

LOST & FOUND

CAMPUS POSTVENTION Best Practices



What is postvention, and why is it important to campuses?

Postvention is the sensitive and timely response to a suicide death.

The goals of postvention are to:

1. Assist others in the grieving process.
2. Stabilize the environment.
3. Reduce the risk of negative behavior.
4. Limit the risk of further suicide.

Suicide is the leading cause of death among college-aged young people in the State of South Dakota¹. Prevention work is key to saving lives, but students are being lost right now, and our campuses need to respond appropriately to save the lives of more students in the future.

The campus ecosystem of students, staff, faculty, and the surrounding community holds a great amount of responsibility to care for the overall well-being of the people within it. The written and unwritten rules of order in place via policy, procedures, and otherwise ensure that even during conflict, disorder, and tragedy the ecosystem can still be an equitable and stable environment in which all can succeed. Preparing for and responsibly reacting to the tragedy of suicide on your campus should be as normalized as the policy and procedure of fire drills. Postvention planning can be an uncomfortable topic, but a well-executed plan immediately increases campus wellbeing and can lead to greater success in both short-term suicide prevention work.



1 <https://sdsuicideprevention.org/about-suicide/facts-stats/>

What is this booklet for, and how do I use it?

This booklet is divided into three parts to help college campuses navigate the stages of campus suicide planning and response.

<p>PLANNING STAGE <i>page 4</i></p>	<p>Ideally, postvention policies and plans are crafted in advance so the response to a suicide can be enacted quickly, which allows for greater receptivity and positive outcomes for all affected by the death throughout the campus community. Effective campus postvention work requires clear communication and enthusiastic coordination between administration, faculty, and staff, as well as with community service providers. This section will help you start this process with your campus leadership to ultimately create a plan and policy.</p>
<p>CRISIS STAGE <i>page 9</i></p>	<p>When the tragedy of a staff or student suicide hits your campus, you must spring into action regardless of policy and plans you may or may not have in place. This section of the booklet will take you through the critical action steps you can follow immediately after the death to ensure the best outcomes for your campus community.</p>
<p>EVALUATION STAGE <i>page 15</i></p>	<p>After some time has passed, a campus should evaluate what went well and what could be improved. This is an opportunity to put new policies in place, expand the training of staff and student leaders, and implement new suicide prevention efforts to better support the mental health needs of the entire campus.</p>

PLANNING STAGE

*For additional information on what needs to be done in the planning stage, reference pages 6-11 in **Postvention: A Guide ...** (listed in Resources).*

How to start a conversation about postvention planning on your campus

Postvention planning conversations start in two ways:

1. **Before a crisis happens**
2. **After a crisis occurs**

How the conversation starts is important, as it provides context for the actions you are hoping to take.

A campus that has been affected by a suicide loss, especially if it was recent, will often be more motivated to create change in policy and procedure quickly, as well as to craft a plan to react better to a potential crisis in the future because they are still feeling the impact of their response.

A campus that has not been affected by suicide is more likely to have this planning process on their to-do list but not as an immediate priority. We hope these steps help you start the process of completing a response plan on your campus.

The hope is a suicide never occurs on one of our campuses, or if it does, that it never happens again. Either way, the reality is a plan is needed and is best crafted in advance, not when the crisis is happening.

STEP 1 – Bring the important players together.

While each campus is unique, we have found that **this conversation is best started by the departments and leaders most in touch with students, campus culture, and mental health**—typically your Student Affairs office and Campus Counseling Center. Leaders such as the Dean of Students and the Director of the Counseling Center should be approached to start this conversation with the rest of the campus administration. If this person isn't you, use this booklet to start the conversation about postvention planning for your campus.

STEP 2 – Form a Postvention Committee.

Later in this planning stage, we will talk about all the people who would need to be involved if a student or faculty dies by suicide, which is what we refer to as the campus response team. However, at this stage, **we want to form a smaller committee of the people that can move the needle on this conversation on your specific campus.** These might be leaders in the roles listed below, or administrators and faculty that carry influence on your campus.

- Dean of Students / Director of Counseling Center
- Student Affairs Office
- Director of Counseling / Student Affairs
- Administrative Leader / Human Resources
- Security
- Legal Counsel

STEP 3 – Develop the Campus Suicide Response Plan & create the Suicide Response Team.

