November 1, 2017

Dear Members of the Guelph-Wellington-Dufferin Community:

Guelph-Wellington-Dufferin is a broad geographic area, but when a tragedy occurs in one area it affects us all. Recent tragic suicides in the Centre Wellington community remind us of this, that we all mourn the loss and need to care for each other during this time.

Some of our young people may be deeply affected by these tragedies. School staff have been briefed on how to identify students who may be distressed or want to talk, and they are here to support your child/youth. In addition to staff in classrooms, Child and Youth Counsellors/Workers, Psychologists and Social Workers, Guidance teachers, and Chaplains at the Catholic Board, are available to support students. Over the following weeks we will monitor classes closely and respond to needs as they are identified.

Today and over the coming weeks, you may be concerned about your child/youth’s reaction or changes in behaviour. Your child/youth might find it hard to concentrate and complete school work, or might be unusually quiet, or show displays of anger. Some children might show very few reactions. These are all normal reactions.

Normal grief reactions can be very intense for children and adolescents and can be quite different at different ages. Young children may need more comfort and reassurance, middle-aged children might have a need to talk and ask many, possibly difficult questions. Adolescents can be profoundly affected, even if not personally connected to the people involved in the events. Most often, adolescents seek out the support of friends but will still need adult help and will benefit from your support and listening, when needed.

Below, please find an information sheet that might be helpful in understanding what your child/youth might be feeling and might need, at this time. Should you have any concerns about how your child is dealing with this situation, please feel free to contact the school or access any of the emergency resources listed below.

In addition to caring for our children and youth, we must be aware that we, too, can be deeply affected and need support. If you or someone you know needs help, do not hesitate to reach out. In Guelph and Wellington County, you can call Here24/7 (1 844-437-3247), a 24-hour crisis and support line for children, youth and adults, or in Dufferin County contact Dufferin Child and Family Services (DCAFS) 519-941-1530 <https://dcafs.on.ca/> for children and youth. You can find more information on the boards’ websites: [www.wellingtoncdsb.ca/mentalhealth/pages/](http://www.wellingtoncdsb.ca/mentalhealth/pages/) click on the “finding help link or <https://www.ugdsb.ca/parents/mental-health/> or www.cmhaww.ca.

Sincerely,

Martha Rogers, Director of Education Tamara Nugent, Director of Education

Upper Grand District School Board Wellington Catholic District School Board

Fred Wagner

Canadian Mental Health Association

Waterloo Wellington (CMHAWW)

**Suicide in Schools: Information for Parents/Guardians**

Adapted from: Headspace School Supports

Young people respond to suicide in unique ways, and a wide range of reactions is possible. Your child’s response will be influenced by their personality, their relationship with the deceased person, what is happening in their life and their ability to adjust to change. Whatever age your child is, they will need to find safe ways of expressing feelings.

Your child/youth may feel:

* confusion
* anger
* aggression
* withdrawal
* fear
* guilt
* denial
* blame
* betrayal
* abandonment
* hurt
* sadness

Parental understanding, reassurance and attention are very important at this time. Be guided by your child/youth’s need to talk, and make it clear to them that you will be available whenever they need you. You will not harm or prolong your child’s distress by encouraging them to talk about the event, feelings, or concerns.

Young people who have experienced other stressful situations in their lives may find it harder to cope. These experiences may include the separation/divorce of parents, the death of a relative/pet and moving house/school. They may become upset and need to express their feelings about these other concerns, even if they had appeared to be coping. If your child/youth is already using mental health services, make them aware of the suicide.

Your child/youth may have a lot of questions. They may want to know exactly what happened. The school will have provided your child with information about the incident. Details about the way a suicide occurred will not be given to students, as this information is potentially harmful to their wellbeing. As parents, it is important to steer discussion towards the positive “help-seeking” actions which young people can take. This includes talking to a trusted adult, such as a parent, counsellor, teacher, relative or friend.

**If you need help**

**Here24/7:** Addictions, mental health & Crisis Services

[www.here247.ca](http://www.here247.ca)

1 844 437 3247

DCAFS: Dufferin Children’s Mental Health (519) 941-1530

<https://dcafs.on.ca/>

[www.kidshelpphone.ca](http://www.kidshelpphone.ca)

1-800-668-6868

**Distress Line**

519 821 3760

**Youth Support Line**

519 821 5469

**Suicide Awareness Council of Wellington-Dufferin**

<http://www.sacwd.ca/>

**The Coping Centre** (Bereavement support for families & children)

1 877 554 4498

**Canadian Mental health Association** WW <http://www.cmhaww.ca>

**You can also talk to your school; we can help you explore options for support**

Key message after a crisis: “Tell an adult if you are worried about yourself or a friend.”

This is an important message to share with your child/youth in any discussion about suicide. Adolescents sometimes share their feelings about death with friends – in conversations, letters, emails, text messages and on the internet. If they suspect a friend may be about to hurt themselves, they should tell an adult immediately.

Be aware that you or your child may be affected by the media’s responses to the event. You may decide to protect your family against certain coverage. You may choose to watch the news together, so you can discuss any concerns that are raised and ensure your child/youth feels supported. Hopefully, media reporting of specific youth suicides will not occur. However, if it does, be aware that it can contribute to young people’s vulnerability.

When you speak with other members of the community, reinforce that the best approach is to respect the bereaved/affected family, avoid glamourizing or sensationalizing suicide, and encourage help-seeking actions in young people. Young people should also encourage help-seeking in any friends they have concerns about.

Some reactions can happen weeks, months or a year after an event. If you are concerned about your child’s reaction and behaviour (such as changes in their socializing or school work), it is important to speak to the principal or student counselor at their school or a GP. This may result in a referral to a counselor for a mental health and/or risk assessment.

And, finally, please be aware that school staff will also be affected by this tragedy. While everyone will be working towards normalizing school routines, some staff will be managing very difficult emotions. We will do all we can to support our staff as well as our students, but we might all need extra patience and care, during the next while.