



Oregon Youth Suicide Prevention Campaign – Article #5

by Ann Kirkwood, Oregon Health Authority Suicide Intervention Coordinator

Suicide Prevention Resources for Coaches, Athletic Directors and Trainers

Children and teens learn better when they aren't depressed or anxious. They learn better when their school is safe, when they feel supported and connected, and when they feel they belong in their school community. **Anxiety, depression and suicide risk can affect any student, regardless of grades, extra-curricular activities, peer group or history of discipline.** According to the Oregon Healthy Teens Survey, 17 percent of eighth and 11th graders reported seriously considering suicide in the past 12 months (2013). Nearly ten percent of eighth graders and eight percent of 11th graders self-reported having attempted suicide one or more times in the previous year.

Coaches, athletic trainers and athletic directors have a unique role in their schools. They are school leaders, role models and often mentors to their athletes, and they are known and trusted by parents. They also spend significant amounts of time with their athletes and may be the first adult to notice when a student is depressed or potentially suicidal.

A comprehensive approach to school suicide prevention includes:

- Planning proactively to prevent suicides
- Promoting emotional well-being and connectedness among all students
- Identifying students who may be at risk for suicide and learning to assist them in getting help
- Learning to be “safe” adults that youth will talk to
- Being prepared to respond when a suicide death occurs

Steps you can take and resources your school can use in each of these areas are:

Planning

Learn what your school is doing for suicide prevention. Does your school have a protocol or procedure for suicide prevention and post-suicide intervention? Are you ready as an organization to support a suicidal student? Are mental health and suicide risk factors taught in classes as a matter of routine? Does your school have a suicide prevention program for and by students? If not, encourage your school administration to establish a suicide prevention program. Resources that would aid in this effort are listed at the end of this article.

Promoting emotional well-being and connectedness

Students who are part of a sports team can feel connected to their peers and to their school community. Athletic staff can help students build positive social relationships, emphasizing respect, resiliency and mutual support. Athletes also can be opinion leaders in their schools to support good mental health and reduce stigma. There are many best practice student-led programs and can be matched to the needs of your schools. One of them, Sources of Strength is being used in Oregon schools. <https://sourcesofstrength.org/>.

Identifying at-risk youth

Previous columns have focused on how to identify youth at risk for suicide and refer them to care. Know your school policy on how refer, whether to the administrator or to a school counselor. If you don't have procedures and guidelines in place, be an advocate for creating them. The SAMHSA Toolkit for Schools can help if you don't have procedures and want to create one.

Learning to be "safe adults"

Many students don't reach out to adults when they are depressed, anxious or thinking of suicide. They say they don't feel they have any adults in their lives that will not judge them, minimize their feelings and emotions, or deny that a youth's problems are significant enough to seek help. There are trainings to help school staff learn how to be that "safe adult". Many Oregon schools are training all faculty and staff in Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) at <https://www.qprinstitute.com/>. Oregon trainers are available and online self-study courses are offered. The 90-minute training can be taught at staff meetings. Additional, more detailed trainings are available for school counselors and administrators to whom suicidal youth are referred. A recent development in Oregon is free access to a virtual high school staff suicide awareness training called Kognito. If you are interested in getting Kognito in your school or have questions, contact Liz Thorne, MPH at liz@clairnguidance.com

Responding when a suicide occurs

The June column will focus on post suicide interventions for schools. The Connect program is being piloted in Oregon to help schools and community partners develop plans for post suicide intervention (called "postvention"). To learn about Connect, visit: <http://www.theconnectprogram.org/>. For information on Connect in Oregon, contact Cheryl Ramirez at the Association of Community Mental Health Programs, cramirez@aocmhp.org. The Suicide Prevention Resource Center has a toolkit for postvention in schools available at: <http://www.sprc.org/resources-programs/after-suicide-toolkit-schools>

For more information on the programs listed in this column, contact Ann Kirkwood, Suicide Intervention Coordinator, Oregon Health Authority, ann.d.kirkwood@state.or.us.

Additional Resources

- Suicide Prevention Resource Center: <http://www.sprc.org/settings/schools>, <http://www.sprc.org/resources-programs/after-suicide-toolkit-schools>
- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: <https://afsp.org/our-work/advocacy/public-policy-priorities/suicide-prevention-in-schools/>
- The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration has a toolkit for high schools to implement prevention programs in a strategic way: <http://store.samhsa.gov/product/Preventing-Suicide-A-Toolkit-for-High-Schools/SMA12-4669>
- A self-study course and accreditation for suicide prevention for schools is available from the American Association of Suicidology. Learn more at <http://www.sprc.org/resources-programs/school-suicide-prevention-accreditation>.
- [The Response](https://public.health.oregon.gov/PreventionWellness/SafeLiving/SuicidePrevention/Pages/response.aspx) best practice program, developed in Oregon, also is available at <https://public.health.oregon.gov/PreventionWellness/SafeLiving/SuicidePrevention/Pages/response.aspx>. It is a comprehensive middle and high school program that increases awareness about suicide among staff, students and parents. The program is designed to heighten sensitivity to depression and suicidal ideation, as well as offer response procedures to refer a student.