of their student, a liberated school suicide leader seeks to understand the ways our systems and the roles we play in them create the conditions for suffering, thriving, and everything in between.** Owning the role that our school policies, culture, and actions might have played in a suicide death might be a necessary part of the postvention process. For example, if the student's death is connected to transphobia, a school's postvention leadership work is not only the memorialization and commemoralization, but also rectifying with the school's accountability or role in the student's despair, pain and hurt. Students from marginalized communities may face additional layers of trauma due to systemic inequities and may require targeted support that addresses both their immediate grief and the ongoing challenges they face. **Crisis leaders must own the impacts of the systems they lead and cultivate a deep sense of accountability to their student population, orienting towards what systemic care, belonging, and justice mean to them.**

Advice From the Field

“When we are often taught ‘nationally recognized best practices,’ we often think that is the only way we can move forward in a given situation. When we create policies to guide the actions we take, we need them to be inclusive of local knowledge and practice (which sometimes contradicts “best practice!”).”

-SCRR Policy Workgroup Participant

“Before writing your policy, consider writing about your community first.”

-SCRR Policy Workgroup Participant

“I would love to see the qualitative experiences inform ideas about our long-term supports versus the limitations, quantitative and evidence based, when those kind[s] of modalities fail to meet the needs of diverse groups and nuanced situations.”

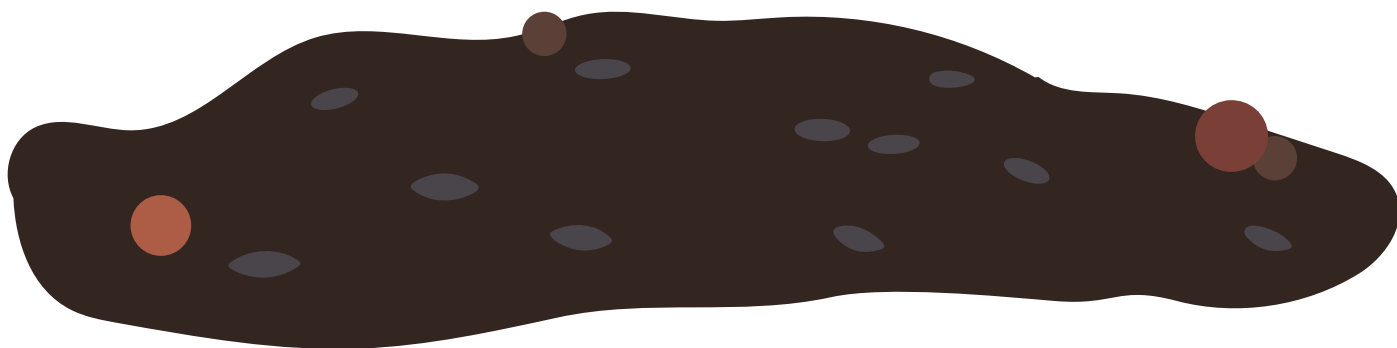
-Postvention Community of Practice Participant

“We have to sit with the reality that many staff do not share the same cultural identities as students, and that impacts the work we do. We must hold students with intention and seek to partner with the community to continue to nurture our students.”

- SCRR Practice Workgroup Participant

Reflection Questions To Drive Action

- » In what ways does my relationship to “comfort” - because of my race and my role as a school leader - impact my ability to support BIPOC students and staff through grief?
- » What do I need to know, do, and be to increase my grief literacy so that I can better support my grieving students and colleagues?
- » How might we hold the both/and of becoming more grief comfortable but also not accepting disproportionate death in our communities?
- » How might I engage others in critical self and systems reflection in a way that generates a more liberatory approach for all?
- » What stigmas and beliefs exist in my community about suicide? How might we begin to shift that narrative?
- » What assets and gifts exist in the soil of our community? How might we build meaningful and reciprocal relationships with our community?
- » What are we learning from the past? What might the students and staff who have been here previously have to teach the students and staff who are here and have yet to come?
- » What contexts are easier for me to consider and which ones do I tend to avoid including in my leadership practices? What individual and collective learning might I need to do in order to move through my biases?
- » Who and what are we valuing? How do we know? What shifts does that inspire me to make in my practice?
- » What strengths do we have to work around the conditions we are not yet able to change? What strategic maneuvers might we be able to make to move closer towards a liberatory and healing centered way of being, both within and beyond grief?



Your notes, reflections, illustrations, and grapplings here:



2- SEEDS



Reflecting to acknowledge and expand our capacity as school crisis leaders to hold fear, uncertainty, and discomfort throughout the days, weeks, and years after a student's death by suicide.

The seed that will become the tree carries the blueprint and potential for miraculous growth and resilience. The soil informs the seed that it is time to grow, and the seed must break its form and expand. As school crisis leaders, we must also attune and respond to the moment and the context, expanding our capacity to hold fear, uncertainty, and hope in the days, weeks, and years after a student's death by suicide.

Leadership Considerations

Tend to Your Relationship To Suicide-related Fear & Grief

"No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing."

