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Teachers as Early Warning Detectors

Teen suicides are rising. Teachers have a role in halting the trend.

Teen suicide isn't a topic everyone feels comfortable talking about—but for the sake of our students, we need to. The recent Netflix series *Thirteen Reasons Why* raised the issue in a public way, and school systems struggled to respond. Teenage suicide is a mental health challenge that deserves our time and attention.

On average, there are 121 suicides every day in the United States, of all ages. The downward trend of teenage suicide in the late 1980s through 1990s has reversed and is rapidly climbing. Data from the National Vital Statistics System of the Center for Disease Control (Curtin, Warner, & Hedegaard, 2016) indicate that from 1999 through 2014, the age-adjusted suicide rate for teenagers¹ in the United States increased by 24 percent, from 10.5 per 100,000 people to 13.0 per 100,000 people. The rate of suicide *attempts* is also increasing. The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (n.d.) notes that for every suicide, there are 25 attempts.

Every teacher who spends more than a few years in a middle or high school will end up knowing a student who attempts suicide. We need to know how to respond sensitively both to suicidal students and to youth who know someone who killed themselves (or tried).

Fortunately, schools are becoming more open to talking frankly about this. During Doug's first year of teaching, a student attempted suicide. At the time, the advice was "don't talk about it. Just return to your regular lessons." The week before we wrote this column, a teenager told Doug that his 11-year-old sister had attempted suicide and was in the hospital. Doug offered to drive him to



the hospital and showed him some books about the topic, inviting him to borrow a few. After they talked, the boy asked Doug if he could tell his class what had happened. During a circle conversation with the class, the student noted he was feeling sad and explained why. Because the issue of suicide had been discussed on other occasions, his disclosure didn't paralyze his classmates. He received support from peers. Equally important, students were reminded that suicide affects many more people than the person who attempts it.

Know the Warning Signs

Before we go any further, we want to explain our purpose for writing about suicide. We don't believe teachers have to become counselors, but we believe teachers can be the eyes and ears of



**WATCH
the Video**



Watch students share thoughts on a book in which a major character is self-destructive at www.ascd.org/el1217fisherfrey.

the mental health system. Teachers should be on the lookout for signs that a student might be a suicide risk and alert a mental health professional so the student can get help. According to the Jason Foundation (2017), four out of five teens who attempt suicide give clear warnings.

These warning signs include talking, writing, or drawing about suicide; showing drastic behavior changes; withdrawing from friends or social activities; giving away prized possessions; taking unnecessary risks; becoming preoccupied with death and dying; losing interest in his or her personal appearance; increasing the use of alcohol or drugs; and having made a previous suicide attempt.

In addition to spotting the signs and alerting mental health professionals, educators can do at least three other things to help teens at risk of suicide.

Incorporate Books on the Topic

Several high-quality texts sensitively, yet authentically, address this issue and can facilitate conversations. In the video accompanying this column, two groups of students in Marisol Thayre's English course discuss *Looking for Alaska* by John Green (Speak, 2006), a book they've selected to read together. These students discuss literary techniques, but you'll also see Ms. Thayre push their critical thinking further by asking them to consider connections to an article on adolescent suicides they read earlier in the week.

It's important to note that there is no evidence that talking about suicide or knowing someone who took their life increases the risk of suicide behavior (Watkins & Gutierrez, 2003). Rather, when students read and talk about the topic, it moves it to their awareness level. The right book might help a student discuss his or her feelings. For instance, after reading Terri Fields' novel *After the Death of Anna Gonzales* (Henry Holt, 2002), one student in our school told her parents that she had a plan to take her

own life—and then received the help she needed. A year later, she reflected, "I guess I needed that book at that time in my life. It gave me permission to talk about what I was feeling." Such books can also help peers develop the confidence they need to inform an adult when one of their classmates has disclosed suicidal thoughts.

Monitor Student Writing


Be on the lookout for disclosures in students' writing. It is rare for a student to write something as direct as "I plan to hang myself tonight." Rather, teachers should pay attention—and talk with others—when what they are reading makes them uncomfortable because it implies feelings of very low self-worth, being a burden, or wishing to disappear. For example, one student Nancy knows wrote that she identified with the character in a novel because she felt that, like that character, she'd let her family down in a big way, and couldn't do anything right. She went on to write about feeling worthless, ending, "Maybe I'll just disappear. Their life would be easier that way."

It seems that this student was exploring the idea of hurting herself or running away. It's not our job as educators to figure it out or to counsel this student. But it is absolutely our job to notice and let someone know. This student later opened up to a counselor that she had a plan related to suicide.

Bring in Speakers

One way to get kids information on suicide is to bring in speakers who can engage students in honest conversations and provide appropriate resources and materials. We invite staff from the Yellow Ribbon (www.yellowribbon.org) program to present at our school. There are many other groups, including school counselors with expertise, who have the skills to address this topic. We prepare students for these guests by asking them to generate questions in advance of

the visit. We also provide them with a note-taking guide for the time a guest is present.

Far too many young people are taking their lives, and teachers can help prevent that. A colleague once said, "Suicide awareness and prevention was not my job description, and thankfully I don't have to do that part of my job very often, but when I do, it's the most important thing I do." He's right. This is an added responsibility for educators. But young people trust us, and we can help them get through the tough times. We can serve as early warning detectors for students who are at risk for causing themselves harm. 

¹The age-adjusted rates are rates that would have existed if the population under study had the same age distribution as the "standard" population.

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