



Transcript of SPARK Talk on “Suicide Postvention as Suicide Prevention”  
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I’m here to talk about postvention as part of suicide prevention planning and postvention is a not so user-friendly term, but what it means is responding or being prepared to respond in a way that’s helpful after a suicide death. And the goal of postvention is to promote healing and reduce risk after there’s been a suicide. And that’s a really important piece because one of the things that we know is that one of the highest risk factors for suicide is when we know somebody who’s died by suicide so after there’s been a suicide death of someone we know, statistically we become at higher risk for suicide.

One important consideration for responding after a suicide death is cultural issues and it’s particularly important given the, um, the relationship of cultural and religious issues to death and ah and they can be very different for different cultures and understanding them and having sensitivity to that is a really key component of suicide postvention efforts.

Suicide death is the proverbial pebble in the pond. And it’s important to have an effective response that treats the immediate first wave that impacts on family and friends as well as working around those ripples that flow out from there into the community and into the larger society and how that might impact through media and social media. Particularly for young people we can see that um situations where um how that person is memorialized may lead to suicide contagion, and contagion is a term that’s used for when several suicides occur or suicide attempts occur after a suicide death.

One of the areas where the research is very strong is, around how the media reports on suicide and the media can reduce risk or they can increase risk and contribute to contagion if they glamorize suicide, they report it repeatedly, they go into graphic details about the suicide death. And so this becomes a little bit more complicated, but allowing families to memorialize their loved one in a way that is respectful is really important. But it’s also important that they try to do so in a balanced way that doesn’t inadvertently romanticize or glamorize the death.

At the community level and the systems level, one of the challenges is that oftentimes people don’t feel like they need to prepare for a suicide death. While they understand that suicide occurs--because it occurs so infrequently--there’s sort of a belief that it will never happen here, and so when a suicide death does occur they’re often unprepared and/or not trained about how best to reduce risk and promote healing.

One of the challenges in promoting healing and reducing risk after a suicide is working with first responders and providers who themselves are so typically focused on giving and leading a response that they lose the importance of self-care and the potential impact that this suicide death has on them. And for community members who have relied on law enforcement on guidance counselors on mental health providers on faith leaders, um we oftentimes don’t check back with them to make sure that they’re getting the support that they need.

Another challenge that often is part of um thinking about responding to a suicide death as part of a comprehensive suicide prevention effort is--when there are limited resources and funding--many people feel that it’s best to put the money towards prevention efforts and they don’t understand or consider that postvention really is prevention and that’s important for them to understand and think about that as part of their planning process. So part of what we encourage people to think about is to develop policies and procedures or protocols for what to do in the event of a suicide death.

Unlike suicide prevention efforts where we really want everybody to understand the risk factors and warning signs, with postvention we’re really looking at those key providers like funeral directors and faith leaders and law enforcement and mental health providers to understand what that postvention response is. So it’s not a universal method it’s something that we would have targeted to specific populations. The overall goal for a response after a suicide death is about being prepared, identifying pathways for communication and sensitivity around communication to the family, and then implementing that in a response that is effective and timely.