- C.S Lewis

While the SCRR communities of practice and workgroups spanned over years, participants held many voices and perspectives, one common thread woven through all conversations was: **a school leader's fear following student death by suicide is the greatest barrier to effective postvention (maybe even to prevention)**. The fear and uncertainty held around the topic of suicide can lead to silence as a response after a student dies by suicide. Not addressing a suicide death in a school, ignoring the cause of death, "pushing it under the rug," expecting someone else to respond, tiptoeing around the topic, or any other kind of fear based silence loudly reinforces the very stigma that suicidology seeks to extinguish.

However, as school leaders, you are also members of the school community. You are grieving the student's death, too. You are leading from within the complex experience of losing a student to suicide. In the landscape of postvention leadership, we will meet with everything that we may have been conditioned to avoid at all costs - grief and the wide range of strong emotions it contains, open-ended and non-linear timelines, questions without clear answers, unknowing, and impermanence.

Due to the complex nature of choice in suicide and the lack of knowledge, science and history we have about this specific cause of death, we cannot remove fear and uncertainty from the landscape of postvention leadership.

What we can do is:

- **Personal:** Expand our capacity to be with fear and a whole host of other strong and challenging emotions.
- **Relational:** Use our language and our routines of connection and communication to validate how unsettling fear and uncertainty can be, how complicated it can make grief and its compounding impact on bereavement.
- **Cultural:** Commit to encouraging and tend to culturally rich and relevant practices of memorialization and commemoration of students who die by suicide in our school communities.
- **Systemic:** Partner with the processes and practices of collective grief to transform the conditions that contribute to harm, isolation, and suffering in our school communities.

As school crisis leaders after death by suicide, you are called to make and hold space for grief, not only in the immediate aftermath but for years to come as the process of well-tended grief drives individuals and communities towards deeper healing and transformation.

Our SCRR community invites you to let go of the idea that you should not be leading if you are also grieving, or that you should not be leading if you feel fear.

Advice From the Field

“Be more intentional with self-care (more than someone in leadership saying “you have to take care of yourself”). We need a formalized self-care pathway to be intentional about (compassion fatigue and satisfaction)”

-2024 Practice Workgroup

As our 2021 Community of Practice participants have affirmed, “living and working as our whole selves (not compartmentalizing) can be very supportive to doing postvention work sustainably.”

We are reminded by our 2021 CoP participants that when we are holding space for others, “it is our ability to sit in discomfort that can allow people the space they need to feel whatever is happening for them. As listeners, we don’t have to react; instead, we can respond without fixing things.” Making and tending the space within us that can hold space for others is a good and necessary place to begin and return to throughout your postvention journey.

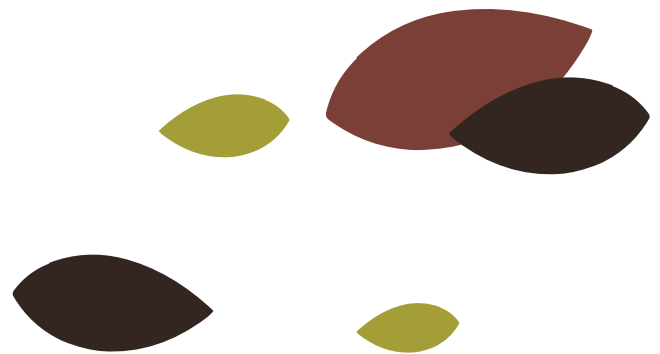
The 2023-2024 SCRR Liberated Postvention Policy Workgroup reminds us that when working with parents and families after a student’s death by suicide, remember to first check in with ourselves and normalize these responses from other parents and caregivers:

- Feelings of relief that it wasn’t your child
- Feelings of fear that your child may do the same thing
- Feelings of anger at the school/district
- Feelings of guilt (survivors guilt) and shame
- Feelings of isolation

These feelings of fear can create barriers to having safe and supportive conversations because of finger pointing, blame, and potential liability. Too frequently, school mental health professionals and crisis responders have been told, “you’re not allowed to talk about this” or “you can’t give a comment.” The Community of Practice conversations drove home the idea that our policy must be informed by the needs of the community, not the needs being limited by the policy.

Reflection Questions To Drive Action

- » How are we providing space for grief and providers' feelings of failure after the loss of clients/young people?
- » In thinking about your healing experiences, past and present. Where did/do you need more culturally responsive support/care?
- » When thinking about postvention realities and possibilities, how might we hold space for the things that make us feel discomfort? Who might benefit if we are able to go there?
- » How do we shift the culture for educators, school mental health providers, and school leaders to admit their own struggles with leading after a student death by suicide?
- » What does support look like for staff? (How might we do for our team the same that we would do for our students?)
- » How might we reinstall hope and competency in providers, educators and leaders after loss of a student?
- » How might we maintain hope in this work on a daily basis?



Your notes, reflections, illustrations, and grapplings here:



3- ROOTS

Reflecting to articulate the lineages, language, commitments, and questions that shape how we relate to and communicate with one another in our school communities in the aftermath of death by suicide.



