

After a crisis

Timely and Appropriate Response to a Death

Crisis Management Checklist

Use this checklist to manage your team after a crisis has occurred.

CONDUCT INFORMATION-GATHERING AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT

- Activate the Crisis Management Team and hold an immediate meeting.
- Obtain the facts.
- Manage the death scene.
- Notify the next of kin.
- Involve family in memorializing the decedent.

PROVIDE COMMUNICATIONS AND SUPPORT TO YOUR TEAM

- Review the communications guidance provided.
- Stay aware in the aftermath of a suicide.
- Make a clear distinction between positive accomplishments and qualities of the deceased and his or her final act.
- Use appropriate language.
- Disseminate information according to the Crisis Notification Plan.
- Provide players, former players, and staff with immediate crisis response services and promote healthy coping skills.
- Coordinate and schedule crisis response services.
- Coordinate funerals and memorial services with family.

FACILITATE ONGOING SUPPORT AND FOLLOW-UP

- Identify potentially high-risk individuals who might need continued crisis support.
- Consider the ongoing needs of players, former players, staff members, and their family members.
- Conduct end-of-season outreach and evaluation.

CONDUCT INFORMATION-GATHERING AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT

✓ Activate the Crisis Management Team and hold an immediate meeting.

As soon as the team becomes aware of a death, the Crisis Management Team should be activated to plan and carry out crisis management and support activities. A unified and well-informed response is essential to management in times of crisis. This response begins with a Crisis Management Team meeting, by telephone or in person (*see Appendix E: Sample Agenda for Activated Crisis Management Team Meeting*). The goals of this meeting are to provide accurate information about the event to members of the Crisis Management Team and to make sure members know their role(s) and how to accomplish them.

When death occurs:

- Obtain all of the facts, including manner and cause of death, to the degree known.
- Reach out to the next of kin.
- Help connect the bereaved, including family, team members, and staff, with supportive resources.

When death occurs on team property, in addition to the steps above:

- Alert law enforcement officials.
- Secure the scene and document names of witnesses.
- Work with law enforcement to notify the next of kin, using the emergency contact information list.
- Contract for professional cleanup of the scene, if required.

✓ Obtain the facts.

There are five classifications for death: natural, accidental, suicide, homicide, and undetermined. Many deaths initially ruled undetermined are assigned a different classification at a later date, when more information is available. There are special considerations for responding to and communicating about a death when the manner is suicide or undetermined (which could later be ruled a suicide).

If the death of a player, former player, or staff member occurs outside of the workplace, the team may be notified by a relative, friend, co-worker, or law enforcement official. The relative, friend, or co-worker may not have all of the facts about the death and may not be certain of the cause of death. Carefully coordinate employee communication so that individuals are notified in a timely and, if possible, simultaneous manner.

No matter where the death occurred, do not make any official statements until the death has been confirmed by law enforcement, the medical examiner or coroner, or an immediate family member. Be especially wary of death reports from disreputable news organizations and/or social media sites.

Confusion, speculation, and rumors are common in the aftermath of a crisis and they can exacerbate emotional upheaval. False information can be especially hurtful to family members and friends of the deceased. The team and its representatives should be considered sources of accurate information. As such, the Crisis Management Team must take great care to ensure that information is factually accurate and communicate it compassionately.

✓ **Manage the death scene.**

On the discovery of the deceased on team property, law enforcement should be contacted immediately. If the death is suspected to be from non-natural causes, keep all unauthorized people away from the body and site, as the area will be treated by law enforcement as a crime scene. Do not disturb the scene until you have received permission from the appropriate law enforcement authorities. Comply with all requests from law enforcement as they conduct their investigation.

The scene of a death should be cleaned by professionals with expertise in safely removing biohazardous material. Outside professionals should be hired to avoid putting employees in the extremely difficult position of cleaning up after the death of someone they knew.

