

Talking About Suicide in Schools

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Many people find it difficult to talk about suicide...even mental health professionals! It can be uncomfortable and scary and makes many of us feel out of our comfort zone. So, is it important to talk about suicide? Or should we listen to those uncomfortable feelings that tell us to ignore, walk away, hold back, and avoid this topic?

As a clinical psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania's Center for the Treatment and Study of Anxiety and a member of the [Anxiety and Depression Association of America](#) (ADAA), I value bringing awareness about mental health issues to the public. We know that talking about suicide and suicide prevention in productive ways is very important for both the individuals suffering from suicidal ideation, and the people who so desperately want to help them. Suicide can affect everyone. The good news is, there is room for all of us to get involved with suicide prevention.

School-based interventions that involve students, faculty, and parents are one way we can promote and implement suicide prevention efforts. This work can begin with school administrators, but can easily extend to students and parents as well.

So how do we start talking about suicide in our schools? And what are productive ways in which to do this?

One way is to create small groups for students to discuss difficult issues like mental health problems, family difficulties, interpersonal challenges, and painful emotions. This is especially important as it is more likely that a student will report something to another student rather than to an adult. Helping establish relationships between students and faculty can also serve as a preventative measure with regard to suicidal ideation, violence, bullying, etc. Preventative measures should include promoting help-seeking, emotional well-being, and networks of social support and "connectedness" among students, faculty, and parents. After-school clubs and relationship-building activities are also ways to connect students to each other and provide alternatives to negative behaviors and isolation.

How do we implement preventative interventions?

It's important to enhance resilience and life skills among children and adolescents. Sponsoring mindfulness and stress reduction workshops can help individuals take control in managing their mental health. Providing information about self-help tools,

coping, and emotion regulation, and connecting students to apps they can use on their phones that assist in building these skills can help in the management of life stress and mental health challenges. Incorporating lessons about empathy, forgiveness, and behavior management into curriculums can help expand one's insight and understanding. Other helpful interventions include showing kids how to reach out, encouraging them to do so, making care available and ensuring that a [suicide hotline number](#) is easily accessible. Teaching bullying prevention is also important, as it is linked to a variety of mental health issues, not just suicide.

What else can we do?

Identify students at risk! This includes prior attempts, misuse of drugs, family history of suicide, chronic illness or disability, and lack of access to mental health care. School-based screening programs that protect student identity while identifying the presence of suicidal ideation and risk factors can also help with suicide prevention. These screenings should include parents, school personnel, and students in this process in a collaborative way. Screening should be done with efforts to educate and reach out to students regarding suicide in order to empower individuals to be aware of their own mental health as well as signs of people suffering around them.

Making concerted efforts to reach LGBTQ groups in schools is also critical, as stress from discrimination is a known risk factor for LGBTQ youth. It is important to educate students, parents, and faculty as to the warning signs of suicide. These include but are not limited to suicide notes or plans, making final arrangements, preoccupation with death, changes in behaviors, thoughts, and/or feelings.

How do we manage death by suicide?

In the event that someone dies of suicide in the school, plans for the presence of extra mental health counselors, grief groups, etc. should be established so that students and parents and faculty can talk, healthily process their feelings, and support each other.

So what do we do now?

Start the conversation! The point is that social support and connection are key factors that buffer against suicide. In school and out, we should all strive to find more ways to communicate and connect about our own struggles and personal challenges...even when it is hard or uncomfortable.