



Suicide Clusters—<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/02/12/several-students-commit-suicide-tulane-appalachian-state>

Suicide on Campus and the Pressure of Perfection—
<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/02/education/edlife/stress-social-media-and-suicide-on-campus.html>

Issue 42

focus

What is the Focus?

The *Focus* newsletter highlights important issues in mental health, providing timely information on a range of topics, including work-force development, supported education, organizational development and sustainability, peer-to-peer services, youth transition and system transformation. Have a suggestion for a topic? Let us know!



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Postvention: How Colleges and Universities Can React to Suicide Clusters

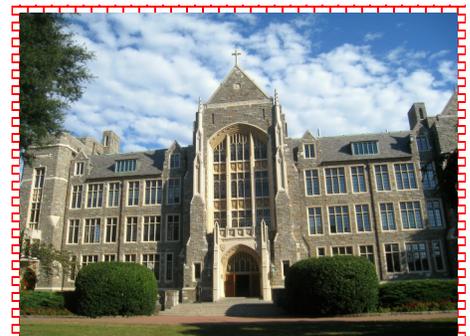
How a college or university reacts in the event of a suicide or other traumatic death within its campus community matters greatly. It sets the tone for students and other community members to process the trauma. It conveys messages about campus stigma, and the reality that students need help. It can make a tremendous difference in how people react, and can even determine what happens next.

To effectively make the greatest difference and prevent further suicides, colleges and universities must thoughtfully plan how they will respond when a suicide occurs in their community.

Suicide Clusters

At Tulane University, seven students lost their lives during the 2014-15 academic year, including four by suicide. At Appalachian State, nine students passed away, including three by suicide. This phenomenon, in which multiple people die by suicide in a single community within a short time span, is known to researchers as a “suicide cluster.” For some reason, they seem to be happening with increasing frequency on college and university campuses.

The phenomenon of suicide clusters begs the question of whether the mental health of college students is particularly poor, or if there is



some factor that makes it more likely for them to become suicidal. As Dusty Porter, Tulane's vice president of student affairs noted in speaking with *Inside Higher Ed*, "It's difficult to attribute causality. I do think we are seeing a generation where students are experiencing greater anxiety and depression."

The suicide rate among students enrolled in higher education is far less than that found in the general population. Nonetheless, according to information from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program at the University of California at Los Angeles, the mental health of incoming freshmen is in fact at a low point. So what's going on?

Is it a lack of attention to mental health? In the Tulane and Appalachian State cases, it seems not. Both schools have robust, high profile campaigns and active counseling centers. Tulane has even received a JedCampus seal from college mental health non-profit the Jed Foundation. Efforts there appear successful, with a 40% increase in students accessing services in the most recent academic year. At Appalachian State, the number of students engaged has increased markedly since 2009.

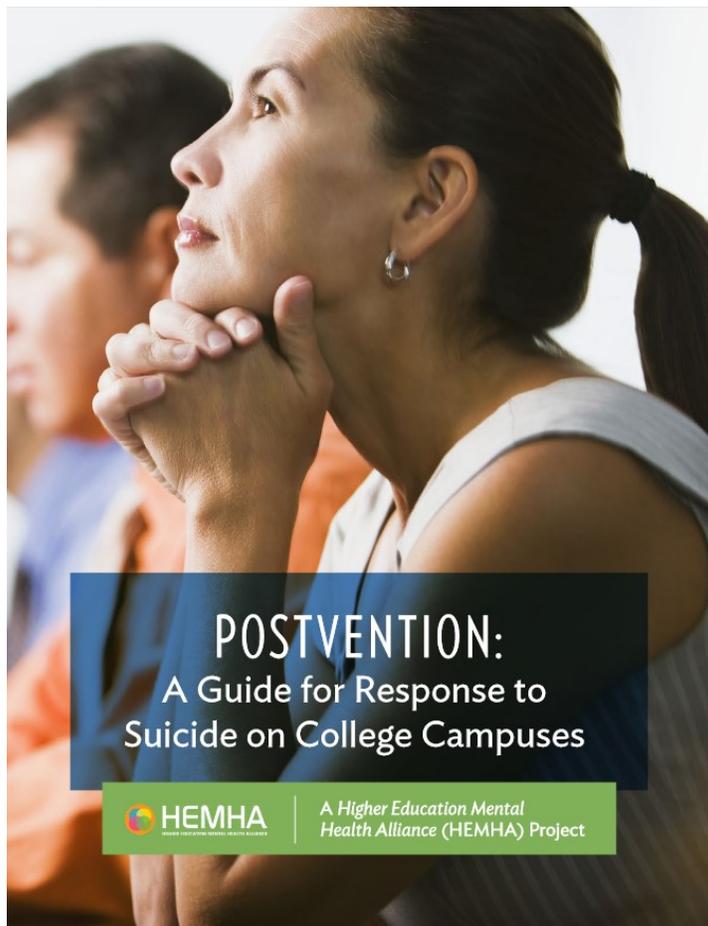
It's difficult to determine what exactly causes suicide

