





SUICIDE: A WAY TO END THE PAIN

Young people who commit suicide usually do not want to kill themselves – they just want to end their pain. Some adults are prone to dismiss a student's "troubles," knowing that these problems are temporary. Young people, however, do not have this broader perspective on life. They believe that the unhappiness they are feeling is a permanent condition. They do not believe that they have any choices other than living in pain or killing themselves. For them, suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem.

SUICIDE: A SUBJECT FOR B.C. SCHOOLS

Talking to students about suicide does not put ideas in their heads. For too many, it is an option they are already considering.

A 1999 report by the McCreary Centre Society was based on a survey of nearly 26,000 B.C. students in grades 7 to 12. Of the students surveyed:

- 14% had thought about suicide
- 11% actually planned a suicide
- 7% attempted suicide
- 2% were injured in a suicide attempt.

The statistics are grim. Yet the numbers only hint at the tragic stories that lead some students to end their lives. Suicide continues to be a leading cause of death among young people. And adolescents are not the only group at risk. Recent studies show that children under the age of 13 do have, and may act on, suicidal impulses.

School personnel are in a unique position to recognize students at risk and help them by:

- showing that someone cares
- acknowledging their pain
- reassuring them that they do have choices
- referring them to professionals who work with youth at risk of suicide.

Learn more about suicide. The information in this booklet is a good start.

Who is at Risk

The following factors, especially in combination with one another, may increase the likelihood that a student may have suicidal feelings:

depression or other psychiatric disorder
previous suicide attempt
low self-esteem
feelings of helplessness or hopelessness
conflict at school or with the law
abuse or neglect
perfectionism
being gay or lesbian
a traumatic event or recent loss
abuse of alcohol or other drugs

Warning Signs

□ social isolation

Although youth suicide and suicidal behaviour may appear to strike without warning, in reality students almost always send signals, including:

☐ talking or joking about suicide and death

□ recent suicide of family member or friend

- □ increased and/or heavy use of alcohol or other drugs
- $\hfill\Box$ making final arrangements, such as giving away prized possessions
- □ engaging in risk-taking behaviour
- $\hfill\Box$ exhibiting changes in school or social behaviour such as:
 - \bullet change in attendance
 - decline in academic performance
 - inability to concentrate
 - failure to complete assignments
 - lack of interest/withdrawal
 - change in relationships with classmates
 - increase in irritability or aggressiveness
 - wide mood swings
 - unexpected displays of emotion
 - despairing attitude
 - preoccupation with death and suicide (e.g. writing about it, drawing images of death)
 - behavioural changes (e.g. a "party animal" becomes withdrawn or vice versa)
 - sleep disturbance, loss of appetite
 - \bullet loss of interest in previously important relationships
 - changes in appearance and personal care

HOW TO HELP

ask

The most common complaint of young people about adults is that we do not listen. As adults we are prone to give advice, make judgments and solve problems for students. What they really need and want are people who will just listen.

When you initiate a conversation with students by asking them what is wrong, you will often be met with a shrug and a muttered, "Nothing." **Do not give up at this point.** Students often need to be convinced that someone really cares before they will open up and share their feelings. A good way to begin might be to focus on the changes you have observed in the student. For example, "I've noticed lately that you (describe behaviour change). Can you tell me more about that?"

When they do open up to you, do not offer solutions or tell them how much better they have it than someone else. Just listen. This delivers two critical messages:

- 1) I take your problems seriously.
- 2) I care enough about you to want to help.

Listen for the feelings behind the words and be alert for phrases like, "I'd rather die than . . ." or "I can't take it anymore" or "Everyone would be better off if I wasn't here."

ASSESSING RISK

assess

The best way to find out if a student is contemplating suicide is to ask her or him directly:

"Are you thinking of killing yourself?"

This does not "put ideas into their heads" – it frees them to talk about what is really going on and how bad they are feeling.

If the answer to "Are you thinking of killing yourself?" is yes, ask . . .

"What method have you thought of to kill yourself?"

"Do you have the means (quns, pills, etc.)?"

"When do you think you'll do this?"

The more lethal and available the means, and the more definite the time frame, the greater the risk.