✓ **Notify the next of kin.**

In many cases, law enforcement personnel work with victim advocates (professionals trained to support victims of crime) to notify the next of kin. Depending on the circumstances, consider having a representative from the team accompany the victim advocate when the family is contacted. When notifying the next of kin, dignity and professionalism are essential, but this does not mean you need to restrain yourself from expressing appropriate emotions. Use the person's name and work with the victim advocate to answer the family's questions while avoiding unnecessary traumatizing details, if possible.

✓ **Involve family in memorializing the decedent.**

It is important to work with the family of a deceased player, former player, or staff member. They will often appreciate the support of the team, and their cooperation can be valuable for effective crisis management. The Director of Player Engagement or a team representative should ask to visit the family in their home on learning of the death, if he or she did not accompany the victim advocate during the

death notification. It may be useful for a pair of representatives to visit the family together so they can support one another during the visit. It is important to respect the family's cultural and religious traditions related to the manner of death, grieving, and funeral ceremonies.

The Director of Player Engagement or team representative(s) should:

- Offer the team's condolences.
- Ask what the team can do to assist and whether there is anybody else the family would like them to notify.
- Inquire about funeral arrangements. Ask whether the funeral will be private or the family will allow others to attend.
- Provide the family with information about counseling (see [Appendix F: List of Grief and Bereavement Resources](#)).
- Ask whether the family knows of any of their loved one's co-workers who may be especially upset.
- Briefly explain to the family what the team is doing to respond to the death.
- Schedule a time for the family to speak with a Human Resources representative about benefits and compensation the deceased was eligible for and how to continue certain benefits, like medical insurance. Discussion might include death-related benefits and compensation, employer-sponsored insurance, and other payroll-deducted benefits.
- At a later time, ask whether the family would like their loved one's personal belongings returned. If they do, set a time to come back and deliver the belongings, transporting them in appropriate containers.

PROVIDE COMMUNICATIONS AND SUPPORT TO YOUR TEAM

✓ **Review the following guidance on communicating during a crisis**

Make sure all team officials are familiar with the content, or will consult appropriately, before communicating to others about the crisis.

Communication during a crisis is one of the most important tasks of the Crisis Management Team. Appropriate communication fosters trust and confidence in the crisis response. The following recommendations are appropriate for communicating during all types of crises.

- **Be transparent:** The appearance of withholding information can create distrust and rumors. If you are seen as forthright and reliable, then people will continue to come to you for information.
- **Stick to the facts:** Keep explanations clear and simple. Avoid all conjecture and speculation.
- **Be genuine:** It is OK to show emotion, to the extent it is measured by compassion. Do not insinuate blame, judgment, or conclusions that are not yet known.
- **Describe further communications:** Tell your audience who is communicating to the media, law enforcement/security, and the family. They will also want to know where and how often communications will come from the team to players and their families about unfolding and/or related events.
- **Explain where to get help:** The team and NFL have many resources available. Tell the audience who they can talk to if they wish to have more information or need assistance.

✓ **Stay aware in the aftermath of a suicide.**

Some vulnerable individuals may be at risk for responding to a suicide by attempting suicide themselves. This is also known as a contagion effect. The death by suicide of a co-worker or public figure,

and the way it is communicated, may trigger suicidal thoughts and feelings in some vulnerable individuals, and may increase their risk for copycat behavior.

The reasons for contagion are many. The death, particularly of a leader or perceived leader or professional athlete, may instill a loss of hope (e.g., “If he could not deal with his problems, given all he had going for him, what chance do I have?”); team and media attention to the death may offer just what the vulnerable person lacks and desires (e.g., a sense of importance and value, even though that attention could not be appreciated by a deceased person).

When a suicide occurs, many co-workers and people in the larger community might experience suicidal distress and be at risk for an attempt. When a culture or organization acknowledges or memorializes a suicide in a dramatic or sensational manner, or focuses too much on the detailed means of death, there is an increased risk that some vulnerable individuals will imitate the behavior.

It is important in this context not to glamorize the current state of “peace” the deceased may have found through death. Although some religious perspectives consider the afterlife to be much better than life in the physical realm, this contrast should not be overemphasized in team communications. For others who are dealing with psychological pain or suicidal thoughts, the lure of finding peace or escape through death may add to the attractiveness of suicide.