Once you have formed your committee of leaders, **it's time to draft a plan that you can take to administration for further approval.** You will utilize the "How to create a suicide response team" sections as well as the information in the crisis stage of this booklet to craft the plan and implement suggested policy and procedure changes. This booklet suggests best practices from the experts in postvention work; however, you will need to tailor your plan to best fit your campus.

STEP 4 – Gain approval.

After the committee has created a draft plan, **it is ready to take to administration for further approval,** which is a process that will be unique to each campus. Because of the nature of this policy change has to do with the death of someone related to campus, we advise that you consult your legal counsel about all policy and procedure changes.

STEP 5 – Run the drill.

While we hope we never have to touch this plan, everyone involved needs to know how it will function and how to play their role. Documentation of all roles and responsibilities should be disseminated in a format to staff that can be easily accessed in a time of crisis. Additionally, just like you run a fire drill each year, this plan needs to be discussed so that the people involved have the opportunity to ask clarifying questions and understand their roles. We highly encourage you to **include this response plan in your staff trainings and meetings at least once a year.**

How to create a Campus Suicide Response Team

An effective team will include representatives from many campus offices, including but not limited to:

- Student Affairs
- Counseling Department (or social work & psychology departments)
- Health Center (or nursing department)
- Campus Security
- Residence Hall Leadership
- Registrar
- Chaplaincy

The number of people needed on this team can vary; you can determine the appropriate number for your community. It is best to attach roles in the team to positions and not to individuals for sustainability of the team long term. Assigning specific duties to members of this team and planning response protocol before it ever happens ensures that all members know their role and can execute tasks quickly and simultaneously. Protocols should be specific but flexible.

One member should be identified as the primary coordinator between the committee and outside campus contacts. Forming relationships with outside campus contacts will be imperative to coordinate resources and information needed. Consider these contacts and others specific to your community:

- Police/Fire departments
- Local L.O.S.S teams (Local Outreach to Survivors of Suicide)
- Counseling centers
- Emergency rooms

An additional clinical response team will be critical in implementing supportive resources on campus for processing the news while keeping campus counseling services running as normally as possible. This team should include:

- Campus counseling services
- Representatives from campus departments such as social work, psychology, and nursing
- Community counseling professionals

WORKSHEET: Creating a Campus Response Team

Use this worksheet to get you started on roles and responsibilities for the Campus Response Team. Please note this list is not exhaustive, just a starting point. This list of responsibilities is what you would pull out to delegate duties immediately after receiving news of the death.

ROLES	SUGGESTED REPRESENTATIVES	RESPONSIBILITIES	Name(s) of potential team members	Contact info for potential team members
Internal Staff/Faculty Communication	Office of the President	Handles all staff communication of notifications, resources, and concerns.		
Internal Student Communication	Student Affairs	Handles all student communication of notifications, resources, and concerns.		
External Communication	Campus Security	Coordinates resources and information between outside orgs such as the police dept, counseling centers and more.		
Gathering Student Belongings	Residence Life	If student lived on campus, handles gathering belongings and securing students room.		
Parent Liaison	Student Affairs/ Campus Counseling/ Chaplain	Handles all communication with parents.		
Clinical Team	Campus Counseling/ Community Counselors/ Social Work & Psychology Depts./Chaplain	In charge of coordinating all current and additional resources to keep campus support running as normal and provide additional support to students in need		

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommended postvention policies

Once the team is in place, it will need to follow essential policies and procedures to carry out the plan successfully. In addition to the action steps listed in the crisis phase, we recommend putting policy in black and white in employment and student handbooks to support this work.

These are the postvention policies we recommend:

1. **A Campus Suicide Response Plan will be created by the Postvention Committee and updated every two years.**
2. **The Campus Suicide Response Plan roles will be addressed annually in an all-staff training such as QPR (recommended prevention training).**
3. **A list of therapeutic resources, both internal and external to campus, for staff and students will be created and disseminated to all staff through campus email. The list will be updated annually.**

Recommended prevention policies

Implementing a campus suicide response team and plan ensures your campus is prepared for the worst while simultaneously hoping it never happens. However, there is more you can do than just hope. Implementing policies that make ongoing prevention training and education a priority on your campus can stop these tragedies from happening when people on your campus are equipped with the tools and resources to notice when someone needs help and know how to get them to that help quickly.