RISK = lethality + availability + short time frame

GET HELP

If you have identified a student who may be at risk of suicide, or someone has told you about a potentially suicidal student,

do not attempt to deal with it on your own. Your school or school district should have a suicide intervention protocol – follow it. This protocol describes the roles and responsibilities of school personnel in dealing with potentially suicidal youth.

Check now to see if your school or district has a protocol – do not wait until there is an issue of a potential suicide. If there is no protocol, or it needs updating, start working on it today. The *Manual of Best Practices in Youth Suicide Prevention*, available from the provincial government (see next page), can help you develop a protocol. A sample protocol is also included below.

Your school or district may have a "Crisis Response Policy" or "Critical Incident Response Protocol," but this is not always the same as a suicide intervention protocol. Check to see if "suicide intervention" is included. Suicide intervention tells you what to do before a crisis, while crisis response offers guidance on what to do after the fact.

Sample Suicide Intervention Protocol

The following protocol advises you to inform the school counsellor immediately when you are aware that a student is at risk of suicide. If, **based on your** evaluation of the risk (lethal means + availability of means + time frame), you believe the student to be in imminent danger of attempting suicide, do not leave him or her alone. Stay with the student until help arrives.

possible risk of suicide

immediately inform school counsellor* counsellor meets with student, assesses level of risk and, in the event of

Low to Medium Risk

informs administrator

contacts parent/guardian

refers to Ministry for Children and Families' child and youth mental health team or an outside agency

establishes follow-up plan documents the incident

High Risk

informs administrator contacts parent/guardian

depending on the situation and the school protocol, contacts

- crisis response team or
- emergency services and stays with student until help arrives establishes follow-up plan

documents the incident

^{*}If your school is without a counsellor, inform the principal and ask him or her to seek appropriate help without delay.

LEARN MORE ABOUT SUICIDE

ASK•ASSESS•ACT Suicide Intervention Training Program For School Personnel

Let's Live! A School-Based Suicide Awareness and Intervention Program (lesson plan for grades 7 to 12)

Suicide is Not a Joke: How to Help a Friend (for teens)

Teen Suicide: What Parents Need to Know (for parents)

order the above from the BC Council *for* Families tel: 604-660-0675 or 1-800-663-5638 <www.bccf.bc.ca>

BC Safe School Centre

tel: 604-660-7233 or 1-888-224-7233 www.safeschools.gov.bc.ca

Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention (CASP)

<www.compusmart.ab.ca/supnet/casp.htm>

CHOICES: Suicide Awareness & Intervention Program and Video

Vancouver Crisis Centre

tel: 604-872-1811 <www.crisiscentre.bc.ca>

Healthy Connections: Listening to BC Youth - Highlights from the Adolescent Health Survey II

order from The McCreary Centre Society tel: 604-291-1996 www.mcs.bc.ca

Kids Help Phone

national, anonymous 24-hour help line (English and French) tel: 1-800-668-6868 http://kidshelp.sympatico.ca

Manual of Best Practices in Youth Suicide Prevention

tel: 250-387-6409 or 1-800-663-6105 www.publications.gov.bc.ca

SAFER (Suicide Attempt Follow-up Education & Research)

tel: 604-879-9251

Suicide Information and Education Centre (SIEC)

tel: 403-245-3900 <www.siec.ca>

Suicide Prevention Information and Resource Centre (SPIRC)

tel: 604-822-0740 <www.mheccu.ubc.ca>

SUICIDE – What You Need to Know

A Guide for School Personnel

This booklet has been adapted for the BC Ministry of Education from the ASK•ASSESS•ACT Suicide Intervention Training Program offered by the BC Council for Families.



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The BC Council for Families appreciates the contributions of these organizations in the preparation of this booklet:

Suicide Prevention Information and Resource Centre (SPIRC)
The McCreary Centre Society
Vancouver School Board

To order more copies of this booklet, contact:

Office Products Centre 742 Vanalman Avenue Victoria, BC V8W 9V7 tel: 1-800-282-7955 facsimile: 250-952-4442

Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Main entry under title: Suicide

ISBN 1-896611-03-6

1. Teenagers-Suicidal behaviour. 2. Suicide-Prevention.

I. B.C. Council for Families.

HV6546.S84 2000 362.2'8'0835 C00-910292-2