In a similar way, the team should avoid normalizing the suicide by interpreting it as a reasonable response to particularly distressful life circumstances. Most people do not seriously consider suicide an option; therefore, suicidal ideation is not normal. Most individuals who seriously consider suicide do not act on those thoughts, but instead find more constructive ways to resolve them. Presenting suicide as common may unintentionally remove a protective bias against suicide in a community.

✓ **Make a clear distinction, and even separation, between the positive accomplishments and qualities of the deceased and his or her final act.**

Make the observation that although the deceased is no longer suffering or in turmoil, we would rather she or he had lived in a society that understands mental or behavioral health problems and supports those who seek treatment—without a trace of stigma or prejudice. Envision how the community or society in general could function better, or provide more resources to help other troubled individuals find effective life solutions. The goal of this approach is to motivate the community to improve the way it cares for, supports, and understands all of its members.

✓ **Use appropriate language.**

Although common English usage includes the phrases “committed suicide,” “successful suicide,” and “failed attempt,” these should be avoided because of their connotations. For instance, the verb “committed” is usually associated with sins or crimes. Along the same lines, a suicide should never be viewed as a success, nor should a nonfatal suicide attempt be seen as a failure. Instead, use phrases such as “died by suicide,” “took his life,” “ended her life,” or “attempted suicide,” which are more accurate and less offensive.

✓ **Disseminate information according to the Crisis Notification Plan.**

- Internally to staff and players, including those on injured reserve and the practice squad
- Externally to the NFL, media, and families, if appropriate

Players and staff members should be informed of a colleague’s death by someone in a position of authority. An employee’s close colleagues should be told of the death in person, if at all possible (**see Appendix G: Sample In-Person Talking Points**). This will allow members of the Crisis Management Team to gauge reactions and facilitate the identification

of potentially high-risk individuals who might need continued crisis support. It may be appropriate to tell employees from other departments or those who had limited contact with the deceased in writing (**see Appendix H: Sample Internal Memo for Notifying Staff of a Suicide or Homicide**) or by phone, if they cannot be told in person.

The Crisis Management Team can minimize the potential for contagion by setting an appropriately respectful tone when acknowledging and communicating about the death of a player, former player, or staff member. One of the most challenging elements in effective crisis response is for the Crisis Management Team to accurately, respectfully, and carefully communicate information regarding the death. Occasionally, a death in the workplace involves other employees as witnesses. In these cases and others, information about the death may spread quickly, especially with rapid information exchange via texting, social media, and the like. The Crisis Management Team should be aware that, even before any official team announcement, a great deal of information may be circulating, much of it inaccurate. Timely and accurate information can help dispel rumors.

Communication in times of crisis presents an opportunity to reinforce and build trust, confidence, and team cohesiveness. When done well, players, former players, and staff members will feel cared about, supported, and secure in the knowledge that leadership is both compassionate and competent. Feeling cared about and supported in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event is hugely important in the healing and recovery process. The positive outcomes of this response can contribute to an overall stronger, more cohesive, engaged, and productive team culture. One way to establish trust is for leaders, including those on the Crisis Management Team, to acknowledge how they have been personally affected by the loss.

Expert consultation on crisis messaging and communicating about suicide is available from the NFL Life Line team. For more information contact the NFL Life Line at **(800) 506-0078** and ask the crisis counselor to have a member of the NFL Life Line Crisis Communications Team connect with you for a consultation.

Communicating With the Media

A written statement to the media about any high-profile death should:

- Acknowledge the death has occurred without including too many details.
- Concentrate on the life of the deceased, instead of the details surrounding his or her death.
- Express the team's sympathy to the family members and friends of the deceased.
- Focus on supporting the living.
- Include information about crisis resources for the general public, such as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, **1-800-273-TALK (8255)**, or general ways to seek help.

If the death was by suicide:

- Do not include details about the location or cause of death.¹
- Do not attribute the death to specific circumstances or offer simplistic explanations.

Be aware of any recent crises affecting your team or others where these sample news releases (**see Appendix I: Sample Media News Releases**) may have been used. The reuse of similar news releases can make the team and its representatives appear disingenuous and overly scripted.