These are the prevention policies we recommend:

1. **Place 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline materials in all buildings and high traffic areas of campus.** Knowing this resource could save someone's life. Materials can be ordered from the Helpline Center.
2. **Require QPR or other prevention training to staff, faculty, and student leaders twice a year.** These training courses are free and can be provided in departments or all staff training environments.
3. **Resilience-focused mental health education including coping strategies and available resources should be delivered to all students each year through classroom or moderate group size.**

*Additional information and best practices for implementing policy can be found in the "Model School Policy" document listed in Resources, **page 17**.*

CRISIS STAGE

ACTION STEPS FOR AFTER A SUICIDE

This list provides a generalized overview of steps to take immediately after a suicide along with a long-term response. Use this as a loose guide to understand where you are in the crisis and recovery process.

IMMEDIATE: Acute Phase

Coordinate: Contain the crisis.

Notify: Protect and respect the privacy rights of the deceased employee and their loved ones during death notification.

Communicate: Reduce the potential for contagion.

Support: Offer practical assistance to family.

SHORT-TERM: Recovery Phase

Link: Identify and link affected students, staff and faculty to additional support resources and refer those most affected to professional mental health services.

Comfort: Support, comfort, and promote healthy grieving of the students, staff, and faculty who have been affected.

Restore: Restore equilibrium and optimal functioning on campus.

Lead: Build and sustain trust and confidence in organizational leadership. Demonstrating leadership in times of crisis is always an opportunity to build trust, confidence, and campus cohesiveness.

LONGER-TERM: Reconstructing Phase

Honor: Prepare for anniversary reactions and other milestone dates.

Sustain: Transition postvention to suicide prevention.

—From A Managers Guide to Suicide Postvention in the Workplace

CAMPUS DEATH NOTIFICATION CHECKLIST

Listed below you will find best practices for how to notify student families and the entire campus community of a student death. These are listed in order of priority, with some notifications happening simultaneously, to quickly and effectively announce the death to decrease anxiety and dispel rumors. It will be up to the family to decide if they give permission for the death to be shared as a suicide and if they would like to share information about memorials and services. Regardless of whether the death is being shared as a suicide, the method should never be announced, and supportive services should always be offered.

PRIORITY 1

□ Family members of the student who died

A designated campus administrator, in conjunction with a campus medical or counseling staff person, should contact the family immediately to inform the family and answer questions. This staff member will stay in contact with the family beyond the initial phone call to arrange pickup of student belongings and ask what they would like disclosed to the campus community as well as what they would like shared about funeral services. This is a tough role to fill, and this staff member should be given the opportunity to agree or decline the responsibility as well as have the ability to share it with one other staff member.

*Find best practices for communicating with the family on pages 13-14 in **Postvention: A Guide ...** (listed in Resources).*

PRIORITY 2

□ Roommates, friends, or other sub-groups of which the student was a member

Those closest to the student have an increased risk of suicide and complicated grief. It is best to notify these students and close advisors in small in-person groups and connect them to resources immediately. Encourage these students to limit social media as the death is announced to other groups.

*Find a template for these conversations on pages 47-49 in **After a suicide ...** (listed in Resources).*

□ School administration, faculty, staff, and board

School deans or high-level administrators should be notified first with instructions on how to respond to emotional and academic requests from faculty and students. Email notifications to the rest of this group should be simultaneous with notifications to other close students. All emails should include information on how to recognize suicide risk factors, supportive resources available for themselves and students, and be updated as information changes.

□ All students

This notification should come from the Dean of Students, and it is imperative to include available resources such as group and individual counseling sessions, talking circles, and crisis hotlines in this email. Creating a culture of support while maintaining campus scheduling creates stability for the community.

Please note: We recommend sending this notification with resources to all students for a few reasons.

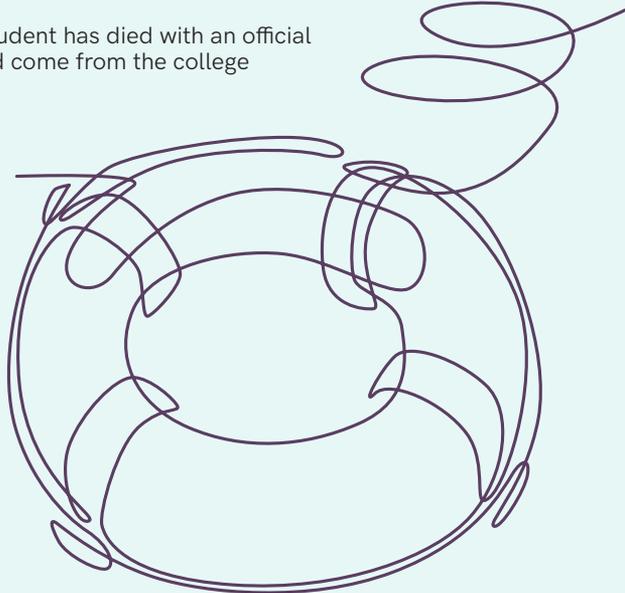
1. You never know who could be impacted by the death, and you want to make sure that the resources and same information are given to all for maximum positive impact.
2. While a student might not be affected by the death itself, they still might need these resources for other reasons
3. If you are concerned about the negative or traumatizing news of hearing about death or suicide, the data tells us that talking about suicide in this way does not increase the likelihood of additional occurrences but that providing the resources to students that might be in need could save their lives.

