Suicide Prevention Resource Center

Preventing Suicide
The Role of High School Teachers

Key Steps to Reduce Suicide Risk among Your Students:

Understand how suicide prevention fits with your role as a high school teacher

Identify students who may be at risk for suicide

Respond to students who may be at risk for suicide

Be prepared to respond to a suicide death

Consider becoming involved in schoolwide suicide prevention

Ms. Gomez, a high school social studies teacher, was concerned about her student Tia because she knew Tia had problems at home. One day she overheard Tia tell a friend that she was totally depressed from being dumped by her boyfriend, had given up trying to pass math, and thought her friend who had recently taken his life had the right idea.

Ms. Gomez asked Tia if she would be willing to talk with her, and she agreed. When they met, Ms. Gomez talked with her about what was going on and how she was feeling. Then Ms. Gomez asked if Tia would go to see a school counselor right away, and she reluctantly agreed. Ms. Gomez walked with her to the counseling center, and Tia talked with a counselor. Later that day, Ms. Gomez met with the counselor to provide critical background information about Tia that could be used in assessing her degree of risk.

(Based on the experiences of a school psychologist)

Understand How Suicide Prevention Fits with Your Role as a High School Teacher

Teachers are well positioned to promote a feeling of connectedness and belonging in the school community.

As a teacher, you have an important role to play in preventing suicide. You have daily contact with many young people, some of whom have problems that could result in serious injury or even death by suicide. You are therefore in a position to notice what students say, do, and write, and take action when you suspect a student may be at risk of self-harm.

Teachers can also play an active role in suicide prevention by fostering the emotional well-being of all students, not just those at high risk. Teachers are well positioned to promote a feeling of connectedness and belonging in the school community. School connectedness is the belief by students that adults and peers in the school care about them as individuals as well as about their learning (CDC, 2009). You can create connectedness by interacting with students in positive ways and helping them engage with peers and other adults in the school community during the school day and extracurricular activities. Connectedness is an important factor in improving academic achievement and healthy behaviors, and it is related to reductions in suicidal thoughts and attempts (Whitlock et al., 2014; Marraccini, et al., 2017).

Know the facts

Suicide touches everyone—all ages and incomes; all racial, ethnic, and religious groups; and in all parts of the country. The emotional toll on those left behind remains long after the event. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among teenagers in the United States (CDC, 2017). **Each year:**

2,877

About 2,877 young people ages 13 to 19 die by suicide (CDC, 2017).

1 in 6

Approximately 1 in 6 high school students seriously consider attempting suicide (CDC, 2018).

1 in 13

1 in 13 high school students attempt suicide one or more times (CDC, 2018).

However, suicide is preventable.

When individuals, schools, and communities join forces to address suicide, they can save lives.

In this sheet, the term "mental health contact" is used to refer to the staff person(s) or consultant(s) who are responsible for responding to a mental health crisis, as designated by the school. **All school staff should know who their school's main mental health contact is.**

Identify Students Who May Be at Risk for Suicide

Know the factors that can increase suicide risk

There are many factors that may increase a student's risk for suicide. Some of the most significant ones are:

- Mental health disorders, e.g., depression, anxiety disorders

- Substance use disorder

- Access to a means to kill oneself (i.e., lethal means such as guns or medications)

- Previous suicide attempt(s)

- Family history of suicide or mental health disorders

- Childhood abuse, neglect, or trauma

- Exposure to the suicide of another person

- Stressful life circumstances (e.g., school problems, academic and/or disciplinary; family problems; relationship problems or breakups; bullying; legal problems)

Suicide involves the interplay of multiple risk factors. Sometimes stressful life circumstances can serve as tipping points and trigger suicidal behavior in adolescents who are already at increased risk.

(Adapted from AFSP, 2018, and AFSP & SPRC, 2018)

Crisis Lines

Both of these services provide free, 24/7 support for people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress.

