The Role of Teachers in Preventing Suicide

If you are thinking of hurting yourself, or if you are concerned that someone else may be suicidal, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

Marianne is a middle school teacher. One of her students, David, began the year as a quiet, subdued, and passive young man. He did his work, but he did not participate in class or interact with the other students. Recently, David has undergone what, to Marianne, seems like a dramatic change in personality: He can barely stay in his seat, is uncooperative, has lost interest in his work, and gets angry easily. Last week, Marianne saw him punch a locker.

Marianne decided to speak with some of David’s other teachers. She discovered that they had noticed similar problems, along with a decline in the quality of his school work.

Marianne spoke to the school counselor, who suggested that David come in for an appointment. Marianne told David that she was concerned about him and that she thought he might benefit from talking to someone. She walked him to the counseling office while he made an appointment, and she called the counselor later to make sure that he kept it.

Did Marianne prevent a suicide? There is a good possibility that neither she, nor the school counselor, nor her student, David, can ever really be sure. But Marianne noticed a student with problems and took effective action. In doing so, she demonstrated concern and assisted a troubled student in getting help. And she may have saved a life.
Table of Contents

Introduction........................................................................................................................... 3
Recognizing the Warning Signs............................................................................................... 3
Responding to the Warning Signs........................................................................................... 5
Postvention.............................................................................................................................. 7
References............................................................................................................................... 8
School-Based Suicide Prevention Programs and Materials.................................................... 9

The Role of Teachers in Preventing Suicide
Introduction
Suicide is the third leading cause of death among children, teens, and young adults ages 10 to 24. About 4,300 young people in this age range die by suicide each year (CDC, 2007). But this is only the tip of the iceberg. Every year, approximately 118,000 young people ages 15-24 are brought to emergency rooms to receive treatment for self-inflicted injuries (CDC, 2009a). A recent national survey (CDC, 2009b) revealed that in the 12 months preceding the survey:

- almost 13.8 percent of high school students had seriously considered attempting suicide
- 10.9 percent of high school students had made a plan for how they would attempt suicide
- 6.3 percent of high school students had attempted suicide one or more times

Very few of these suicides, or suicide attempts, take place in schools. But many young people who are at risk of suicide attend school and exhibit warning signs that, if recognized and acted on, could prevent death or injury and reduce emotional suffering.

As a teacher, 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 well-positioned to observe students’ behavior and to act when you suspect that a student may be at risk of self-harm. There are specific steps you can take to identify and help young people at risk, especially if your school has created a structure that can support your personal efforts to safeguard the health and safety of its students.

Recognizing the Warning Signs
Suicide and other self-destructive behaviors rarely occur without some warning signs. You, perhaps even more than parents of teens, can assess what is “normal” adolescent behavior and what may be an indication that something is wrong.

Here are some signs that a young person may be at risk for suicide:

- **A suddenly deteriorating academic performance.** Teens who were typically conscientious about their school work and who are now neglecting assignments, cutting classes, or missing school altogether may be experiencing problems that can affect their academic success, behavior, and health and put them at risk of suicide.

- **Self-mutilation.** Some young people resort to cutting their arms or legs with razor blades and other sharp objects to cope with emotional pain. Self-mutilation of this type is an unmistakable sign that something is wrong.

- **A fixation with death or violence.** Teens may express this fixation through poetry, essays, doodling, or other artwork. They may be preoccupied with violent movies, video games, and music, or fascinated with weapons.

- **Unhealthy peer relationships.** Teens whose circle of friends dramatically changes for no apparent reason, who don’t have friends, or who begin associating with other young people known for substance abuse or other risk behaviors may signal a change in their emotional lives. Their destructive behaviors may discourage more stable friends from associating with them, or they themselves may reject former friends who “don’t understand [them] anymore.”
- **Volatile mood swings or a sudden change in personality.** Students who become sullen, silent, and withdrawn, or angry and acting out, may have problems that can lead to suicide.

- **Indications that the student is in an unhealthy, destructive, or abusive relationship.** This can include abusive relationships with peers or family members. Signs of an abusive relationship include unexplained bruises, a swollen face, or other injuries, particularly if the student refuses to discuss them.

- **Risk-taking behaviors.** Risk-taking behaviors often co-occur and are symptomatic of underlying emotional or social problems. Such behaviors as unprotected or promiscuous sex, alcohol or other drug use, driving recklessly or without a license, petty theft, or vandalism, especially by young people who formerly did not engage in these activities, can be an indication that something is wrong.

- **Signs of an eating disorder.** An eating disorder is an unmistakable sign that a student needs help. A dramatic change in weight that is not associated with a medically supervised diet may also indicate that something is wrong.

- **Difficulty in adjusting to gender identity.** Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender teens have higher suicide attempt rates than their heterosexual peers. While coming to terms with gender identity can be challenging for many young people, gay and lesbian youth face social pressures that can make this adjustment especially difficult.

- **Bullying.** Children and adolescents who are bullied, as well as those who bully, are at increased risk of depression and suicidal ideation (Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpela, Marttunen, Rimpela, & Rantanen, 1999).