*Find a template for this email on pages 12-13 (Figure 1) in **Postvention: A Guide ...** (listed in Resources).*

□ All school families

A notification that a student has died with an official communication should come from the college president.

*Find a template for this email notification on pages 50-53 in **After a Suicide ...** (listed in Resources).*



BEST PRACTICES CHECKLIST DURING THE CRISIS

While every campus will respond differently according to the existing policy, this list will guide the administration to execute a response that creates safety and support for the campus community. Many of the practices below will be implemented in the crisis phase but should continue as time goes on. Campus community members who are more deeply affected by the death will continue to need monitoring and flexibility for their overall success.

- **Maintain a stable environment for the student, operating schedules as normal.**

Returning to routine as much as possible is helpful for all who are experiencing grief and uncomfortable feelings from the loss.

- **Arrange for group-based and individual grief and loss counseling and make these services available to the entire school community. Clearly communicate session availability to students, staff, and the families of all students.**

Prior relationships with community counseling services are key to ensure support is provided campuswide without overloading an already potentially understaffed campus counseling department. Due to an influx of need, community resources will need to be called in for their service and expertise. Don't forget to rely on your campus departments like social work, psychology, and nursing for their support.

*Learn more about about group and individual support on pages 19-21 in **Postvention: A Guide ...** (listed in Resources).*

- **Immediately identify students at risk of suicide and monitor them. A suicide death can be a triggering event for others.**

Keep an eye out for students who start to behave outside of their norm. Behaviors such as missing class, disengaging, and letting grades slip could all be indicators they require more support. Comments about hopelessness, being worthless, or feeling trapped require follow-up. As uncomfortable as it might be, asking the direction question "Are you thinking about killing yourself?" will help you guide that student to resources they need and possibly save their life.

*Learn more about warning signs on page 63 in **After a suicide ...** (listed in Resources).*

- **It is best to limit memorials when possible.**

Memorials are a balancing act between supporting the needs of survivors and discouraging imitative behavior for those high risk. Other activities such as fundraising, community service, or sending cards to survivors are good examples of action with lower risk.

*Learn more about about memorials on pages 23-25 in **Postvention: A Guide ...** (listed in Resources).*

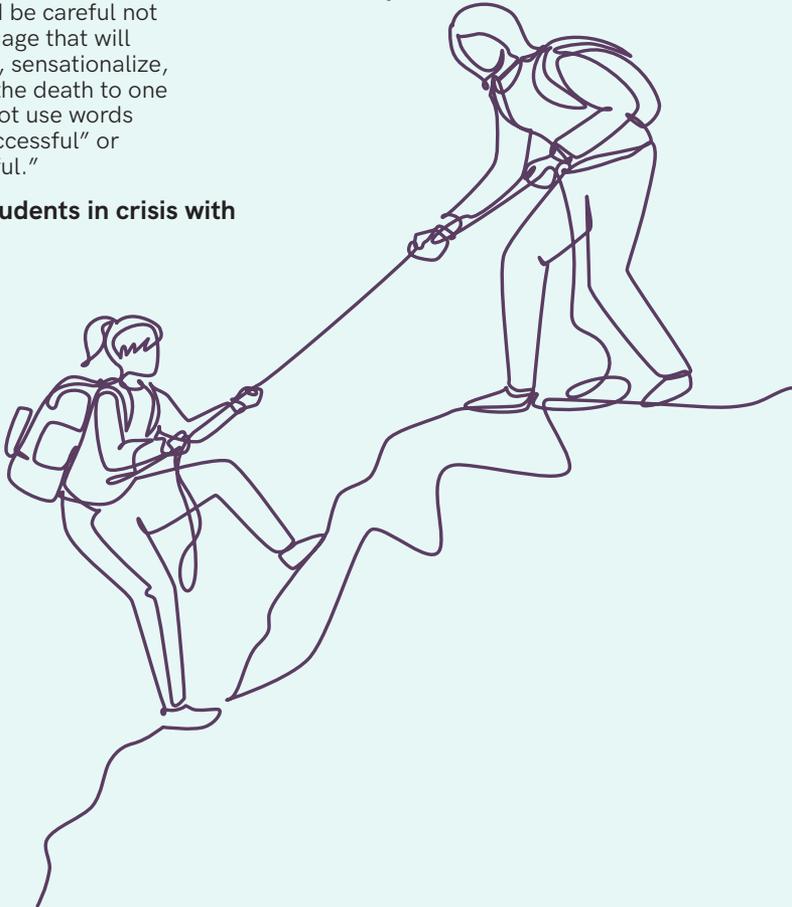
□ **Proper messaging about suicide is important for overall safety.**