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline
Call or text 988

Crisis Text Line
Text 741741

Look for signs of immediate or serious risk

Leaders in the suicide prevention field agree that the following warning signs indicate a young person may be at risk for suicide:

1. Talking about or making plans for suicide

2. Expressing hopelessness about the future

3. Displaying severe/overwhelming emotional pain or distress

4. Showing worrisome behavioral cues or marked changes in behavior, particularly in the presence of the warning signs above. Specifically, this includes significant:

   - Withdrawal from or change in social connections or situations

   - Changes in sleep (increased or decreased)

   - Anger or hostility that seems out of character or out of context

   - Recent increased agitation or irritability

Risk is greater in youth who have attempted suicide in the past. Risk is also greater if the warning sign is new behavior for the student or behavior that has increased and is possibly related to an anticipated or actual painful event, loss, or change.

(Expert panel listed at https://www.youthsuicidewarningsigns.org/about, 2013)

Address Cultural Differences

Differences in cultural background can affect how students respond to problems, the way they talk about death and dying, and their attitudes toward suicide, as well as how they feel about sharing personal information, speaking with adults, and seeking help. It is important to be aware of possible differences and tailor your responses to students accordingly. For example, individuals from some cultures may not be open to seeing a mental health provider, but they may be willing to talk with a primary care provider, faith community leader, or traditional healer.

Help Your Colleagues

Suicide can occur among your colleagues as well as among students. If you notice signs of suicide risk in your colleagues, you can assist them in getting help too. For more information on how to help them, see the "Resources" section, including the information sheet *The Role of Co-Workers in Preventing Suicide in the Workplace*.

Respond to a Student Who May Be at Risk for Suicide

If you notice any of these signs in a student, take these recommended steps right away:

1. Do not leave the student alone. Make sure the student is in a secure environment supervised by a caring adult until he or she can be seen by the school mental health contact.

2. Make sure the student is escorted to the school's mental health contact.

3. Provide any additional information to the school's mental health contact that will help with their assessment of the student.

(Adapted from AFSP and SPRC, 2018)

Be Prepared to Respond to a Suicide Death

The suicide—or violent or unexpected death—of a student, teacher, well-known community member, or even a celebrity can increase suicide risk among vulnerable young people. Therefore, an essential part of any crisis or suicide prevention plan is responding appropriately to a situation that may put students at risk for suicide. This type of response is often called *postvention* and is usually managed by the school administration and mental health staff. In a school setting, there are a number of recommended postvention measures that may be taken. Find out if your school has a postvention plan, and if so, what is included in it.

For more information on postvention, see *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*, which is listed in the "Resources" section of this sheet.

Consider Becoming Involved in Schoolwide Suicide Prevention

Identifying students at risk for suicide is a crucial part of a comprehensive approach to suicide prevention. As a teacher, you can also participate in or support other aspects of suicide prevention. The following list outlines the key components of a comprehensive school suicide prevention program:

- Schoolwide programs that promote connectedness and emotional well-being

- Identifying students at risk and in crisis and connecting them with help

- Postvention

- Staff education and training

- Parent/guardian education and outreach

- Student programs (e.g., curricula for all students, skill-building for students at risk, peer leader programs)

- Screening students at risk

- Policies and procedures for implementing the components above

This type of program is often coordinated by a school's suicide prevention or crisis response team leader under the supervision of the school administration. For more information about comprehensive school suicide prevention programs, see *Preventing Suicide: A Toolkit for High Schools* in the "Resources" section.

Resources

After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools, Second Edition
By the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and the Suicide Prevention Resource Center (2018)
http://www.sprc.org/library_resources/items/after-suicide-toolkit-schools
This online resource provides basic information and practical tools for schools to use in developing and implementing a coordinated response to the suicide death of a student. It includes sections on crisis response teams and activities; helping students cope; addressing issues related to memorials, social media, and contagion; and working with the media and the community.

