



State of Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

Elizabeth Burmaster, State Superintendent

YOUTH SUICIDE PREVENTION RESOURCES AND SERVICES

Why should we worry about youth suicide? Are many kids really depressed or suicidal?

- For students age 10-14, Wisconsin's suicide rate is 5th highest in the U.S.
- Our rate for students age 10-19 is 13th highest in the U.S., 42% higher than the U.S. average
- More than 1 in 5 Wisconsin high school students report symptoms of depression annually
- Suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death among youth in Wisconsin, accounting for more than 17% of all deaths in this age group

What are the risk factors for suicide—things that are associated with suicide attempts?

- Previous suicide attempts are the strongest predictor of future attempts
- Exposure to suicide of another student, a loved one, or through the media
- A history of depression or other mental disorders, including drug or alcohol abuse
- Unsupervised access to firearms, especially during times of perceived crisis
- Poor problem-solving skills, risky or impulsive actions, conflicts, stressful life events

What are the warning signs? What can school staff members watch for?

Early warning signs are behaviors that adults may notice in many students. But for some students, these are the first signs that they are struggling with depression or a low mood. Be watchful of these students to see if the symptoms persist for more than a few weeks or a month.

- Difficulty concentrating or a decline in quality of school work
- Social withdrawal, personality & mood changes
- In younger children, physical complaints related to emotions (stomachaches, headaches)
- Changes in sleeping and eating habits—too much or too little of either or both
- Preoccupation with death

Urgent warning signs indicate that a student may have made a decision to harm themselves.

- Serious thoughts or direct statements about suicide, especially specific plan
- Impulsive or violent actions, rebellious behavior, or running away
- Refusing help or feeling beyond help, claiming to be a bad person, intolerant of praise
- Hopelessness, helplessness, or worthlessness
- Being suddenly cheerful after a period of depression (problems no longer worry them)
- Giving away favorite possessions, making a last will & testament, "tying up loose ends"

Is it legally safe for you to intervene in a suicide attempt?

State law insulates all school district employees and volunteers from civil liability for their acts and omissions when trying to intervene in a student's suicide. This means that you can make mistakes or neglect to do the best thing and you are safe. Obviously we don't want this to happen, but the legislature found it so important that school staff take action when a student is suicidal, that they insulated you from civil liability for your efforts with suicidal students.

THIS NOTICE CONTINUES ON THE NEXT PAGE

What can you do if you become concerned about a student?

Steps to helping a student are not complicated; it is OK to ask students how they are doing. Students who are really struggling are usually scared and want help. It's a myth that students won't be honest when asked if they need help or that you must be a pupil services professional to help a student in this situation. Another misunderstanding is that you can bring on thoughts of suicide by asking a student if they have been thinking about hurting themselves. Research has looked into this question in depth, and no evidence for a connection has been found.

If a student shares that they are having a difficult time or are thinking about self-harm, be sure to acknowledge these feelings rather than minimizing them. Say something like, "I'm sorry to hear about this. It sounds really hard." Don't tell them to get over it or move on; that's not realistic for a person with depression. Then, follow up with a statement of care and concern. "I'm worried about this and I would hate for anything bad to happen to you." The final step is to connect the student with someone who knows how to work with students who may be suicidal. This could be a pupil services professional, administrator, or even a health educator. "Let's go tell someone in the guidance department. They know how to work with students who have concerns like these." These simple steps can be summarized as "Acknowledge, Care, and Tell" or ACT. It's a central skill taught in an evidence-based youth suicide prevention program called SOS-Signs of Suicide. SOS has been shown to reduce suicidal acts in youth.

What youth suicide prevention resources are available from DPI?

DPI provides a variety of training and resources, all of which are available on our web site. Just go to the DPI main page (www.dpi.wi.gov) and enter the words "suicide prevention" in the search engine. On our suicide prevention page, you will find the following highlights:

- A web-based video training for teachers. Our school psychologist gives a brief overview of suicide prevention and intervention, include a more detailed explanation of ACT.
- A flyer for DPI's full-day suicide prevention workshop.
- A complete listing of state laws and rules about youth suicide.
- DPI's Health Class curricula for middle and high school students.

What other resources should school staff be aware of?

- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, www.afsp.org
- Suicide Prevention Resource Center, www.sprc.org
- Mental Health America of Wisconsin, www.mhawisconsin.org
- Helping Others Prevent and Educate about Suicide, www.hopes-wi.org
- **800 273 TALK**

Local Resources can be referenced here. Consult local telephone directories and/or your County mental health board.

This notice meets the requirements of WI Statute for staff notification of suicide prevention resources. For more information about the data, suggestions, or background to this notice, please search "suicide prevention" on the DPI web page <http://dpi.wi.gov>.