SUICIDAL BEHAVIOR IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

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Setting the Stage

- What are the common myths about suicide in children and adolescents?
- If I suspect my child is feeling suicidal, what should I do?
- How can schools and communities work together to prevent suicide?
Continuum of Suicidal Behavior

**Suicide** - Death caused by self-directed injurious behavior with any intent to die as a result of the behavior.

*Note: Terms “committed” suicide, “completed suicide” and “successful suicide” are not considered unacceptable; preferred terms are “death by suicide” or “died by suicide.”*

**Suicide attempt:** A non-fatal self-directed potentially injurious behavior (may or may not result in injury) with any intent to die as a result of the behavior.

**Suicidal ideation:** Thoughts of suicide that can range in severity from a vague wish to be dead to active suicidal ideation with a specific plan and intent.
Suicide is a Serious Problem

- Myth – Suicide in youth is not a problem
- Truth - Suicide in young people is a serious and prevalent problem:
  - 3rd leading cause of death for young people ages 10-24 and accounts for 20% of all deaths annually
  - Top methods used - firearms, suffocation, poisoning
Suicidal Behavior: A Serious Problem

- Boys are more likely than girls to die from suicide.
  - Of the reported suicides in the 10-24 age group, 81% were males.

- Girls attempt suicide more than boys, a particular problem for girls from Latina backgrounds.
Suicidal Behavior: A Serious Problem

Rates of other suicidal behavior are high according to a nationally-representative sample of high school students:

- 15.8% seriously considered attempting suicide
- 12.8% made a plan about how they would attempt suicide
- 7.8% attempted suicide one or more times
- 2.4% made a suicide attempt that resulted in an injury, poisoning, or an overdose that required medical attention
Risk and Protective Factors

- Risk factors – Increase likelihood that a young person will engage in suicidal behavior
  - Intraperonal, Social/situational, Cultural/environmental
- Protective factors – Mitigate or eliminate risk
  - Intraperonal, Social/situational, Cultural/environmental
- Consider the balance between the two
Risk Factors: Intrapersonal

- Recent or serious loss
- Mental disorders (particularly mood disorders)
- Hopelessness, helplessness, guilt, worthlessness
- Previous suicide attempt
- Alcohol and other substance use disorders
- Disciplinary problems
- High risk behaviors
- Sexual orientation confusion
Risk Factors: Social/Situational

- Recent or serious loss (e.g., death, divorce, separation, broken relationship; self-esteem; loss of interest in friends, hobbies, or activities previously enjoyed)
- Family history of suicide
- Witnessing family violence
- Child abuse or neglect
- Lack of social support
- Sense of isolation
- Victim of bullying or being a bully
Risk Factors: Cultural/Environmental

- Access to lethal means (i.e. firearms, pills)
- Stigma associated with asking for help
- Barriers to accessing services
  - Lack of bilingual service providers
  - Unreliable transportation
  - Financial costs of services
- Cultural and religious beliefs (e.g., belief that suicide is noble resolution of a personal dilemma)
Protective Factors

- Skills in problem solving, conflict resolution and handling problems in a non-violent way
- Strong connections to family, friends, and community support
- Restricted access to highly lethal means of suicide
- Cultural and religious beliefs that discourage suicide and support self-preservation
Protective Factors

- Easy access to a variety of clinical interventions
- Effective clinical care for mental, physical, and substance use disorders
- Support through ongoing medical and mental health care relationships
Warning Signs

- A warning sign does not mean automatically that a person is going to attempt suicide, but it should be responded to in a serious & thoughtful manner.
- Do not dismiss a threat as a cry for attention!