Visualize the range of root types that ground a tree - wide roots for stability, deep roots to pull in water and nutrients, and fine roots to house the mycelial networks that connect the entire forest. All the trees in a forest share information and nutrients through their root systems. **As school crisis leaders, the root system symbolizes the way coherence and resilience come through common understanding and ways of being: creating and committing to a shared language.** In our postvention work, we anchor ourselves in culture and values and are willing to stay curious to always learn, adapt, and grow.

Leadership Considerations

Ground in Shared Language

Shared language is a means for stability and hope by providing impacted individuals with tools to talk about their experiences, redefine policy and practice, and move toward healing.

Having a unified understanding of the meaning of terms (e.g., what does “postvention” mean to your school community?) is important, while also not defining them so explicitly that they don’t have application to a range of contexts.

When we have clarity through shared language, it better supports values and commitment alignment. By ensuring we are speaking about the same things that helps build contextual capacity for continued dialogue and strengthened practice as we move through recovery and renewal.

When students hear leaders and staff using the same compassionate clear language, it creates powerful stability for them as they lean into their own memorialization and commemoration processes. It helps things feel coherent as students enter meaning making processes. Shared language, commitments, and questions empower school systems and school crisis leaders to more effectively honor the young people they have lost.

Navigate tensions between opinions: Sometimes educators, families, experts, clinicians, and survivors will have differing needs and visions. Leadership is finding dialogue and discernment.

In 2022, a group of SCRR network members came together to grapple with often conflicting asks from families and communities and advice from experts when it came to memorialization and commemoration of students who had died by suicide. The following themes arose to inform leadership choices:

- Practices are culturally honoring and decenter what “has always been done” or protocol-driven
- Decisions are responsive to the wishes of those most impacted, as well as honoring who the individual was to the community
- Actions are community-focused with the intention of unity and connection
- Spaces are emotionally adaptive - meaning they are containers to hold a range of emotions
- Rituals are revisited and evolving as grief continues to move through the community

Advice From the Field

“Memorialization and commemoration will happen no matter what, it is part of human nature. Kids will grieve together no matter what - and school leaders have the opportunity to be part of the conversation, validate, and hold space for students.”

- SCRR Suicide Postvention CoP Participant

“As we consider ways to support meaning-making, memorialization, and commemoration, many school leaders grapple with the what, the how, and the for how long. We must root in an understanding of mourning, memorializing, and remembrance that opens possibilities and motivates us to move with and through our fear and unknowing.”

- SCRR Field Coach

When asked “What are memorialization & commemoration in the context of postvention not?” here are some responses from SCRR Community of Practice members:

- Planting a tree - and calling it good
- Blaming and shaming providers for “missing” the signs of suicide as an attempt to prevent future loss
- Blaming and shaming friends + family for their reactions
- Glamorizing suicide to honor someone’s life
- Expensive
- Time-consuming
- Something that can happen without the student/caregiver's voice and choice
- Time-limited - space limited - place limited - person limited
- Avoidable - grief and death is part of life
- Something that adults in the home may know or may know how to do in a healthy way
- Limited to the students - if adults cannot model how to walk through the grief if they aren’t given space and permission to walk through the grief
- Is not WEAKNESS

So then, what is it?

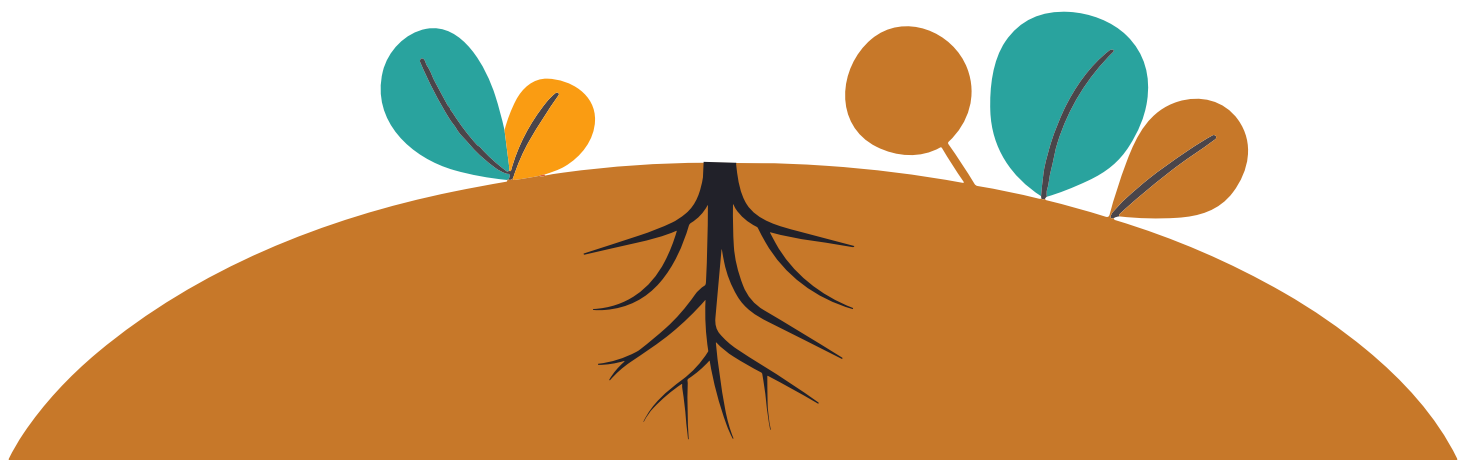
“This is a community process meant to meet the moment and hold space for people’s grief, recognizing this loss, and moving together toward healing and preventing further harm.”