clusters to occur, but cases like those at Tulane and Appalachian State, among others, seem to underscore the possibility that campus communities are particularly vulnerable to them. Within campus communities, information about a suicide can move quickly through social media channels. With each college or university being its own closed social group, an event like a suicide becomes

public knowledge quickly, and anecdotes, speculation and rumors can move extremely rapidly. Simultaneously, the pressure to appear happy and successful, coupled with the same social media that allows for word of an untimely death to spread quickly, can discourage students from seeking help when they need it.

Victor Schwartz, medical director at the Jed Foundation, which works to support mental health and wellness and challenge stigma among students in higher ed, describes the effect. "There can be this contagion effect when there is a suicide death in a contained community. It creates almost a

permission. It's less remote and less frightening. This connection can happen in an unconscious way, but if there's a large enough at-risk population, unfortunately it may be enough to capture one or two people that may have otherwise not acted."



Postvention

So if the answer to preventing suicide clusters isn't just offering enhanced counseling services or engaging in anti-stigma campaigns, what is it? One answer is a strategy known as a "postvention." Instead of prevention, which focuses on changing the conditions that enable something to happen, or intervention, which interrupts an event while happening, postvention takes the strategy of reacting quickly after an event to alter how a community reacts to it.

In *POSTVENTION: A Guide for Response to Suicide on College Campuses*, a guide produced by the Higher Education Mental Health Alliance (http://hemha.org/postvention_guide.pdf), the aims of postvention are described in this way:

Suicide postvention involves a series of planned interventions with those affected by a campus suicide with the intention to:

- *Facilitate the grieving or adjustment process,*
- *Stabilize the environment,*
- *Reduce the risk of negative behaviors,*
- *Limit the risk of further suicides through contagion*

College and university postvention is the provision of psychological support, crisis intervention and other forms of assistance to those affected by a campus suicide. The structure of the suicide postvention program should fit with the specific needs of the campus community.

The idea behind postvention is that a campus community creates a plan to react to a student suicide or other traumatic event before the fact. The plan includes the creation of a committee or similar body with representation from student affairs, campus counseling, campus health centers, media relations, residence hall leadership, and other officials and representatives. Together, they identify a point person, and develop specific protocols to follow when a suicide takes place.

The hope is that by having a postvention plan in place, a campus community will be better able to respond thoughtfully an individual suicide, and pro-actively address the trauma that the event may cause for others in the community. The plan should help the campus to react in unison, foster discussion of what happened in a productive manner without glorifying it, provide a moment to break down stigma and let people know that if they need help, it is available, and spread the message that people in mental distress can and do recover. If the university can successfully enact its plan, it may be able to stem the cascading trauma and potentially prevent a suicide cluster from emerging.

Learn More on August 20

The issue of suicide clusters on American campuses is one that is gaining attention from SAMHSA. **On Thursday, August 20 at 1:30 ET, SAMHSA and the Jed Foundation will present a two-part webinar entitled "Responding to Suicide Clusters on College Campuses."** It will feature experts in suicide prevention and campus mental health discussing what is currently understood about the phenomenon of suicide clusters, the demographics and factors surrounding them. They will also examine what can be done to prevent them, including the use of postvention techniques and effective communication strategies. To register for this event, and learn more about how postvention planning can stem the emergence of clusters, visit <http://campusclusters.com/>.

With the fall semester set to begin, this is an opportune moment for administrators, faculty and students to review their institution's approach to supporting the mental health of their students. Hopefully, by including a postvention plan in that review, schools can pro-actively prevent the emergence of clusters and make their campuses safer, more supportive and stigma-free.



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