Finding Programs and Practices
By the Suicide Prevention Resource Center (n.d.)
http://www.sprc.org/strategic-planning/finding-programs-practices
This webpage provides information on SPRC's "Resources and Programs" webpage and other program registries and lists, as well as suggestions for selecting programs.

Los Angeles County Youth Suicide Prevention Project
http://preventsuicide.lacoe.edu/
This project's website has separate sections for school administrators, school staff, parents, and students. Each section contains information sheets, videos, and other helpful resources. The website also has links to resources on a variety of populations at risk and special issues in suicide prevention.

Preventing Suicide: A Toolkit for High Schools
By the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2012)
http://store.samhsa.gov/product/Preventing-Suicide-A-Toolkit-for-High-Schools/SMA12-4669?WT
This toolkit helps high schools, school districts, and their partners design and implement strategies to prevent suicide and promote behavioral health among their students. It describes the steps necessary to implement all the components of a comprehensive school-based suicide prevention program and contains numerous tools to help carry out the steps.

Preventing Suicide: The Role of High School Mental Health Providers
By the Suicide Prevention Resource Center (revised 2019)
http://www.sprc.org/resources-programs/role-high-school-mental-health-providers-preventing-suicide-sprc-customized
This information sheet helps high school mental health providers recognize and respond to the warning signs and risk factors for suicide in high school students.

Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide (SPTS)
http://www.sptsusa.org
SPTS develops educational materials and training programs for teens, parents, and educators, and its website contains separate sections for each group. SPTS is the developer of the online course Making Educators Partners in Youth Suicide Prevention and the Lifelines Trilogy manuals and workshops covering suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention for educators and school staff.

Suicide Prevention among LGBT Youth: A Workshop for Professionals Who Serve Youth
By the Suicide Prevention Resource Center (2011)
http://www.sprc.org/training-institute/lgbt-youth-workshop
This kit provides all the materials needed to host a workshop to help staff in schools, youth-serving organizations, and suicide prevention programs take action to reduce suicidal behavior among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth. It includes a leader's guide, sample agenda, PowerPoint, sample script, handouts, and small group exercises.

Suicide Warning Signs (wallet card)
By the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (2011)
http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/media-resources/
This wallet-sized card contains the warning signs for suicide and the toll-free number of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

The Role of Co-Workers in Preventing Suicide in the Workplace
By the Suicide Prevention Resource Center (revised 2013)
http://www.sprc.org/resources-programs/role-co-workers-preventing-suicide-sprc-customized-information-series
This information sheet helps people in any type of workplace learn how to recognize and respond to the warning signs for suicide in their co-workers.

The Trevor Project
http://www.thetrevorproject.org
The Trevor Project is a national organization with a focus on crisis and suicide prevention among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth. It provides counseling by phone, text, and chat; an online social networking community for LGBTQ youth and their friends and allies; educational programs for schools; and advocacy initiatives.

Youth Suicide Prevention, Intervention, and Postvention Guidelines: A Resource for School Personnel
By the Maine Youth Suicide Prevention Program (2009, 4th edition)
http://www.maine.gov/suicide/docs/Guidelines%2010-2009--w%20discl.pdf

This guide describes the components of a comprehensive school-based suicide prevention program. It also includes an assessment form to help schools determine if they are ready to manage suicidal behavior; detailed guidelines for implementing suicide intervention and postvention in schools; and appendices with related materials, including forms and handouts.

Youth Suicide Prevention School-Based Guide
By the Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, University of South Florida (2012 Update)
http://theguide.fmhi.usf.edu/
This guide provides a framework for schools to assess their existing or proposed suicide prevention efforts and resources, and information that school administrators can use to enhance or add to their existing programs. Topics include administrative issues, risk and protective factors, prevention guidelines, intervention and postvention strategies, and school climate.

In addition to these resources, SPRC's webpage on schools has many other useful materials. Go to http://www.sprc.org/settings/schools

References

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Youth suicide warning signs. (2013). Retrieved from https://www.youthsuicidewarningsigns.org/healthcare-professionals

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Web: http://www.sprc.org