- School Administrator in an SCRR Postvention CoP

School crisis leaders are tasked with remaining connected to the individuals most impacted by the loss to honor their experience in ongoing ways. A critical vehicle for this is co-creating understanding among stakeholders in their system so that meaningful conversations, memorialization, commemoration, and meaning making can take root.

Reflection Questions To Drive Action

- » How is suicide postvention currently defined, and what would it look like/sound like/feel like to have a more embodied, equitable, and liberated approach?
 - What story or stories are we/am I telling with the words we/I use to talk about suicide and postvention? Who is prioritized in that story? Who is left out of that story?
 - What kinds of spaces are we/am I creating with these words? Who feels welcomed into those spaces? Who might not feel welcomed into those spaces?
 - How is our language informed by people who have experienced suicidal thoughts or a non-fatal suicide attempt? How is our language informed by those who have lost someone to suicide?
- » How might we leverage other frameworks (trauma-informed practices, restorative circles, racial justice, etc.) to intersect with and clarify the approach to suicide postvention?
 - What opportunities exist to leverage existing school priorities to create a more trauma-informed and grief-sensitive culture? For example, is there already an understanding that students do not learn optimally when they are impacted by trauma and grief, and that giving them space to move through their grief process - rather than keeping the same high academic expectations - may be a more advantageous strategy towards sustaining academic rigor in the long run?
- » How might we speak about and attend to the possibility of the movement of subsequent suicide behaviors through a school community following a death by suicide?
 - How might we do so in a way that does not stigmatize suicidal behavior (i.e. “contagion”) or avoid tending to the risk after exposure to death by suicide?
 - How do we understand and resource the experience of shock following a death by suicide, so that we do not rush through, overlook support needs for support, and underutilize available community resources in this phase of the loss?
- » What questions might be strategic to ask ourselves and our organizations when supporting individuals from cultural backgrounds different than our own, specifically during recovery?
 - What are best practices? Do they have limitations surrounding cultural humility?
 - Where might our definition of safety be limited by a particular cultural lens? How might we expand it?
- » What questions might be strategic to ask ourselves and our organizations when supporting individuals from marginalized backgrounds, specifically during postvention?



Your notes, reflections, illustrations, and grapplings here:





4- TRUNK

Reflecting on the structures and policies that provide a stable framework for recovery and renewal after a student dies by suicide; Strong Flexibility To Guide The Vision.

The trunk is what gives a tree its structure and is responsible for transporting materials and providing support to the entire tree. Inside the sturdy structure of the trunk, all of the processes that keep the tree alive are flowing. Like the trunk of a tree, **our postvention policies provide a stable framework for action in the aftermath of a student dying by suicide.** When we expand our policies to include recovery and renewal, they become the map we need to get from where we've come to where we are going.

Leadership Considerations

In reflecting on postvention policy through a liberated lens, members of SCRR's 2022-23 Community of Practice gathered to develop some distinctions, considerations, and guidance for postvention policy development:

Community Practice as Best Practice » When we are taught “nationally recognized best practices,” we often think that is the **only** way we can move forward in a given situation. When we create policies to guide the actions we take, we need them to be inclusive of local knowledge and practice (which sometimes contradicts “best practice!”) and derived from the community. Before writing your policy, consider writing about your community first. *Who lives here? What are our community values? What are our traditions? How do we naturally take care of each other? How do we heal? How do we grieve?*

Embrace Harm Reduction » Schools (due in part to rigid school policies) are sometimes the most concerned about appropriate memorialization and the associated risk of acting or not acting. We should always consider how we can make something safer for all community members, rather than taking an all-or-nothing approach to postvention work. This is especially true for youth-led/youth-requested actions. *Are we causing more harm by giving a flat no? Are we causing more harm by not explaining ourselves (and why don't we explain ourselves to youth?)? How can we let youth take the lead and partner with them to make something safer?* There will always be spontaneous memorializing inside our schools and our communities - so how do we make room for those unplanned moments, while wrapping students in safety and care? This can help students feel heard and cared for rather than left alone.

