School Mental Health Communities of Practice

Suicide Prevention, Intervention, and Postvention in Schools

Suicide, particularly in teens, is a public health crisis.

- **Suicide** is the **second leading cause of death** for young people ages 10-24.
- In Ohio, **most** youths who die by suicide **are male and** non-Hispanic **Whites**.
- Among Ohio high school students, **14% seriously considered attempting suicide**.
- Among Ohio high school students, **6% reported attempting suicide**.
- **26%** of high school students in Ohio reported **feeling so sad or hopeless** they stopped doing usual activities.
- **On average, every high school will have 1 student complete suicide every 5 years**.
- Rate of suicide is **4 times higher for lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth** compared to heterosexual youth.
- **20%** of adolescents have some **diagnosable mental health disorder**.
- **90% of all people who die by suicide had at least one mental health disorder**.

School personnel can recognize the signs and symptoms that someone may be experiencing suicidal thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Signs and symptoms of suicidal ideation, along with actions you can take to help, include:

- ***Withdrawing from friends and family members***: Reach out to children and adolescents who are becoming increasingly isolated or seem like they do not have strong personal connections.
- ***Secrecy***: If a young person is hiding a phone, computer, internet history, drawings, writings, etc., understand that this may be a sign that they are experiencing a mental health crisis.
- ***Disconnecting from formerly enjoyed activities***: Pay attention when a young person disconnects and/or ceases taking part in activities without anything to replace them.
- ***Extreme reactions to poor feedback/performance in school***: Notice students who exhibit signs of perfectionism, high anxiety, or extreme negative reactions regarding their academics, as these signs may be cause for concern.
- ***Expressing suicidal thoughts***: Do NOT ignore these comments as they may be a sign of something more serious, particularly if they are used consistently.
- ***Verbal, Behavioral, and Situational Cues:*** Connect with students who display these cues.
    - *Direct verbal cues*
        - "I wish I were dead"
        - "I am going to end it all"
    - *Indirect verbal cues*
        - "I'm tired of life, I just can't go on"
        - "My family would be better off without me"
        - "Who cares if I'm dead anyway"

Citation: Project AWARE Ohio (2017). Teen suicide: Prevention, intervention, and postvention (Information Brief). Retrieved from: http://resources.oberlinkconsulting.com/uploads/infobriefs/Teen_Suicide_Prevention_Info_Brief.pdf

- o *Behavioral cues*
  - Previous suicide attempt
  - Acquiring means (such as pills, weapons, etc.)
  - Giving away possessions
  - Drug abuse or relapse
  - Increased apathy
  - Physical symptoms (change in appearance, change in sleep patterns, headaches)
  - *Sudden* improvement in mood or optimism (can occur when an individual has made a decision to attempt suicide and feels 'at peace' with that decision)
- o *Situational cues*
  - Being expelled from school or fired from a job
  - Victim of assault
  - Death of someone close, especially by suicide
  - Public shame to family or self

School staff can understand the important role they play in preventing suicide.

There are a large number of resources available to schools for education and outreach for their students (see below). Resources and programming are often broken down into three tiers: prevention, intervention, and postvention. Each has its own unique definition and time of use. Combined, they can create a comprehensive protocol for schools to work with their staff, students, and families to maintain a safe and healthy environment in their buildings and communities.

