Suicide in Schools: Prevention and Intervention During COVID-19
A Summary for the DC CoP

On August 29, 2020, the Mental Health Academy hosted a two-day virtual summit on suicide prevention for health care professionals. Jonathan B. Singer, Ph.D., LCSW, President of the American Association of Suicidology and an Associate Professor of Social Work at Loyola University Chicago, presented on school-based suicide prevention and intervention strategies. Dr. Singer highlighted how issues related to COVID-19 and racial justice have given urgency to the prevention of suicide and highlighted intersection of health, suicide, and equity.

The DC CoP team attended this session to bring information and best practices on suicide prevention back to the DC community. School personnel in DC should follow OSSE's Health and Safety Guidance during COVID-19 when implementing suicide prevention activities.

Overview

- The suicide rate of youth ages 10-14 has steadily increased over the past decade and is the **second leading cause of death** among this age group.
- Suicide deaths for youth ages 10-19 are lowest during the summer and December, and highest in January and February. This information, combined with survey findings on the leading stressors in youth, suggests that **school is a major cause of stress** for youth in the US.
- School-based professionals should look at the racial/ethnic breakdown within their school and community to **identify those at highest risk**.
- **Sexual and gender minority youth** as well as **black youth** are at greatest risk for suicide.
- When looking at issues that co-occur with suicide death for those ages 10-19, the highest rated problems were having an "argument or conflict" (20%) and a "school problem" (18%). Schools can work to mitigate and provide coping mechanisms to deal with such issues.
- Suicide risk cannot be minimized effectively without addressing systemic inequities at all levels of society.

Prevention

Schools play an important role in suicide prevention efforts. Schools can play a more intentional role by training youth on the use of effective conflict-resolution and coping skills to work through struggles they may be facing. School-based suicide prevention tactics include team-based approaches and programs. For schools with suicide prevention activities in place, it is crucial that behavioral health professionals make appropriate adjustments to be able to execute a plan during remote learning. This includes:

- o Developing protocol for how to reach out to a family member of a student you are concerned about.
- o Establishing and standardizing norms for what can and cannot be discussed through the chat within the distance learning classroom. This includes whether students are allowed to talk socially, joke, and share memes.

- Providing a list of conversation starters for educators and staff around how to talk about COVID-19 related illness and death.
- Establishing and fostering personal connections with and between students.

It is important to create suicide prevention programs to target those most at risk. For many schools, this will involve outreach that **specifically addresses the discrimination that sexual and gender minority youth and/or black youth will face**. Unfortunately, nearly all existing prevention programs focus on the individual rather than the environment. When discussing stressors with students in the groups listed above, it is important to understand to what extent the stressors they have are in response to stereotyping, bias, and racism.

Intervention
Interventions should center around supporting students as well as their families. In schools that are offering distance learning, it is especially important that all intervention plans place the family of the student at the center, as they are the primary adult(s) that the student interacts with. Each intervention plan must include the items below.

For the Family:
- Document where the student and family is located geographically.
- Identify what resources are available to the family with regard to resources, technology, and availability.
- Restrict access to lethal means.
- Explain that while technology is not inherently bad, what is worrisome is watching videos/researching about self-harm or how to kill oneself.

For the Student:
- Check-in about COVID-related illness and death among family and/or friends.
- Revise and modify the safety plan as needed.
- Use different resources (listed in the section below) to help build and strengthen coping skills.
- Monitoring risk using the Suicide Risk Monitoring Tool that captures ideation, intent, plan, warning signs, protective factors, mood and cognition (scroll to *Support Material* and click on *Risk Assessment Resources* to download).

Featured Tools and Treatments

For Mental Health Professionals and Teachers:
Counseling Access to Lethal Means (CALM) Webinar: This free webinar from the Suicide Prevention Resource Center focuses on how mental health professionals can reduce access to lethal means within the home. This is especially important during distance-learning, where children and adolescents might be confined in their home for long periods of time.

PREPaRE Training Curriculum: A paid training (with a virtual option) for those who work in a school environment who want to learn how to best prepare for crisis intervention and response. The curriculum was designed by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) and is built upon evidence-based resources.

SOS Signs of Suicide Train-the-Trainer: A paid virtual workshop to provide training resources and a course for school professional to teach suicide prevention to students. The training is 3.5 hours and is hosted by MindWise Innovations with a middle school and high school option.

Suicide Prevention Resource Center: A website that hosts a variety of free resources, webinars and toolkits for professionals looking to further their education on suicide prevention.

Suicide in Schools: A Practitioner's Guide to Multi-level Prevention, Assessment, Intervention, and Postvention: Additional eResources are available for free on the publisher's website. Scroll down to the *Support Material* for files on topics related to school including how to discuss suicide prevention with teachers, students, and families.

The Trevor Project: The leading national organization providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention to LGBTQ+ youth. The resources section of their website provides information on how to address suicide prevention among sexual and gender minority youth.

For Students:
Mood Tracker: A free web and smartphone application to keep track of a student's mental health. The free option can track a student's mood, sugar amount, sleep hours, exercise quality, and expressed gratitude. It also includes an opportunity for email reminders and journal entries.

notOK: A free web and smartphone application that lets trusted family members know when a user is not okay and needs to speak with someone they trust. It can be used as part of a suicide prevention plan for an individual when they need to talk with a trusted support person.

Virtual Hope Box: A free smartphone app that helps build coping skills for individuals struggling with depression. The four main features include sections for distraction, inspiration, relaxation, and coping skill options. It was designed specifically for veterans but is applicable to anyone struggling with depression. It is one of the few empirically tested smartphone tools designed to support patients' risk for suicide.