Hold Nuance » Even with best practices, good policies, and proactive planning, each postvention response will be unique and will present its own set of challenges and opportunities. We cannot take a one-size-fits-all approach to postvention. *How can that be reflected in the policies we build? How can we continually learn and grow from the actions we take? How can we lead a team that is comfortable leaning into gray areas? How can we assure our policies and/or their implementation, are both consistent and nuanced enough to consider the above?*

Provide Discerned Transparency » We need to be transparent about why we take the actions we take, to the extent we can. We need to find age-appropriate ways to explain to youth why certain things are happening the way they are happening. The more we withhold information, the more students feel unheard and unsupported. *What am I able to share, and what is important to share? How might I lead with openness while also attending to privacy and the wishes of the family? What might I do when I cannot share enough to put others at ease?*

Seek Balance » Policy leaders need to sit in the tension that students and staff taking the time they need is important, and also that structure and routine can be helpful for some people. The “return to routine” should not be conflated with “returning to normal,” meaning before this death by suicide. *How can we adapt routine to tend to grief? Are there opportunities to build grief literacy or mental health promotion into lesson plans? How does/can this apply to teachers and staff as well?*

Look back to move forward » The rings we see inside the trunks of fallen trees can tell us about the conditions in which the tree grew and adapted to survive. Similarly, each time we enact our postvention policies, we must reflect on our response cultures to adapt to new conditions and integrate new and vital lessons. Such reflection is an essential aspect of the renewal process, to improve conditions/practice for the future.

- What did we learn from the activation of our response plan? Are there areas in which we truly showed up for each other? Are there experiences of harm that need repair or apology? What data about our overall school climate did our trauma response surface? What harms or rifts have happened in the school community that could use some attention and repair?
- What areas of the response plan do we need to revisit and refine? Why? Do we need to revisit the communications or crisis response team protocols?
- What partnerships were needed? Where did we work well with outside partners (and what did that look like)? What additional partnerships might need to be built moving forward?
- Did we need more or less of certain roles? Did we have the right amount of communication? Again, how do you know? Who are you asking?
- Did we have the supports we needed at the right times to respond to students and parents?
- Did school staff have access to support in order to step into their roles for the crisis team?
- How might we need to adapt our postvention policies to reflect learnings from our responses?

Advice From the Field

“Schools are sometimes the most concerned about appropriate memorialization and the associated risk of acting or not acting. We should always consider how we can make something safer rather than taking an all-or-nothing approach to postvention work. This is especially true for youth-led/youth-requested actions. Are we causing more harm by giving a flat no? Are we causing more harm by not explaining ourselves (and why don’t we explain ourselves to youth?)? How can we let youth take the lead and partner with them to make something safer?”

- SCRR 2023-2024 Policy Workgroup Participant

“There will always be spontaneous memorializing inside our schools and our communities- so how do we make room for those while wrapping them in safety and care? This can help students feel heard and cared for rather than left alone.”

- SCRR 2023-2024 Policy Workgroup Participant



Reflection Questions To Drive Action

- » How might developing a school-wide policy or practice to support diverse expressions of grief foster a greater sense of belonging and community in my school?
How might we center our local community practices of collective care in our postvention policy and practice?
- » How does your current policy define “family” and how might you shift that definition to be more inclusive of diverse family structures and community bonds?
- » How does your policy support grievers on an annual and consistent basis for years to come following their loss?
- » How does your policy address access to memorialization and commemoration practices and spaces at the school site that include an equity and justice lens?
- » How might we center the inclusion of young folx while also attending to their protection/holding them in trauma-informed ways?
- » How can we let youth take the lead in memorializing and commemorating actions inside our schools and communities while wrapping them in safety and care?
- » How can the need for nuance, complexity, and adaptation be reflected in our postvention policies and practices?



Your notes, reflections, illustrations, and grapplings here:



5- BRANCHES

Crafting and adapting the practices that reach out to touch every part of the school community, offering guidance, nourishment, and support in the days, weeks, and years after death by suicide.

The branches of a tree are the structural support for the leaves, fruits and flowers that the tree produces. They also carry water from the soil to the leaves, and the food from the leaves to the rest of the tree. During dormant periods, when temperatures are colder, the branches store unused nutrients that the tree will need later on.

Each role in our school community functions like the branch of a tree, and the leaves that grow from the branches reflect the contextualized, informal decisions they make to ensure the whole school community moves toward recovery and renewal. When we value and resource the people in each role with knowledge, reflective spaces, and responsive practices, we are building the capacity of our school community to thrive through very challenging times.

Leadership Considerations

No Role Too Small: Envisioning The “Smaller” Actions that Truly Distinguish Postvention

Everyone who grieves the death of someone by suicide tells a story. **Schools can help facilitate that story by:**

- Including accurate information and supportive spaces for students
- Pausing for the brain to function optimally amidst grief and loss
- Normalizing the complex grieving process that can accompany suicide death

This decreases fear, targeting the number one barrier to suicide prevention and postvention.

As we consider the practices that distinguish postvention, considering the unique roles and contributions of each individual within the system and what might motivate them, matters. The different perspectives and experiences brought to the postvention conversation helps to strengthen our response, recovery, and renewal. Each position in the hierarchy of the school system is uniquely positioned to support, advocate, and operationalize at each phase of the postvention process.

When we consider these roles and perspectives, the universal concern is the wellbeing of the young people who are impacted by our postvention efforts.

Who are the people influencing this conversation, funneling into the support our young people receive and what role do they play in supporting students?

School Leaders & Administrators can be defined as those with the highest systemic power within the school system, be it district level or school site level. These individuals may have a bit more distance from the loss itself, and can add stabilization in the response phase vital to the school community because they have more influence over processes and structures.