Things to consider: The method of suicide should never be announced, supportive resources should always be offered, and be careful not to use language that will romanticize, sensationalize, or simplify the death to one cause. Do not use words such as “successful” or “unsuccessful.”

□ **Support students in crisis with flexibility.**

Examples include extending deadlines, providing make-up work, recognizing the death and its impact on the community during class, and excluding tests in final grades.

□ **Consult existing school policies or protocols regarding crisis management, student deaths, and suicide deaths and work with the administration to implement.**



FAQS FOR THE CRISIS STAGE

What is a L.O.S.S. team & how can they help?

L.O.S.S. stands for Local Outreach to Survivors of Suicide and is a team of individuals who have typically endured the loss of suicide themselves. A local L.O.S.S. team, if available, can help your campus suicide response team offer supportive resources in their time of grief. This team can be especially helpful if members of your campus suicide response team are not suicide loss survivors themselves.

What if the family doesn't want a suicide announced?

It is highly recommended to speak with the family about the importance of talking openly with students about suicide to further increase prevention efforts and help students feel supported during a time of loss. Students, especially those close to the student who died, might already be aware that the death was a suicide and not having the ability to talk about it within the campus community can be harmful as rumors and misinformation can spread. If the family insists on not referencing suicide as the cause of death, their wishes must be respected; you can still provide resources to students in need and increase campus-wide suicide prevention initiatives.

How do I help my staff and faculty?

Think ahead. Creating a suicide response plan with your team will help them emotionally and logistically plan for this type of campus tragedy. After a death has occurred, extend the same counseling resources to staff and faculty as you offer the students.

What other resources exist?

- *Postvention: A Guide for Response to Suicide on College Campuses*
- *A Managers Guide to Suicide Postvention in the Workplace*
- *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools (Second Edition)*

What is Survivors Joining for Hope?

Survivors Joining for Hope (SJ4H) is a Lost&Found program that provides financial and resource support to people that have lost a loved one to suicide in South Dakota, Iowa, and Minnesota. When appropriate, this is a great referral for the family of the person who died. Learn more at <https://resilienttoday.org/programs/postvention/survivors-joining-for-hope/>

EVALUATION STAGE

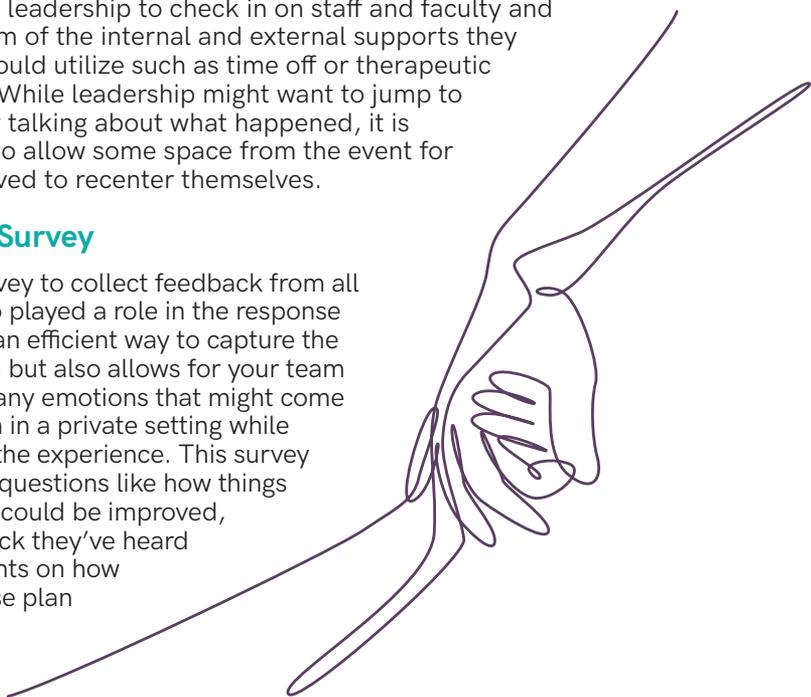
The purpose of the evaluation stage is to make sure that the campus suicide response team is feeling supported, to provide training and resources, and to continually improve the campus response plan based on the feedback of the people doing the response on your campus. Each crisis scenario will be different and brings to light what can be improved or changed to support all parties involved with the tragedy. While these topics can be hard to come back to after the fact, it is important to support each other while learning from what went right, as well as what went wrong.