- **Prevention:** This focuses on awareness of signs, symptoms, and deviation from normal adolescent development. Direct impact of prevention services allows for screening and identification of students suffering from mental health disorders and referring them to mental health services within and/or outside of the school. Screening can be done through a number of evidence-based practices, such as Signs of Suicide (see resources section below) and administered by a variety of school personnel. Identification can happen either through these screening tools or through a school-wide awareness of the signs and symptoms of suicide. More members of the school staff knowing about what behaviors indicate a student may be suicidal leads to more people being able to refer that student to the help needed.
- **Intervention:** The focus of this tier of services is to help a student who is at high risk of suicide, has previously attempted suicide, or attempts suicide on school property. Intervention can be complicated for schools as teachers and school staff must respect legal and ethical boundaries for students. Training school staff on how to appropriately handle crisis situations, inform parents, maintain the safety of other students, and get the student in crisis to the help needed is crucial for safe and healthy school environments. These types of trainings are often referred to as "Gatekeeper Training" (e.g., MHFA, QPR, and/or Kognito; see resources below).
- **Postvention:** Postvention begins after a school or community has lost a young person to suicide. Having a plan in place before a crisis happens allows the school staff to have set procedures and expectations, easing the response process during a difficult time. Small details, such as what to do with the student's desk or locker, should be incorporated into postvention planning. Using effective postvention planning can help students feel secure in times of crisis. To bolster postvention supports, reach out to state LOSS teams – they can serve as a liaison between families, local law enforcement, and the school (see OSPF website – listed below).

Citation: Project AWARE Ohio (2017). Teen suicide: Prevention, intervention, and postvention (Information Brief). Retrieved from: http://resources.oberlinkconsulting.com/uploads/infobriefs/Teen_Suicide_Prevention_Info_Brief.pdf

Suicide Prevention Resources

- **After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools:**
  http://www.sprc.org/sites/default/files/migrate/library/AfteraSuicideToolkitforSchools.pdf
- **American Foundation for Suicide Prevention:** The *More than Sad* program offers prevention education for students, parents, and teachers: https://afsp.org/our-work/education/more-than-sad/
- **Children's Safety Network: Youth Suicide and Self-Harm Prevention: 2017 Resource Guide:** https://www.childrenssafetynetwork.org/resources/youth-suicide-self-harm-prevention-2017-resource-guide
- **Crisis Text Line:** *Text "4HOPE" to 741741* to receive a response from a live, trained volunteer within 5 minutes ("Code Orange" – more severe texts – are handled in an average of 1.8 minutes). Volunteers can then help the texter move from a moment of crisis to a calmer place.
- **Kognito (Suicide Prevention Foundation):** At-risk trainings and simulations for students and school staff in elementary through high school grade levels: https://ohio.kognito.com/
  - Using this link allows all Ohioans to access these resources for free until 2020 – provided by the Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation.
- **Mental Health First Aid:** Offers both youth and adult courses for prevention and intervention: https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/take-a-course/course-types/youth/
- **Mindpeace: Suicide, Education, Research, Advocacy (SERA):** http://mindpeacecincinnati.com/suicide/
- **National Children's Hospital Center for Suicide Prevention & Research:** http://www.nationwidechildrens.org/suicide-research
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: Lifeline Online Prevention Manual:** http://www.sprc.org/sites/default/files/migrate/library/LifelineOnlinePostventionManual.pdf
- **Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation:** Free training and education resources, coalition contact information, LOSS team contact information, and up-to-date statistics and news: http://www.ohiospf.org/
- **Preventing Suicide: A Toolkit for High Schools:** https://store.samhsa.gov/product/Preventing-Suicide-A-Toolkit-for-High-Schools/SMA12-4669
- **Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR):** Three steps anyone can learn to help prevent suicide. https://qprinstitute.com/
- **Red Flags:** Prevention and intervention: http://www.redflags.org
- **Signs of Suicide:** Prevention (focused on screening and identification), intervention, and postvention: https://www.mindwise.org/what-we-offer/suicide-prevention-programs/
- **Sandy Hook Promise:** Offers their "Know the Signs" programming for both youth and adults at no cost. Programs include Start With Hello, Say Something, Signs of Suicide, and Safety Assessment and Intervention: http://www.sandyhookpromise.org
- **Suicide Prevention Resource Center:** http://www.sprc.org

Citation: Project AWARE Ohio (2017). Teen suicide: Prevention, intervention, and postvention (Information Brief). Retrieved from: http://resources.oberlinkconsulting.com/uploads/infobriefs/Teen_Suicide_Prevention_Info_Brief.pdf