Local & State Leaders can be defined as policymakers, governmental organizations, and non-governmental organizations that are adjacent to schools and can shape larger systemic changes to support readiness, response, recovery, and most critically, renewal.

Parents & Caregivers can be defined as those in primary care relationships with students in the loss-impacted school community. Their intimate knowledge of the youth impacted and their own relationship with the loss is an important perspective to hold as we move through response, recovery, and renewal.

Teachers & Educators can be defined as school-based staff that have direct relationship with the school community impacted by the loss. They have unique knowledge of the study body and the school system itself, and will also be navigating their own grief while supporting students in metabolizing their own.

While this section is centering on those who support students, we must also take a moment to acknowledge the important role student voice plays in this conversation. **We cannot attend to the unique needs of each school community without sitting with, listening to, and designing alongside the young people in our school communities impacted by the loss.** Their voice, their insights, and their resilience needs to be a key motivator and pulse for those making the decisions.

Mapping The Roles of School-Based Suicide Postvention

Once the school system has moved through the immediate response to the loss, there is a sense of stabilization and coherence returning to the school community, leaders may default to a “return to normal” approach. And while a sense of normalcy may feel comfortable for those less impacted by the loss, for many it is a jarring juxtaposition to the ache still experienced in their day to day. In the recovery phase, school crisis leaders attend to ongoing safety needs (specifically psychological and social safety), make space for remembering and mourning, and supporting reconnection to ourselves and others. To attend to this, each role can operationalize a range of resources and support for young people in this in-between.

Recovery	
Role (Branch)	Operationalize (Leaves)
School Leaders and Administrators	Coordinate with MHPs for school-based grief groups, consult with local agencies around grief support.
Community Leaders	Offer trainings for local agencies around suicide-specific grief support, interventions, and postvention policy.
Caregivers and Parents	Educate yourself on how to support your child on an ongoing basis around grief; know local resources & school based resources.
Staff and Teachers	Read postvention teacher support guide; participate in a circle if that feels right; take advantage of support offered on campus for personal/professional support and to model healthy grieving for students?



During renewal, practices center on meaning-making, reflection, growth, and change. School crisis leaders are able to engage in conversations about policy and practice, collective storytelling and reflection, and making organization shifts based on what was learned. In this renewal phase, each role might operationalize:

Renewal	
Role (Branch)	Operationalize (Leaves)
School Leaders and Administrators	Remember that anniversaries will be difficult for some people and offer space in place and time for marking the moment. Ask teachers and students how they want to make meaning and encourage co-construction.
Community Leaders	Identify community needs for meaning-making and growth; Support funding of these efforts.
Caregivers and Parents	Educate yourself on how to support your child on an ongoing basis around grief; know local resources & school based resources.
Staff and Teachers	Read postvention teacher support guide; participate in a circle if that feels right; take advantage of support offered on campus for personal/professional support and to model healthy grieving for students.

Advice From the Field

“Support - either perceived or actual - impacts our grief.”
- SCRR CoP Participant

“Just knowing that the space is available is meaningful, even if everyone does not show up to use it.”
- SCRR CoP Participant

“On grief rituals - “the things you do intentionally to feel the love you have for the person that you lost.”
-SCRR CoP Participant

“We would be creating MORE stigma and shame on the grief the student is experiencing by not allowing them to grieve for their friend. It can make the student internalize that my grief is wrong/bad or my friend was “bad” because of their cause of death. Shift the focus from the end of their life to the life they lived. No one’s existence should be defined by the moment of their death but by the life they lived and the love that is left behind.”
-Community Leader in SCRR CoP

Reflection Questions To Drive Action

- » How do we uplift, create, and embed culturally rich and responsive practices of recovery and renewal into our school community for the long term?
- » What informal spaces, places, and gatherings are students, faculty, and staff already creating to grieve? How is grief already being processed through practices, rituals, or gatherings on your campus? How might you provide structured, consistent times or opportunities for students, faculty, and staff to engage with those spaces as well as new spaces?
- » How do we take care of the people who are doing this care work? How can postvention team members step back when they are strongly impacted? Who will step in to take their place?
- » What happens when there is a conflict in who wants to memorialize their loved one? How do we balance respecting the wishes of family members and the school community?
- » How do we respect the privacy of families while ensuring students feel seen when they observe contradictions in how different people are holding and navigating the aftermath of a suicide death?
- » How might we exist as an advocate for our young people, especially those marginalized in society and elevate postvention efforts?
- » How do we ensure that our school community's response to student suicide deaths is equitable? Biases can come into play which give particular deaths more or less attention and district response, based on students' popularity, more or less privileged identity markers, more or less involved parents, etc.



Your notes, reflections, illustrations, and grapplings here:



6- FRUIT



Envisioning goals, outcomes, and legacies of safe, supportive, and resilient school communities that can weather the storm of loss, compost their love and grief, and emerge stronger.