- **Depression.** Although most people who are clinically depressed do not attempt suicide, depression significantly increases the risk of suicide or suicide attempts. Symptoms of depression include the following:
  - A sudden worsening in academic performance
  - Withdrawal from friends and extracurricular activities
  - Expressions of sadness and hopelessness, or anger and rage
  - A sudden decline in enthusiasm and energy
  - Overreaction to criticism
  - Lowered self-esteem, or feelings of guilt
  - Indecision, lack of concentration, and forgetfulness
  - Restlessness and agitation
  - Changes in eating or sleeping patterns
  - Unprovoked episodes of crying
  - Sudden neglect of appearance and hygiene
  - Fatigue
  - The abuse of alcohol or other drugs as young people try to “self-medicate” their emotional pain

---

**The Role of Teachers in Preventing Suicide**
The following warning signs may mean someone is at high risk for suicide. The risk is greater if a behavior is new or has increased and if it seems related to a painful event, loss, or change.

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

These signs are especially critical if the individual has attempted suicide in the past or has a history of or current problem with depression, alcohol, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

**Responding to the Warning Signs**

It takes time and courage to reach out to students on a personal level, but your interest can be a lifeline to a child in crisis. Young people, especially those with emotional or family troubles, need support, and school can be a vital part of that support. School may be the last positive social connection for young people from dysfunctional families or who are isolated from their peers.

When you observe behavior that indicates that there is a problem—whether the student is acting out, withdrawing, committing destructive or aggressive acts toward himself or herself or others, or exhibiting a fixation with death or morbid themes—take note and take action. Consult with your school counselor, principal, or nurse to ensure appropriate and quick assessment and treatment.

Many of the same signs that a student is at risk of suicide can also indicate that the student is at risk of (or is already experiencing) other problems, including emotional distress, mental illness (such as depression or bipolar disorder), violence, domestic violence or child abuse, academic failure, running away from home, or the abuse of alcohol or other drugs. You cannot always tell exactly what may be troubling a student and what the outcomes of these troubles may be. But you can be aware of when something is wrong and take steps to get the student the type of help he or she needs. Below are some of the steps you can take to help students who may be at risk of suicide or of other problems that threaten their well-being.
Ask the Tough Questions

Do not be afraid to ask a student if he or she has considered suicide or other self-destructive acts. Research has shown that asking someone if he or she has contemplated self-harm or suicide will not increase that person’s risk. Rather, studies have shown that a person in mental distress is often relieved that someone cares enough to inquire about the person’s well-being. Your concern can counter the person’s sense of hopelessness and helplessness. However, you need to be prepared to ask some very specific and difficult questions in a manner that doesn’t judge or threaten the young person you are attempting to help. For example:

- I’ve noticed that you are going through some rough times. Do you ever wish you could go to sleep and never wake up?
- Sometimes when people feel sad, they have thoughts of harming or killing themselves. Have you had such thoughts?
- Are you thinking about killing yourself?

Be Persistent

A student may feel threatened by your concern. The student may become upset or deny that he or she is having problems. Be consistent and firm, and make sure that the student gets the help that he or she may need.

Be Prepared to Act

You need to know what to do if you believe that a student is in danger of harming him- or herself. Many schools have procedures for this situation. If your school has such procedures, explain them to the student.

Do Not Leave a Student at Imminent Risk of Suicide Alone

If you have any reason to suspect that a student may attempt suicide or otherwise engage in self-harm, you need to remain with the student (or see that the student is in a secure environment, supervised by caring adults) until professional help can be obtained. The student’s well-being supercedes any promises of confidentiality you may have made to the student. Let the student know that you care, that he or she is not alone, and that you are there to help.

Get Help When Needed

If you believe that the student is in imminent danger, you, or another member of the school staff, should call 911 or (800) 273-TALK (8255). Tell the dispatcher that you are concerned that the person with you “is a danger to [himself or herself]” or “cannot take care of [himself or herself].” These key phrases will alert the dispatcher to locate immediate care for this person with the help of police. Do not hesitate to make this call if you suspect that someone may be a danger to himself or herself. It could save that person’s life.

Use Your School’s Support System

School districts typically have crisis policies for working with suicidal or violent students, students who are at risk of suicide or violence, or other youngsters who are not in this acute state of crisis but still need support to stay in school and stay healthy. Familiarize yourself with these policies and programs and use them when appropriate. If your school does not have such a policy in place, see “Create a comprehensive school crisis plan,” below.
Connect with Parents or Guardians

If a troubled student opens up to you about self-destructive thoughts or actions, contact that student’s parents or legal guardian. Do not promise confidentiality to a child when it comes to issues regarding the child’s safety—but always talk privately with a student before letting others know of your concerns for the student’s safety. If you believe that contacting the parents or guardians may further endanger the child (if, for example, you suspect physical or sexual abuse), contact the proper authorities. In most states, teachers are “mandated reporters” and are required to report suspected child abuse.

