

YOUTH SUICIDE: HELPING YOUR STUDENT

Suicide is preventable and school personnel make a difference. School personnel spend more time with our youth than any other professionals, and often, more time than parents. School staff members are in the position to be suicide prevention gatekeepers and can save lives.

Schools must demonstrate “good faith” efforts to prevent suicide. In Idaho, with the exception of school counselors and psychologists, duty to warn for school personnel is limited to situations when there is a known suicidal tendency. School counselors and psychologists are not limited in this way and always have a duty to warn in all cases.

WHY SUICIDE PREVENTION IS IMPORTANT

- In the last five years, Idaho has lost 83 school-aged children to suicide; 14 of those were under age 15.
- 1 in 7 Idaho high school students has seriously considered suicide; 1 in every 8 has a suicide plan and 1 in 14 has made a suicide attempt.
- 97% of Idaho middle and high school counselors and social workers have experienced a suicidal student.

PROMOTE BELONGINGNESS AND CAPABILITY

*Teachers and other school personnel can also play an active role in prevention by fostering the emotional sense of well-being among all students, not just those already at risk. Teachers are well positioned to **promote feelings of connectedness, belonging and capability** which research shows are essential to preventing suicide.*

LEARN THE WARNING SIGNS. Simply knowing the warning signals for suicide can save a life.

Most suicidal people give some of the clues and warning signs listed here. By learning the warning signs, paying attention and trusting your own judgment, you can make the difference between life and death. Warning signs include:

- Previous suicide attempts
- Talking about, making a plan or threatening suicide
- Withdrawal or isolation from friends, family or activities
- Changed eating habits or sleeping patterns
- Agitation, especially when combined with sleeplessness
- Giving away prized possessions, making final arrangements, putting affairs in order
- Themes of death or depression in conversation, writing, reading or art
- Recent loss of a friend or family member through death, suicide or divorce
- Feeling hopeless or trapped
- Sudden dramatic decline or improvement in schoolwork
- Major mood swings or abrupt personality changes
- Use or increased use of drugs and/or alcohol
- Chronic headaches and stomach aches, fatigue
- Neglect of personal appearance
- Taking unnecessary risks or acting reckless
- No longer interested in favorite activities or hobbies

Any one of these signs alone doesn't necessarily indicate a person is suicidal. However, **all signs are reason for concern** and **several signals may be cause for concern of suicide**. Warning signs are especially important if the person has attempted suicide in the past.

TAKE IMMEDIATE ACTION IF YOU SEE:

- Talking about wanting to die or kill oneself
- Seeking a way to kill oneself, e.g., obtaining a gun
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live

BE AWARE OF RISK FACTORS.

Risk factors include: **Pressures** such as unrealistic academic, social or family expectations can create a strong sense of rejection and can lead to deep disappointment. Teens and young adults are especially prone to feelings of loneliness, hopelessness and rejection as a result of these pressures.

Depression in young people is increasing at an alarming rate and can be difficult to detect in young people. It is extremely important that depressed youth receive prompt, professional treatment. Keep in mind that depression in young men often appears as anger, rage, aggression and getting into fights.

Abuse of Alcohol, Drugs or Sex is a way that some young people cope with feelings of depression or loneliness. However, such behaviors only lead to new problems and a deeper level of depression.

Isolation or Withdrawal can also be a coping strategy for the suicidal youth making them even more susceptible to loneliness, depression and substance abuse.

OTHER GENERAL RISK FACTORS

- Mental disorders or substance use disorders
- Hopelessness
- History of trauma or abuse
- Family history of suicide
- Easy access to lethal means
- Local clusters of suicide that have a contagious influence
- Lack of social support

TAKE ACTION

If you encounter a student at immediate risk:

1. Supervise the student constantly (or make sure he/she is in a secure environment supervised by a caring adult) until he or she can be seen by a mental health contact.
2. Escort the student to see the counselor or other mental health contact.
3. Provide any additional information to the mental health contact that could help with the assessment process. That person should notify the parents.

BE PREPARED TO RESPOND TO A SUICIDE DEATH

The suicide death of a student, teacher, well-known community member or even a celebrity can result in an increased risk of suicide for vulnerable students. Appropriate response is critical. This response is often called postvention and is handled by school administration and mental health staff. For best practice postvention guidelines, visit the Schools page at spanidaho.org, click on Postvention.

MEANS MATTER

Suicide prevention experts assert that if deadly methods are not readily available a suicidal person may delay or not make an attempt. Parents of students at risk should be encouraged to remove firearms and lock up medications and toxins.

Idaho Suicide Prevention Hotline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

Much of the information here is courtesy of the Suicide Prevention Resource Center. Visit their website for more information on suicide prevention for schools at www.sprc.org, or visit SPAN Idaho at www.spanidaho.org.

