

The Role of High School Teachers in Preventing Suicide



Ms. Gomez, a high school social studies teacher, was concerned about her student Tia because she knew she had problems at home. One day she heard her telling 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 taken his life recently had the right idea.

Ms. Gomez asked Tia if she would be willing to talk with her about what was going on, and she agreed. When they met, she talked with Tia about how she was feeling. Then she asked if she would go to see a school counselor right away, and Tia 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.*

(*From the experiences of a school psychologist)

Teachers:

Steps You Can Take to Reduce Suicide Risk among Your Students:

- Understand why suicide prevention is important
- 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

Understand Why Suicide Prevention Is Important

Know the facts

Suicide touches everyone—all ages and backgrounds, all racial and ethnic groups, in all parts of the country. The emotional toll on those left behind remains long after the event.

Suicide is the third leading cause of death among teenagers (CDC, 2010). In addition, each year:

- About 4,700 young people ages 14–24 die by suicide (CDC, 2010).
- Approximately 1 out of 6 high school students seriously consider attempting suicide (CDC, 2012).
- 1 out of 13 high school students attempt suicide one or more times (CDC, 2012).

However, there is help and hope when individuals, schools, and communities join forces to address suicide as a preventable public health problem.



Understand your role

As a teacher, you have an important role to play. You have day-to-day contact with many young people, some of whom have problems that could result in serious injury or even death by their own hand. You are therefore able to observe students' behavior and act 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 already at high risk. Teachers are well positioned to promote a feeling of connectedness and belonging in the school community. According to the CDC (2009), 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. Connectedness is an important factor in improving academic achievement and healthy behaviors, and it is also specifically related to reductions in suicidal thoughts and attempts (Resnick et al., 1997; Blum et al., 2002).



Identify Students Who May Be at Risk for Suicide

Be alert to the problems facing your students

Your position gives you an opportunity to become aware of problems facing your students that may put them at risk for suicide. Researchers have identified a large number of risk factors for suicide. The most significant ones are:

- Prior suicide attempt(s)
- Substance abuse
- Mood disorders
- Access to lethal means

Other risk factors include the following circumstances and problems:

- Recent death of a friend, especially if by suicide
- Recent death of or separation from a family member
- Engaging in self-harm
- Problems in school (academic and/or discipline)
- Relationship problems or breakups
- Bullying or other forms of violence
- Discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender nonconformity
- Family problems or abuse, current or in the past
- Legal issues
- Serious illness or injury
- Other stressful events



Note: Suicide risk is generally greater among individuals with multiple risk factors.

(Adapted from Rodgers, 2011)

Watch for signs of immediate risk for suicide

Some behaviors may indicate a person is at immediate risk for suicide. These three should prompt immediate action:

- **Talking about wanting to die or to kill oneself**
- **Looking for a way to kill oneself, such as searching online or obtaining a gun**
- **Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live**

Other behaviors may also indicate a serious risk—especially if the behavior is new; has increased; and/or seems related to a painful event, loss, or change:

- Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
- Talking about being a burden to others
- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs
- Acting anxious or agitated; behaving recklessly
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Withdrawing or feeling isolated
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge
- Displaying extreme mood swings

(Adapted from National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, [n.d.])

Respond to Students Who May Be at Risk for Suicide

Take action if you encounter a student who is at immediate risk

If someone is:

- **Talking about wanting to die or to kill oneself**
- **Looking for a way to kill oneself, such as searching online or obtaining a gun**
- **Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live**

Take the following steps right away:

1. Supervise the student constantly (or make sure the student is in a secure environment supervised by caring adults) until he or she can be seen by the mental health contact.
2. Escort the student to see the mental health contact.
3. Provide any additional information to the mental health professional evaluating the student to help in the assessment process. That person will notify the student's parents if necessary.