In the analogy of a tree, the "fruit" represents the tangible outcomes of a well-nurtured and healthy postvention effort. For school suicide postvention to be truly effective, it must yield outcomes that reflect not only individual healing but also collective empowerment and systemic transformation. Through a liberation-centered lens, the ideal fruit of such an effort would be seen in the flourishing of a school community that is resilient, inclusive, and committed to justice and equity.

Leadership Considerations

Empower and Resilient Students & Staff: At the core of successful postvention is the empowerment of students, educators, and school staff. What might this look like?

If we visualize the "fruit" or efforts of effective postvention practices and policy as a school community that has not only recovered from the immediate trauma of a student's death by suicide the school community and its members will also:

- Develop the skills and confidence to navigate future challenges related to student death by suicide
- Demonstrate resilience through their ability to express emotions, seek help, and support each other in times of need. This resilience is rooted in a deepened understanding of their mental health, the value of grief, and the importance of community care.
- The postvention process will cultivate leadership among students and staff, encouraging them to take active roles in promoting mental wellness and challenging stigma within their peer groups.

What other fruit might grow from this experience?

Foster A School Culture of Collective Care: A successful postvention effort would transform the school's culture into one where collective care is a fundamental value. What might this look like?

- Staff, students, and families are deeply connected through mutual support and a shared commitment to each other's well-being. This culture would be evident in everyday interactions, where individuals feel safe to express vulnerability and are met with compassion and understanding.
- The school would actively dismantle systems of exclusion and create inclusive spaces where all members, particularly those from marginalized groups, feel valued and supported. In this environment, the entire community shares responsibility for each other's mental health, recognizing that well-being is a collective endeavor.
- Educator and school leader grief is acknowledged, normalized, and destigmatized.

Commit to Equity and Justice-Oriented Practices: Liberation-centered school suicide postvention must also produce equity and justice-oriented practices within the school. What might that look like?

- The policies, procedures, and norms established in the wake of a suicide are not only trauma-informed but also actively work to dismantle systemic inequities.
- School climates and environments in which every student, regardless of their background, has equal access to mental health resources and support.

- Intentional efforts to address the unique needs of marginalized students, such as those who may face additional stigma or barriers to care.
- Engagement in ongoing reflection and action to ensure that its practices promote justice and do not perpetuate harm.

Envision Systemic Change: The most powerful result of a successful postvention effort is the impetus for necessary systemic change, both within the school and in the broader community. What might that look like?

- Through the process of healing and reflection, the school community would develop a vision for a more just and compassionate society.
- This vision would drive advocacy efforts aimed at addressing the root causes of suicide, such as systemic oppression, inequality, and the lack of accessible mental health care.
- The school promotes policies and practices that support mental wellness and social justice, not only within its walls but also in the wider community, acting as a change agent.

Invest in Sustainable Practices and Ongoing Growth: Effective postvention would include the establishment of sustainable practices that ensure ongoing growth and resilience. What might that look like?

- The lessons learned from the postvention process are internalized and historicized, with continuous efforts to refine and improve the school's approach to mental health and crisis response.
- The school leadership creates structures for ongoing training, support, and reflection, ensuring that the community remains vigilant and prepared to address future challenges.
- Empowered students, a culture of collective care, equity and justice-oriented practices, systemic change, and sustainable growth.
- A commitment to not only respond from harm and hurt, but transform through the loss and pain into a place where every member can flourish, grounded in a deep commitment to liberation, justice, and collective well-being.

Advice From the Field

“Your role is so important in this moment. You have the opportunity to model how we show up for each other, how leaders create safety for their school community in the aftermath of collective loss.”

- SCRR 2023 - 2024 CoP Participant

“We can facilitate a space for grief to exist, instead of fighting it, and find healthier ways to cope with that grief to allow students to return focus on school.”