Postvention

The suicide, or violent or unexpected death, of a student, teacher, or even a celebrity can result in an increased risk of suicide for vulnerable young people. Although rare, a suicide in the community (or even a remote suicide that receives substantial press coverage) can also contribute to an increased risk of suicide. Therefore, responding appropriately to a tragedy that may put students at risk for suicide is an essential part of any crisis or suicide prevention plan.

Postvention describes the prevention measures implemented after a crisis or traumatic event to reduce the risk for suicide to those who have witnessed or been affected by the tragedy. These measures include:

- Grief counseling for students and staff
- 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 ensure that news coverage of such an event does not lead to additional suicides or emotional trauma

The Role of Teachers in Preventing Suicide
References


Resources for Teachers
Publications


The Role of Teachers in Preventing Suicide
School-Based Suicide Prevention Programs and Materials

Columbia University TeenScreen Program
(http://www.teenscreen.org/). TeenScreen helps schools and communities implement screening programs to identify at-risk teens and pre-teens. It uses simple screening tools that can detect depression, the risk of suicide, and other mental disorders in teens to help schools identify and arrange treatment for youth who are suffering from depression and other undiagnosed mental illness and those who are at risk of suicide.

Guidelines for School-based Suicide Prevention Programs
(http://www.sprc.org/library/aasguide_school.pdf). This 14-page report, written by the Prevention Division of the American Association of Suicidology in 1999, examines the bases of and requirements for school-based prevention programs in general, as well as for three variations of school-based suicide prevention programs: those for all students, those for groups of at-risk students as identified by research (i.e., incoming high school freshmen), and those for individual students identified through screening. It explores the essential components of and a sample curriculum for a comprehensive school-based suicide prevention program. The report also provides recommendations to ensure the longevity of programs once they are implemented.

Jason Foundation, Inc.
(http://www.jasonfoundation.com). The Jason Foundation, Inc., educates young people, parents, teachers, and others who work with young people about youth suicide. The foundation offers programs, seminars, and support materials on suicide awareness and prevention.

SOS Signs of Suicide Program
(http://www.mentalhealthscreening.org/highschool/). The SOS Signs of Suicide program provides school health professionals with the educational materials necessary to replicate this program, which teaches high school students to recognize the signs and symptoms of suicide and depression in themselves and others and to follow specific action steps to respond to those signs. The program can be incorporated into an existing health curriculum or can be used as a stand-alone program. The program includes educational materials, a training video, and an implementation manual, and can be completed in one or two class periods.

Yellow Ribbon International Suicide Prevention Program
(http://www.yellowribbon.org/). This organization provides training and resources for school- and community-based suicide prevention programs (including gatekeeping). Chapters in a number of states can provide suicide prevention speakers, materials, and training to schools and other organizations.

(http://www.maine.gov/suicide/docs/Guidelines%202010-2009%20%20discl.pdf). These guidelines were developed by the Maine Youth Suicide Prevention Program and designed for schools to use within existing protocols to assist at-risk students and to intervene appropriately in a suicide-related crisis.

Youth Suicide Prevention School-Based Guide
(http://theguide.fmhi.usf.edu/). This online resource was developed by the Florida Mental Health Institute at the University of South Florida. It provides a framework for schools to assess their existing or proposed suicide prevention efforts (through a series of checklists) and provides resources and information that school administrators can use to enhance or add to their existing program. Information is offered in a series of issue briefs corresponding to a specific checklist. Each brief offers a rationale for the importance of the specific topic together with a brief overview of the key points. The briefs also offer specific strategies that have proven to work in reducing the incidence of suicide, with references that schools can use to explore these issues in greater detail.

The Role of Teachers in Preventing Suicide
**Suicide Prevention Gatekeeping Programs**

Livingworks Education, Inc. ([http://www.livingworks.net/](http://www.livingworks.net/)). Livingworks provides training and support for the Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) program, a suicide gatekeeping program. Livingworks also offers shorter presentations on suicide awareness and prevention.

Preventing Youth Suicide Through Gatekeeper Training: A Resource Book for Gatekeepers ([http://www.maine.gov/suicide/docs/gkeepbook.pdf](http://www.maine.gov/suicide/docs/gkeepbook.pdf)). This book was designed for use in youth suicide prevention gatekeeper trainings and to provide basic information about suicide prevention, crisis intervention, support for survivors of suicide, and suicide prevention resources. The book was created for the Maine Youth Suicide Prevention Program.

QPR Institute ([http://www.qprinstitute.com](http://www.qprinstitute.com)). The QPR Institute offers gatekeeper training programs to the general public and to professionals, including firefighters, clergy, and teachers.

**Crisis Response and Postvention**


**Bullying Prevention Websites**


For national organizations and federal agencies with general resources on suicide prevention, go to [http://www.sprc.org/basics/national-organizations](http://www.sprc.org/basics/national-organizations).

---

**You may reproduce and distribute the fact sheets as long as you retain SPRC’s copyright information and website address.**


---

The Role of Teachers in Preventing Suicide