

# The Role of High School Mental Health Providers in Preventing Suicide



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

Over the next weeks, Ms. Thompson stayed in contact with Ellen to ensure that she was following through on the interventions and to 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 that the school has designated as being responsible for handling student mental health crises. For some schools, the mental health contact may need to be a service provider in the community. It is important that all school staff know who the main mental health contact person is.**

## Understand Why Suicide Prevention Fits with Your Role as a High School Mental Health Provider

As a 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 of self-harm

## Key Steps to Reduce Suicide Risk among Students:

- Understand why 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



- Provide needed expertise, support, and information to teachers, other school staff, students, and parents who may notice that one of their students, peers, or children is having difficulties but may not know what to do about it
- 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.

- 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.

**Identify Students Who May Be at Risk for Suicide**

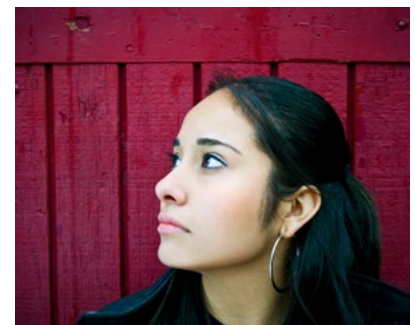
***Be alert to problems that increase suicide risk***

You may notice problems facing your students that may put them at risk for suicide. There are a large number of risk factors for suicide. Some of the most significant ones are:

- Prior suicide attempt(s)
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Mood and anxiety disorders, e.g., depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Access to a means to kill oneself, i.e., lethal means

Suicide risk is usually greater among people with more than one risk factor. For individuals who are already at risk, a “triggering” event causing shame or despair may make them more likely to attempt suicide. These events may include problems in school (academic and/or discipline), family problems or abuse, relationship problems or break-ups, bullying, and legal difficulties. Even though most people with risk factors will not attempt suicide, they should be evaluated by a professional.

(Adapted from Rodgers, 2011 and SPRC, 2008)



## ***Look for signs of immediate risk for suicide***

There are some behaviors that may mean a person is at immediate risk for suicide. These three should prompt you to take action right away:

- **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 a Student 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. 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.
3. Take away any potential method of harm, such as a knife or pills.
4. Do not leave the student alone (not even in a restroom).
5. Collaborate with the school administration and any other available behavioral health staff 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. It is important to be sensitive to the family's culture, including attitudes towards suicide, mental health, privacy, and help-seeking.

### ***National Suicide Prevention Lifeline***

The Lifeline is a 24-hour toll-free phone line for people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress. The phone number is 1-800-273-TALK (8255). For a Lifeline wallet-sized card listing the warning signs of suicide and the toll-free number, go to <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/getinvolved/materials.aspx>



7. Provide parents with any needed referrals to mental health resources.
8. Document all actions 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.

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

### ***Reach out to a student who may be at risk***

The steps above are an appropriate response to a student showing immediate warning signs of suicide. To help the many other students who may be at risk for suicide, take the steps below:

- Talk with the student. Listen without judging and show you care.
- Assess the student for risk of suicide and other forms of self-injury.
- If the student needs further help, contact his or her parents and take the steps listed in the section above as they are appropriate to the situation.

For more detailed steps and tools for responding to a student at risk of suicide, see chapter 2 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.

### ***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*. In a school setting, recommended measures include:

- Grief counseling for students and staff, and support for yourself
- Identification of students who may be put at risk by a traumatic incident
- Support for students at risk
- 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 about postvention, see *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*, which is listed in the Resources section.

### ***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 faith community leader or traditional healer.

### ***Helping Your Colleagues***

Suicide can occur among your colleagues as well as among students. If you notice signs of risk for suicide in your colleagues, 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*.

## Consider Becoming Involved in Schoolwide Suicide Prevention

Identifying students at risk is a crucial part of a comprehensive approach to suicide prevention. As a school mental health provider, 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.

## Resources

### *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*

By the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and the Suicide Prevention Resource Center (2011)

[http://www.sprc.org/library\\_resources/items/after-suicide-toolkit-schools](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.

### *Assessing and Managing Suicide Risk: Core Competencies for Mental Health Professionals (AMSR)*

By the Suicide Prevention Resource Center and the American Association of Suicidology (revised October 2008)

<http://www.sprc.org/training-institute/amr>

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 the at-risk client. 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 Page, SAMHSA's National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices (NREPP), and other program registries and lists, as well as suggestions for selecting programs.



### ***Los Angeles County Youth Suicide Prevention Project***

<http://preventsuicide.lacoe.edu>

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 (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.

### ***Recognizing and 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 Lifelines suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention programs, and the online course *Making Educators Partners in Suicide Prevention* 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 workshop kit provides all the materials necessary 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://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/getinvolved/materials.aspx>

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 (revised 2013)

<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 Teachers in Preventing Suicide***

By the Suicide Prevention Resource Center (revised 2013)

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

This information sheet helps high school teachers recognize and respond to the warning signs and risk factors for suicide in their 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 (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 School-Based Guide***

By 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 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/settings/schools>.

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