Your Role in Preventing Youth Suicide

Identify Students Who May Be at Risk for Suicide

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:

- Depression (and other mood and anxiety disorders)
- Prior suicide attempt(s)
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Access to a means to kill oneself

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.

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 or administrator.
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.

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
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Reach Out to a Student who May Be At Risk

If a student isn’t displaying immediate warning signs but you believe he/she may be at risk, you can still help. 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.

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.

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.

The National Suicide Prevention 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). If you are concerned about a student, colleague or friend, call the Lifeline. Help is always available.

Adapted from SPRC’s Fact Sheet: The Role of High School Teachers in Preventing Suicide Suicide Prevention Resource Center
http://www.sprc.org • e-mail: info@sprc.org • phone: 877-GET-SPRC (438-7772)