¹ *Suicide is a manner of death, but is often confused with cause (e.g., gunshot, suffocation).*

Tips for Working With the Media

- Review the media talking points before conducting an interview or press conference (**see Appendix J: Sample Media Talking Points**).
- Stay on message. Although you have no direct control over a story's editing, you do have control over your messages and how you deliver them.
- Watch out for hypothetical, speculative, or personal questions.
- Do not speculate or answer questions outside of your knowledge or expertise. Instead say, "I am not the appropriate person to answer that question."
- Never say, "No comment." It will make you look uninformed or as if you are trying to hide something. It is better to explain why you can't comment. For example, say, "It would be inappropriate for me to speak on behalf of the individual's family."
- Never speak off the record. Consider every conversation with the media as being on the record.
- Do not repeat negative questions or comments by the reporter. Instead, block the negative question and bridge to one of your key messages.

Examples of blocking a question and bridging to your key message:

- "That question raises an interesting point, but the more important point is..."
- "The best way to answer that question is to tell you what we are trying to do..."
- "That is not really the issue. The real issue is..."
- "I can't speak to that. But what I do know is..."

- “The most important matter at hand is this...”
- “Let’s focus on the facts...”
- “Allow me to frame my answer like this...”
- “Looking at that question broadly...”

✓ **Provide players, former players, and staff with immediate crisis response services and promote healthy coping skills.**

✓ **Coordinate and schedule crisis response services.**

Services should include those provided by team mental health professionals, local professionals with whom the team has an existing relationship, and the NFL Life Line Crisis Specialist.

Crisis response services should be offered on-site to assist players, former players, and team staff in coping with the death. Some players, former players, and team staff may want individual crisis intervention services, while others prefer to meet in small groups. There should be enough mental health professionals and physical meeting rooms that afford privacy on-site to accommodate these preferences. It may be advisable to offer on-site crisis intervention services for a period of time, depending on the circumstances.

It will likely be necessary to find ways to temporarily integrate crisis counseling and messaging into routine work schedules (e.g., brief messages from counselors/coaches/management during team meetings promoting available support services; brief meetings with position coaches and players). It is preferable to reach out to players, former players, and staff members in a deliberate and timely way rather than to allow the emotional environment to escalate. They should be given accurate information about the death, the kinds of reactions that can be expected, and safe coping strategies to help them in the coming days and weeks. Wherever possible, group meetings should follow a structured outline, keep to a time limit, and provide each individual with an opportunity to speak.

There are several resource materials available (**see Appendix O: Resource Materials**) for downloading that can be distributed after a crisis to provide support.

They include:

- NFL Life Line two-page information sheet
- NFL Life Line wallet cards
- A tip sheet on coping with traumatic events
- A tip sheet on coping with a suicide and/or witnessing a traumatic event

✓ **Coordinate funerals and memorial services with family.**

Ask the family whether they would like a counselor present at the funeral or memorial service and make arrangements to provide one as needed. It is also appropriate to ask the family whether they would like tip sheets on self-care and/or a list of grief and bereavement resources available at the services, reception site, or some other venue.

Arrangements should be made to allow all who desire to attend the funeral or memorial service to do so.

If the death was by suicide, a guide to help funeral directors support survivors of suicide loss is available at <http://www.sprc.org/library/funeraldirectors.pdf>.

Spontaneous memorials. In the immediate aftermath of a high-profile death, it is not unusual for mourners to create spontaneous memorials by leaving flowers, cards, poems, pictures, stuffed animals, or other items in a place closely associated with the deceased. The team’s goal should be to balance the need for grief expression with the need to limit the risk of inadvertently glamorizing the death. In all cases, teams should have consistent policies so that suicide deaths, for example, are handled in the same manner as any other death. A combination of time limits and straightforward communication can help to restore

equilibrium and avoid glamorizing the death in ways that may increase the risk of contagion.