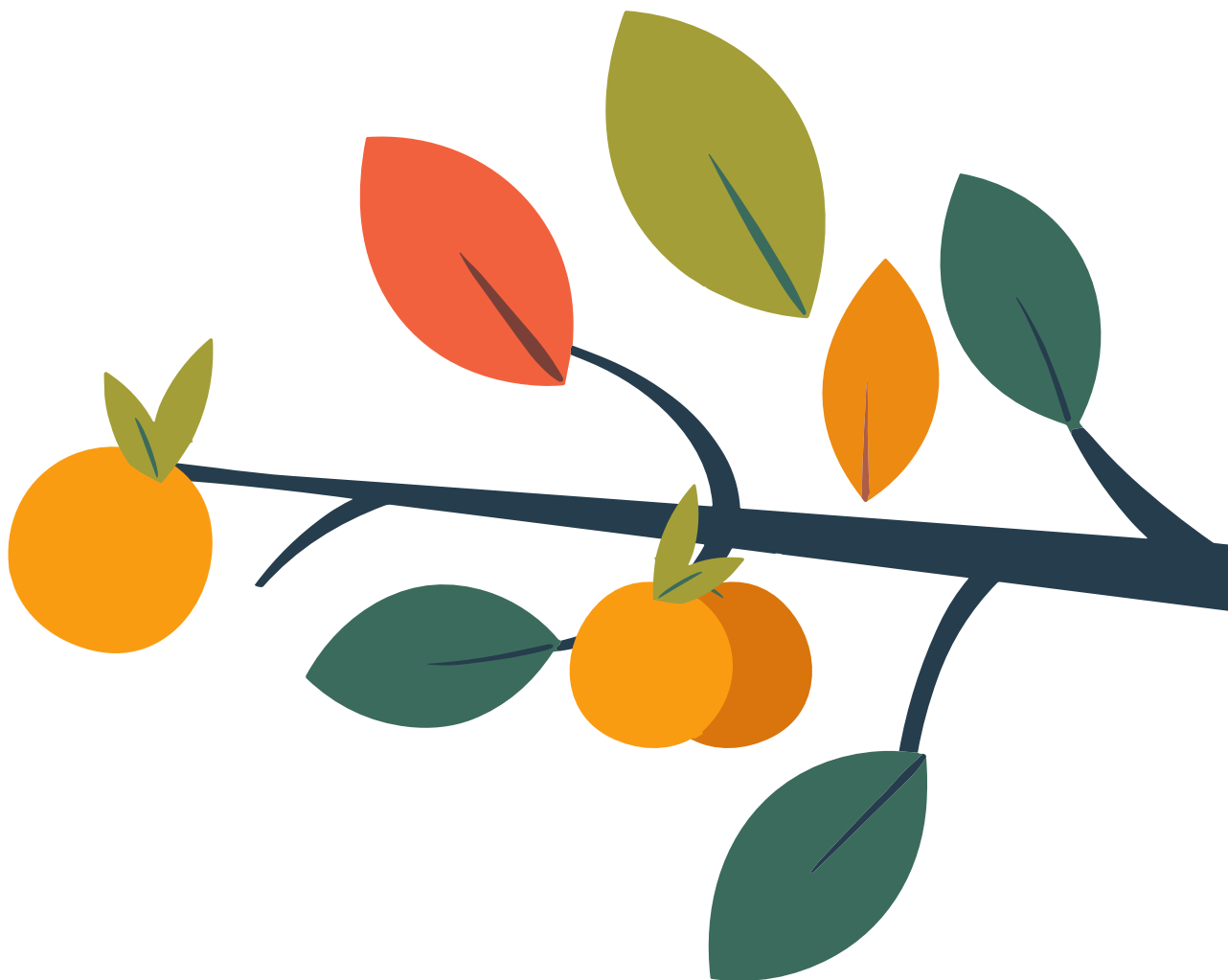
-SCRR 2022 CoP Participant

“We need to hold collective and community loss and push for reparations and repair from years and years of harm.”

- SCRR 2022 CoP Participant

Reflection Questions To Drive Action

- » How might we grow a more safe, supportive, resilient, and liberated school community/world through our suicide postvention efforts?
- » How do we build an environment that allows students to grieve for their friends in ways that are supported at school and not penalized for their grief reactions?
- » How do we reshape our school culture in our district to help support students who are struggling, including those with suicidal ideation?
- » What does renewal look like for you as a school crisis leader in the context of a student's death by suicide?
- » How might renewal look/feel when you are exposed to other crises, losses, and deaths in your school community?
- » What are the warning signs of burnout and/or compassion fatigue for you, your co-workers, and your team following a student death by suicide?
- » How might we discern between burnout, compassion fatigue, and grief? How and why do these distinctions matter (or not)?



Your notes, reflections, illustrations, and grapplings here:



CLOSING

As we bring this guide to a close, we invite you to **practice caring for yourself and others as we continue to expand our understanding of liberated school suicide postvention.** As professionals dedicated to supporting school communities through such profound loss, we must practice care not only toward others but also toward ourselves. **Engaging in postvention work requires us to be present, compassionate, and steady in the face of intense emotions.** This can take a significant toll on our mental, emotional, and physical well-being. Prioritizing self-care is not an act of selfishness but a necessary step in sustaining our ability to help others. Whether it's taking moments of quiet reflection, connecting with trusted colleagues, or utilizing professional mental health resources, tending to our own needs ensures that we can continue to show up fully for the students, families, and staff we serve.

Collective care is equally important. **In the spirit of collaboration, we must lean on each other, creating a network of support that fosters safety, understanding, and empathy. Encourage open dialogue among your teams, check in regularly with one another, and create spaces where vulnerability is met with compassion. By normalizing conversations about our emotional experiences and mental health, we set a powerful example for the school communities we support.** Remember that we are not alone in this work; we are part of a collective effort where mutual care is foundational to healing. Our strength lies in our connections with one another, and together, we can navigate these difficult moments with the compassion and dependability our communities so deeply need.

School crisis recovery & renewal leadership in the aftermath of student death by suicide circles around these central takeaway reflective questions:

- How might safety, mourning & remembrance, and reconnection connect to liberation? To liberated postvention?
- How might coping, healing, meaning-making, and post-traumatic growth connect to liberation? To liberated postvention?
- How might we center students and educators in our liberated postvention work?

Let us remain committed to the principles of care and compassion, both for ourselves and for each other, as we navigate this challenging path. By honoring our own needs and supporting one another, we cultivate the resilience required to help our school communities recover and renew.

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