What kinds of warning signs are cause for concern?
Specific Warning Signs

- **Talking About Dying** - Any mention of dying, disappearing, jumping, shooting oneself, or other types of self harm
- **Change in Personality** - Sad, withdrawn, irritable, anxious, tired, indecisive, or apathetic
- **Change in Behavior** - Difficulty concentrating on school, work, or routine tasks
- **Change in Sleep Patterns** - Insomnia, often with early waking or oversleeping, nightmares
- **Change in Eating Habits** - Loss of appetite and weight, overeating
- **Fear of losing control** - Acting erratically, harming self or others
How To Talk With Your Child

- Talk in a calm, non-accusatory manner
- Let them know you love and care
- Convey how important they are to you
- Focus on concern for their well-being
- Make statements that convey you have empathy for their stress
- Encourage seeking professional help
- Reassure them that they will not feel like this forever by utilizing appropriate help
Prevent Your Child’s Suicidal Behavior

- Prioritize interacting with them in positive ways
- Increase their involvement in positive experiences
- Monitor appropriately your child’s whereabouts and communications (i.e., texting, Facebook, Twitter) with the goal of keeping them safe
Prevent Your Child’s Suicidal Behavior

- Get involved and be aware of your child's friends.
- Communicate regularly with other parents in your community.
- Limit your child’s access to guns, knives, alcohol, prescription pills, and illegal drugs.
- Communicate regularly with your child’s school to ensure optimal safety and care for your child in the school setting.
Help Your Suicidal Child

- Talk with your child about your concerns and ask directly about suicidal thoughts
- Explain value of therapy and potential for medication management of symptoms
- Address your concerns with other important adults in your child’s life
- Discuss concerns with your child’s doctor to get appropriate mental health referrals
- Talk with people in the school who can provide support and guidance
Seek Professional Help

- Be safe, not sorry!
- Take appropriate action when needed to protect your child
  - Feel that something is not right
  - Notice warning signs in your child (including worsening signs)
- Recognize if your child has a lot of risk factors for suicide and few protective factors
Seek Professional Help

- Find a mental health provider that has experience with suicidal youth
- Choose a mental health provider with whom you and your child feel comfortable
- Participate actively in therapy with your child
- Call 911 or take your child to a hospital in case of an emergency
  - Suicidal thoughts or behaviors are a mental health emergency
Intervention Programs

- Psychotherapy is an important component in the management of suicidal ideation and behaviors.

- There are two documented effective psychotherapies for treating those who attempt suicide:
  - Cognitive behavior therapy (CBT)
  - Dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT) for youth diagnosed with borderline personality disorder and recurrent suicidal ideation.
Intervention Programs

- There are other promising interventions!
  - Family therapy
  - Medications
Partner with Schools & Community

- To prevent suicide:
  - Work with schools to ensure that educational suicide prevention programs are offered
  - Collaborate with schools on the development of peer gatekeeper programs related to identifying at-risk peers and encouraging them to seek help
  - Work with local sections of national suicide prevention organizations to have optimal suicide prevention programming available in your community
If Your Child Has a Suicidal Friend

- Have a plan for helping your child:
  - Tell your teenagers that if a friend says that they are going to kill themselves, they should inform a trusted adult (i.e. parent, school nurse, or guidance counselor) to get professional help for their friend
  - Assure your child that it is not their responsibility to decide if their friend’s threat is credible

Remind them not to keep it a secret!
Immediate Prevention Help

- Available 24/7:
  - National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:
    www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org
    1-800-273-TALK (8255)
  - The Trevor Project, a national organization providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth:
    www.thetrevorproject.org/
    1-866-488-7386
Online Prevention Resources

- American Association of Suicidology: [www.suicidology.org/](http://www.suicidology.org/)
- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: [www.afsp.org](http://www.afsp.org)
- Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide: [www.sptsusa.org/](http://www.sptsusa.org/)
- Youth Suicide Prevention Program (YSPP): [www.yspp.org](http://www.yspp.org)
If You Lose A Child To Suicide

- Get support!
  - Remember in your time of sorrow and sadness, you are not alone
  - Reach out to family, friends, and other community members
  - Engage with support groups, locally and nationally (including online communities)
  - Honor your loved one and remember how they lived
  - Volunteer to help other survivors
  - Participate in community activities to prevent suicide
For more information on suicide in children and adolescents,

- American Psychological Association: [www.apa.org/topics/suicide](http://www.apa.org/topics/suicide)
- American Association of Suicidology: [www.suicidology.org/](http://www.suicidology.org/)
- Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) about Teen Suicide Prevention: [http://marinschools.org/SafeSchools/Documents/SMH/SuicidePreventionFAQs.pdf](http://marinschools.org/SafeSchools/Documents/SMH/SuicidePreventionFAQs.pdf)
Questions?
References
