

Is your university prepared to respond to suicide on campus?

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10 questions for universities developing a coordinated response to suicide in their campus community.

Suicide is the second leading cause of death, behind accidents, for young adults, so it is a sad reality that all universities will confront at one time or another on their campuses. During the annual conference of the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services in June, Andrea Carter, assistant dean of student wellness, support and success at University of Toronto Mississauga, and Melinda Scott, dean of students at U of T's University College, addressed a standing-room-only crowd about their experience with student suicides at U of T and how it led them to develop a co-ordinated response. The following is a list of some of the questions that they say postsecondary managers, administrators and crisis-response teams should consider when developing policies or procedures related to suicide on campus:

1. Who is on your crisis-response team? Is it flexible enough to allow representation from multiple groups — including health and counselling services, communications, residence and student life, faculty and senior administration?
2. Have you assigned clear roles and boundaries for each team member? Do they know their roles and the limits of their responsibilities?
3. Has each team member been offered regular training, access to up-to-date resources, and additional supports or accommodations in the case of an incident?
4. Which person on this team will be responsible for co-ordinating communication between internal departments and external groups (such as the police or coroner's office)?
5. Who will be the point of contact for various stakeholders that may be affected or have questions (family of student, student groups, athletic teams, faculty, media, etc.)?
6. What's your communications protocol around suicide? Under what circumstances will you release a statement to the campus community? To the public? What language do you use to describe the death, if any?
7. Have you taken the family's wishes and needs into consideration? How will you balance these with institutional interests?
8. The police will often begin conducting interviews as soon as they arrive on site. Where can these interviews take place? How will you support university community members through the police interview process?
9. How will memorials and messages of condolence be arranged? Who will be consulted in their management or development?
10. Are you prepared for the unexpected? What if the student's parents live out of the country and don't speak English? How do you respond to requests around a specific cultural protocol? What happens when police seal the site for their investigation and no one — including the family or roommates — may access the site for days?