

# 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 Tia 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.

(Based on the experiences of a school psychologist)

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

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).

## Key Steps to Reduce Suicide Risk among Your Students:

- Understand why 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



### *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 (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.



## **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*

Some behaviors may indicate 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 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 of suicide. To help the many other students who may be at risk for suicide, you can take one or both of the following steps, depending on what feels most comfortable to you:

- 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.

### ***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.suicidpreventionlifeline.org/getinvolved/materials.aspx>

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.

Whether or not the student sees a mental health provider, continue to stay in contact 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 Becoming 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.

### ***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 obtaining 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 (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.

### ***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.

### ***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 Mental Health Providers in Preventing Suicide***

By the Suicide Prevention Resource Center (2013)

<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 (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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#### **Suicide Prevention Resource Center**

web: <http://www.sprc.org> • e-mail: [info@sprc.org](mailto:info@sprc.org) • phone: 877-GET-SPRC (438-7772)