Suicide Prevention Resource Center

The Role of High School Mental Health Providers

Key Steps to Reduce Suicide Risk among Your Students:

Understand how suicide prevention fits with your role as a high school mental health provider

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

Ellen's English teacher told the school counselor, Ms. Thompson, that several of Ellen's class writing assignments indicated that she was under a lot of stress and might want to kill herself. Ms. Thompson asked Ellen to come in for a visit with her.

Ms. Thompson looked at a few of Ellen's writings and talked with her about how she was feeling. Next, Ms. Thompson conducted an assessment to determine Ellen's risk for suicide. After reviewing the results, she notified Ellen's parents that Ellen was clearly at risk. Then she took the following steps:

• Referred Ellen to a school support group for students dealing with a lot of stress

• Suggested she join an afterschool math tutoring program to get extra help

• Helped her make an appointment with a psychologist at a local community mental health center

During the next weeks, Ms. Thompson stayed in contact with Ellen to ensure that she was following through on the suggested steps and assist her as needed. She also encouraged Ellen to contact her at any time if she wanted to talk.

(Based on the experiences of a school psychologist)

This information sheet is for mental health staff who are responsible for handling student mental health crises, as designated by the school. For some schools, the mental health contact may need to be a service provider in the community. **All school staff should know who their school's main mental health contact is.**

Understand How Suicide Prevention Fits with Your Role as a Mental Health Provider

As a high school mental health provider, you have an important role to play. You are in a key position to:

- Observe students' behavior and act when you suspect that a student may be at risk for suicide

- Provide expertise, support, and information to teachers and other staff, students, and parents/legal guardians who may notice that a student is struggling

- Determine the next steps to take regarding a student's safety and treatment

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.

Identify Students Who May Be at Risk for Suicide

Be alert to 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

- Exposure to the suicide of another person

- Childhood abuse, neglect, or trauma

- 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.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
Call 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

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.

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. Talk with the student. Listen without judging and show you care.

2. Assess the student for risk of suicide and other forms of self-injury and/or arrange for a comprehensive risk assessment to be done as soon as possible.

3. Take away any potential method of harm, such as a knife or pills.

4. Do not leave the student alone (depending on the level of crisis, possibly not even in a restroom).

5. Collaborate with a supervisor, any other available behavioral health staff, and the school administration in making decisions about next steps.

6. Notify and involve the parents/legal guardians. They must always be notified when there appears to be any risk that a student may harm himself or herself, unless doing so would place the child in a dangerous situation. In the latter case, contact local child protective services.

7. Provide parents with any needed referrals to mental health resources. It is important to be sensitive to the family's culture, including attitudes towards suicide, mental health, privacy, and help-seeking.

8. Document all actions in order to ensure communication among school staff, parents, and service providers and to make sure the student gets needed services.

9. Follow up with the parents to determine how best to provide the student with support after the crisis.

10. In collaboration with a supervisor, decide what other school personnel should be notified about the student's elevated risk status (e.g., the student's teachers, a coach, the school nurse).

(Adapted from Los Angeles Unified School District, 2010, and SAMHSA, 2012)

For more detailed steps and tools for responding to a student at risk for suicide, see chapter two in *Preventing Suicide: A Toolkit for High Schools*, which is listed in the "Resources" section of this sheet. For trainings for mental health providers, see Assessing and Managing Suicide Risk and Recognizing and Responding to Suicide Risk: Essential Skills for Clinicians in the "Resources" section.

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*.

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*. In a school setting, recommended measures include:

- Grief counseling for students and staff, and support for yourself

- Identification of and support for students who may be put at risk by a traumatic incident

- Support for families

- Communication with the media to reduce the possibility of unsafe news coverage that could lead to additional suicides or emotional trauma

- Check-ins with students at risk at later times after the death, (e.g., within a month or on the anniversary of the death)

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 high school mental health provider, 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

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.

Assessing and Managing Suicide Risk: Core Competencies for Behavioral Health Professionals (AMSR)
By the Suicide Prevention Resource Center and the American Association of Suicidology
(Revised April 2019)
http://www.sprc.org/training-institute/amsr
This is a one-day curriculum for mental health professionals. It combines lecture, video demonstrations, and exercises to learn to effectively assess suicide risk, plan treatment, and manage ongoing care of clients at risk. Trainings are sponsored by community groups and facilitated by AMSR's nationwide roster of expert faculty.

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 Teachers
By the Suicide Prevention Resource Center (revised 2019)
http://www.sprc.org/resources-programs/role-high-school-teachers-preventing-suicide-sprc-customized-information-page
This information sheet helps high school teachers recognize and respond to the warning signs and risk factors for suicide in their students.

Recognizing & Responding to Suicide Risk: Essential Skills for Clinicians (RRSR)
By the American Association of Suicidology (2006)
http://www.suicidology.org/training-accreditation/rrsr
This is an advanced two-day interactive training for mental health clinicians. It covers the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to effectively assess, manage, and treat individuals at risk for suicide. Instruction consists of an initial web-based assessment, followed by a two-day, face-to-face classroom workshop, and an online post-workshop mentorship. Training is delivered by RRSR master trainers based throughout the United States.

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

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Revised May 2019

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