STEP 1 - Continue to Provide Support

After a crisis, campus staff might be trying to carry the load for themselves and their students. This is an important time for campus leadership to check in on staff and faculty and remind them of the internal and external supports they can and should utilize such as time off or therapeutic resources. While leadership might want to jump to trainings or talking about what happened, it is important to allow some space from the event for those involved to recenter themselves.

STEP 2 - Survey

Using a survey to collect feedback from all people who played a role in the response is not only an efficient way to capture the information but also allows for your team to process any emotions that might come up for them in a private setting while they recall the experience. This survey should ask questions like how things went, what could be improved, and feedback they've heard from students on how the response plan played out.



STEP 3 – Postvention Committee Debrief

Once survey data is collected, the postvention committee should meet to go over responses and discuss feedback. This is a great time to ask hard questions about existing policies and propose new changes to ensure future success and increase prevention efforts on campus.

If necessary, this is another opportunity to encourage and provide support for those that were involved in the response process, which could be done through an educational opportunity such as learning more about grief, coping strategies, or recognizing signs of declining mental health.

Step 4 – Update Campus Response Plan

Once the questions have been asked and proposals have been made, it is time to update the plan, gain approval (if necessary), and disseminate the new information to all who will play a role in the plan. It is important to provide the opportunity for all members to ask questions and gain consensus on the new changes.

RESOURCES

Higher Education Mental Health Alliance (2014). ***Postvention: A Guide for Response to Suicide on College Campuses***. <https://sprc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Hemha-postvention-guide.pdf>

Carson J Spencer Foundation, Crisis Care Network, National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention and American Association of Suicidology (2013). ***A Manager's Guide to Suicide Postvention in the Workplace: 10 Action Steps for Dealing with the Aftermath of Suicide***. Denver, CO: Carson J Spencer Foundation. <https://theactionalliance.org/sites/default/files/managers-guidebook-to-suicide-postvention-web.pdf>

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and Suicide Prevention Resource Center (2018). ***After a suicide: A toolkit for schools (2nd ed.)***. Waltham, MA: Education Development Center.

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, American School Counselor Association, National Association of School Psychologists, and The Trevor Project (2019). ***Model Schol District Policy on Suicide Prevention: Model Language, Commentary, and Resources (2nd ed.)***. New York: American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

Hejl, L. (2021, September 29). **Postvention: Campus Support After a Student Suicide**. TimelyCare. September 13, 2023, <https://timelycare.com/blog/campus-support-after-student-suicide/>

What is Lost&Found, and how can the organization help?

Lost&Found is a South Dakota-based 501(c)3 not-for-profit organization that aims to do more to eliminate suicide among young adults in the United States.

Lost&Found delivers comprehensive, data-driven, and resilience-focused suicide prevention and postvention programs and services for youth and young adults (ages 10-34) and their support networks. We envision a world in which no young adult dies by suicide. We also envision a world where tools and support for developing lifelong wellness are easily accessible.

Lost&Found can help your campus by providing:

- Mental health and suicide prevention education, training, and resources for staff, faculty and students
- Consultation and support on mental health, prevention and postvention policy creation, as well as support for response team coordination
- Comprehensive, data-driven and resilience-focused student programs
- Campus-specific evaluation tools to increase the mental wellbeing of campus & students

Find more information at resilienttoday.org. Send us a message to request more information at resilienttoday.org/contact.

LOST & FOUND

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