(Adapted from Los Angeles Unified School District, 2010)

Reach out to a student who may be at risk

The steps above are an appropriate response to a student showing immediate warning signs. To help the many other students who may be at risk for suicide (as described in the section, "Identify Students Who May Be at Risk for Suicide"), take one or both of the following steps, depending on what feels most comfortable to you:

For a wallet-sized card with suicide warning signs and the toll-free number of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, go to http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/App_Files/Media/PDF/NSPL_WalletCard.pdf

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

- Talk with the school’s mental health contact about your concerns. He or she may decide to obtain information about the student from other school staff to determine how best to help the student.
- Reach out to the student and ask how he or she is doing. Listen without judging. You could mention changes you have noticed in his or her behavior and that you are concerned. If the student is open to talking further with someone, suggest that he or she see the school mental health contact.

Whether or not the student sees a mental health provider, continue to stay connected with the student and pay attention to how he or she is doing. Also stay in touch with the school mental health contact as needed.

(Adapted from SPTS online course, 2012–2013)

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 result in an increased risk of suicide for vulnerable young people. Therefore, an essential part of any crisis or suicide prevention plan is responding appropriately to a tragedy that may put students at risk for suicide. This 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. These are described in [After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools](#), which is listed in the Resources section of this sheet.

Consider Getting Involved in Schoolwide Suicide Prevention

Identifying students at risk is a crucial part of a comprehensive approach to suicide prevention. As a teacher, you can also be involved in 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
- Policies and procedures for helping students at risk and in crisis
- Postvention
- Staff education and training
- Parent/guardian education and outreach
- Student programs
 - » Curricula for all students
 - » Skill-building for students at risk
 - » Peer leader programs
- Screening for at-risk students

For more information about a comprehensive school suicide prevention program, see [Preventing Suicide: A Toolkit for High Schools](#) in the Resources section.

Cultural Differences

Differences in cultural background can affect how students respond to problems, the behaviors they show, 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.

Helping Your Co-Workers

Suicide can occur among your co-workers as well as among students. If you notice signs of risk for suicide in your co-workers, you can assist them in receiving help too. For more information on helping them, see the Resources section, including the information sheet [The Role of Co-Workers in Suicide Prevention](#).

Resources

After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools

By the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and the Suicide Prevention Resource Center
Published 2011

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 responses to a suicide death of a student or staff person. It includes information about getting started, implementing crisis response actions, dealing with issues related to memorials, helping students cope, and working with social media and the community.

Best Practices Registry for Suicide Prevention (BPR)

Produced and maintained by the Suicide Prevention Resource Center and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

<http://www.sprc.org/bpr>

This registry contains information on approximately 100 suicide prevention programs, including student curricula and peer leader programs, gatekeeper trainings, and trainings for health and mental health professionals. Several documents provide guidance and recommendations that practitioners can use while developing programs, practices, or policies for their own settings.

Los Angeles County Youth Suicide Prevention Project

<http://preventsuicide.lacoe.edu/index.php>

The website of this project 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 at-risk populations and special issues in suicide prevention.

Preventing Suicide: A Toolkit for High Schools

By the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

<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.

Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide (SPTS)

<http://www.sptsusa.org>

Revised 2012–2013

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 Lifelines suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention programs, and the online course Making Educators Partners in Suicide Prevention for educators and school staff.

Suicide Warning Signs (wallet card)

By the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
Published 2011

http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/App_Files/Media/PDF/NSPL_WalletCard.pdf

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

By the Suicide Prevention Resource Center
First published 2006; partially updated 2011

<http://www.sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/CoWorkers.pdf>

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 Role of High School Mental Health Providers in Preventing Suicide

By the Suicide Prevention Resource Center
First published 2005; revised 2012

<http://www.sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/SchoolMentalHealth.pdf>

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.

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 a toll-free crisis phone line, 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 Maine Youth Suicide Prevention Program
Published 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 for schools to 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 Program (YSPP)

<http://www.yspp.org>

YSPP is a suicide prevention education program focusing on youth. It sponsors awareness trainings for communities and professionals and has produced curricula for elementary, middle, and high school students. The YSPP website includes fact sheets, awareness materials, resource lists for adults and youth, and special sections for LGBTQ youth.

Youth Suicide Prevention School-Based Guide

By Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, University of South Florida
Published 2003

<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 covered include administrative issues, risk and protective factors, prevention guidelines, intervention and postvention strategies, and school climate.

In addition to these resources, the School section of the SPRC online library has many other materials. Go to http://www.sprc.org/search/library/School?filters=type%3Alibrary_resource.

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