When a memorial is spontaneously created on team property, team representatives are advised to monitor it for messages that may be inappropriate, such as those that are hostile or inflammatory, or that indicate individuals may themselves be at risk. Teams can leave such memorials in place until after the funeral (or up to about five days), after which the tribute objects may be offered to the family. It is generally not necessary to prohibit access to the site or to cordon it off, which would merely draw excessive attention to it.

American flags should not be flown at half-staff, as that decision is made by the U.S. president or a state governor.

FACILITATE ONGOING SUPPORT AND FOLLOW-UP

✓ **Identify potentially high-risk individuals who might need continued crisis support.**

Everybody responds to crisis situations differently. Therefore, some players, former players, or staff members may need more continued support than others. It is most beneficial to identify potentially high-risk individuals as soon as possible after the crisis to provide them with appropriate support and resources.

Members of the Crisis Management Team and others who have regular contact with players, former players, and staff members, such as chaplains, trainers, and coaches, should compile a list of potentially high-risk individuals. A High-Risk Identification Form (see [Appendix K: High-Risk Identification Form](#)) for each person should be completed and given to the individual responsible for following up with high-risk individuals. A personalized plan for follow-up and support should be developed for each identified individual.

An individual may potentially be at high risk if he or she:

- Has a history of mental health problems, emotional difficulties, or substance abuse, or is in treatment.
- Had a close relationship with the deceased (friend, relative, close colleague, romantic relationship) and/or a contentious relationship with the deceased.
- Received a phone call, text, or other communication from the deceased just prior to the death.
- Has personal experience with the manner of death (e.g., recently lost a family member to homicide or suicide, was in a serious car crash, has a history of driving under the influence).
- Is dealing with stressful life events such as a death or divorce, retiring, or being cut from the team.
- Was an eyewitness to the death.
- Has a history of suicide attempts.

There may be other high-risk individuals in need of support with whom the team does not have contact. If the deceased was a player or former player who had previously played for another team, a member of the Crisis Management Team should communicate with that team's Director of Player Engagement to provide information and make sure they are seeking to identify high-risk individuals themselves. This should also occur when players on other teams went to college with a deceased player or former player.

✓ **Consider the ongoing needs of players, former players, staff members, and their family members.**

Grief feelings can resurface on or near the anniversary date of a tragic loss. Members of the Crisis Management Team can be prepared to monitor and support players, former players, and staff members at that time. The team also should be prepared for grief and emotions associated with the death that may occur on other occasions, such as:

- Anniversary of the event/death
- Birthday of the deceased
- Holidays
- Other celebrations in which the deceased would have participated
- Start of a new season

Members of the Crisis Management Team should brainstorm on other events and activities that may need to be altered or canceled, or will require special planning as a result of the crisis.

Another way to make sure the team is providing appropriate ongoing support is with a survey of well-being and/or social climate, which is best to conduct after some weeks (at least a month) have elapsed and services have been provided since the death. Surveying a few weeks later will help remind players, former players, and staff that some assistance needs may be ongoing, and also determine what services were most beneficial to team players, former players, and staff for continuing, or future, needs. This survey may be provided at the end of the season as well (see [Appendix N: Crisis Response Player Feedback Survey](#)).

✓ **Conduct end-of-season outreach and evaluation.**

The end of the season offers a critical opportunity to bring the Crisis Management Team together once again to plan for any ongoing needs and review how the crisis response went. The Director of Player Engagement or team mental health professionals should follow up again with individuals who were previously identified as potentially at high risk and ask for their consent to participate in brief check-ins during the off-season. If players or former players agree to be contacted, arrange a schedule for follow-up.

All players should receive information and guidance about accessing resources and services during the off-season (see [Appendix L: Sample Team Discussion](#) and [Appendix M: Internal End-of-Season Memo](#)).

The Crisis Management Team should evaluate its activities after a crisis in two ways: through a Crisis Response Review and a Crisis Response Player Feedback Survey (see [Appendix N: Crisis Response Player Feedback Survey](#)). These two evaluation activities will help the Crisis Management Team identify strengths and areas for improvement from its crisis response, and provide information to guide revisions to the Crisis Management Plan.