



## The Role of School Employees in Preventing Suicide

### Understand why Suicide Prevention fits with your role as a School Employee

- Suicide touches everyone—all ages and incomes; all racial, ethnic and religious groups: and all parts of the country.
- Suicide is the 2<sup>nd</sup> leading cause of death for Middle and High School Age youth (ages 12-18 (CDC, 2013).
- More teenagers and young adults die from suicide than from cancer, heart disease, AIDS, birth defects, stroke, pneumonia, influenza, and chronic lung disease, **COMBINED**.
- Each day in our nation, there are an average of over 5,400 attempts by young people grades 7-12.
- **Four** out of **Five** teens who attempt suicide have given clear warning signs.

*In many instances, School Employees are able to make a difference in fostering the emotional well-being of students **simply by helping to promote a feeling of connectedness and belonging within the school community.***

However, there is Help and Hope when individuals, schools, and communities join forces to address suicide as a preventable public health problem.

As a School Employee, you are in regular contact with many young people, some of whom may be experiencing personal problems that could result in serious injury or even death by their own hand. This places you in an ideal position to observe student behavior and to act when you suspect that a student may be at risk of self-harm.

### Know 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. Warning signs that a student may be at risk for suicide include:

- |  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| - Sudden changes in academic performance               | -Changes in peer relationships  | -Difficulty in adjusting to gender identify |
| - Self-mutilation                                      | -Indication that the student is in an unhealthy, destructive, or abusive relationship | -Bullying                                   |
| - Fixation with death or violence                      |   | -History of Depression                      |
| - Volatile mood swings or sudden change in personality | -Risk-taking behaviors  |   |
|  | -signs of an eating disorder  |   |

## More about 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

## Warning Signs continued

A student who displays the following warning signs may indicate that they are at **high risk for suicide**. The risk is greater if a behavior is new or has increased and if it seems related to an event, loss, or change that causes shame or feelings of desperation.

- 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 previously attempted suicide or is known to have or have had a problem with depression, alcohol, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

## Responding to the Warning Signs

When you observe behavior that indicates that there is a problem that may threaten a student's well being, take note and take action. It is also advised that you consult with your school counselor, principal or nurse to ensure appropriate and quick assessment and treatment.

### Steps you can take to help students

- **Acknowledge the student and express your concern for their wellbeing**

Studies have shown that a person in mental distress is often relieved that someone cares enough to inquire about their well-being. Your concern could counter the person's sense of despair

- **Be Persistent**

Be aware that a student may feel threatened or embarrassed by your concern and 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

- **Never leave a student alone if they are at imminent risk of suicide**

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 supersedes 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

- **Be Prepared to Act**

If you believe that the student is in imminent danger, you, with the assistance of your school principal or counselor, if available, should **call 911** or the **Suicide Prevention Lifeline ((800) 273-TALK (8255))**

Tell the dispatcher that you are concerned that the person with you **"is a danger to [him/herself]"** or **"cannot take care of [him/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.

*It takes time and courage to develop personal connections with students, but your interest can be a lifeline to a child in crisis. For some individuals, school may be their only positive social connection*



As members of the Monongalia County School community, it is our duty and responsibility to take action when there is knowledge or suspicion that a student may harm him/herself. Although staff is advised to adhere to principles of confidentiality established under FERPA, confidentiality may be breached when a student is a threat to oneself or others.

## Additional Resources

### West Virginia Specific Resources

- WV DHHR, Suicide Prevention Resource - <http://www.dhhr.wv.gov/bhhf/resources/Pages/Suicide.aspx>
- WV Suicide Prevention Resources Center - <http://www.sprc.org/states/west-virginia>
- Monongalia County Schools Suicide Prevention Page - [http://boe.mono.k12.wv.us/district\\_info/divisions/pupil\\_services/school\\_counseling/suicide\\_prevention\\_resources/](http://boe.mono.k12.wv.us/district_info/divisions/pupil_services/school_counseling/suicide_prevention_resources/)

### 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](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.
- Youth Suicide Prevention. Intervention, and Postvention Guidelines: A Resource For School Personnel** (<http://www.maine.gov/suicide/docs/Guidelines%2010-2009--w%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.