

# Protocol for Handling Suspected Suicide Risk

School Resources to Support Military-Connected Students is a project by the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness an applied research center at The Pennsylvania State University and is funded by the Department of Defense Education Activity Grant number HE1254-19-0009.

For more information click on the links below:

<https://schoolresources.militaryfamilies.psu.edu/>

<https://militaryfamilies.psu.edu/>

<https://www.psu.edu/>

<https://dodeagrants.org/>

Our goal is to provide school personnel with free, evidence-based resources to support military-connected students. This training is part of our *Suicide Prevention* series.

## Important Reminders

Before starting this training, please read the items below carefully and check the box in front of each item to indicate your understanding.

- The following content discusses suicide and may be upsetting to some individuals.
- Follow all district, local, state, and federal regulations. This training is **NOT** intended to replace or override existing procedures or laws.

## Introduction

### What is the purpose of this training?

As you engage in conversation with a student who may be experiencing suicidal ideation, it is imperative to evaluate the student's current level of risk. This training will walk you through how to conduct an initial evaluation to determine if a full risk assessment should be conducted.

### Objective

The goal of this training is to increase your confidence in your ability to:

**Conduct an initial evaluation of a student who may be experiencing suicidal ideation to determine if a full risk assessment should be conducted.**

*How confident are you in your ability to do this now?*

Please click on the link below to submit your response.

[https://pennstate.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_6Gp3iBHLvhcTluR?modulenumber=suicide15](https://pennstate.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6Gp3iBHLvhcTluR?modulenumber=suicide15)

Verify that you have completed each of the tasks below before proceeding with this training.

Answered the survey question in the link.

Clicked the arrow underneath the survey question to submit your response.

Recorded the ID number provided after you submitted your answer to the survey question. You will need it to complete the survey at the end of this training.

## Research

### What is most important for me to know?

Below are the steps you should follow to evaluate a student's level of risk for suicide.

**This information can also be found on a handout that you will be able to download at the end of this training.**

**Step 1:** Talk to the student privately. Is the student a danger to himself or herself in that moment? Is professional help needed immediately? Threat level can be determined by using some of the questions below.

• Are there times that you have felt so upset that you just wish you could be out of the situation?

• Have you ever felt so upset that you wished you could be gone forever?

• Sometimes, people in your situation lose hope. Is this true for you?

• Have you ever thought things would be better if you were dead?

• Have you ever thought things would be better if you weren't around anymore?

• Have you ever felt like you wish you hadn't been born?

• Do you ever feel like everyone would be better off without you?

• With this much pain or stress in your life, have you ever wished it would all just go away?

• Have you ever felt like hurting yourself?

• Have you ever tried to hurt yourself?

**If a student answers affirmatively to any of the above prompts, you or the designated building professional must follow up with a very clear assessment of suicidal ideation.**

• Have you ever had thoughts about killing yourself? What were those thoughts?

• Are you currently thinking about killing yourself?

Sample questions to assess suicidal ideation and determine threat level (Erbacher, Singer, & Poland, 2015)

**Step 2:** Sometimes students make statements that you will need to interpret (Erbacher, Singer, & Poland, 2015). The image below offers some examples of what students might say, and what they might actually be thinking or feeling.

## Student Suicidal Statements

What They Say	What It Means	Experience
"I feel hopeless."	Tomorrow will be no better than today.	Hopelessness
"I can't see any way out."	I cannot think of alternatives.	Cognitive constriction
"I'd be better off dead."	I have found the best solution.	Problem-solving
"I'm so confused."	Part of me wants to live, part of me wants to die.	Ambivalence
"It isn't worth it."	My life is not worth keeping.	Differential value
"No one cares."	I'm all alone.	Social isolation

Suicidal statements, meanings, and feelings (Erbacher, Singer, & Poland, 2015)

**Step 3:** As you conduct a risk assessment, focus not only on the words, but identify if nonverbal or other behavior matches. Sometimes a student may say that they are "fine" when their behavior appears otherwise.

If either a student's nonverbal or verbal behavior indicates a risk, appropriate action must be taken. If the student denies having suicidal thoughts, and you are confident in his or her answer, you can end the questioning here. Make sure you document the inquiry and share what you discussed with the school counselor immediately.

If the student denies having suicidal thoughts, but you are not confident in his or her answer, escort him or her to the professional in your building who is designated to handle such situations.

**Step 4:** If the student acknowledges having suicidal thoughts, escort him or her to the professional in your building who is designated to handle such situations. School counselors and psychologists are trained to engage students who are suicidal. Document the inquiry. If the student acknowledges having suicidal thoughts and the professional designated to handle such situations is unavailable, find out how often he or she experiences these thoughts, when he or she tends to think about suicide more often, how intense the thoughts are, and how long he or she has been having the thoughts. More information about suicide risk assessment best practices can be reviewed by clicking the button below to visit the training titled *Suicide Risk Assessment Best Practices*.

**Go to *Suicide Risk Assessment Best Practices***

Click on the link below to visit the training titled *Suicide Risk Assessment Best Practices*. The objective of this training is to increase your confidence in your ability to identify and implement best practices for conducting suicide risk assessments.

[https://learning.militaryfamilies.psu.edu/school-resources/modules/suicide\\_12-suicide-risk-assessment-best-practices\\_201022/](https://learning.militaryfamilies.psu.edu/school-resources/modules/suicide_12-suicide-risk-assessment-best-practices_201022/)

**Step 5:** If a student provides any affirmative response to suicidal ideation, conduct a brief screening using a brief screening tool such as the Ask Suicide-Screening Questions (ASQ), Columbia- Suicide Severity Rating Scale (C-SSRS), or Kutcher Adolescent Depression Scale (KADS). More information about these brief suicidal risk screening tools can be reviewed by clicking the button below to visit the training titled *Brief Suicidal Risk Screening Tools*.

#### **Go to *Brief Suicidal Risk Screening Tools***

Click on the link below to visit the training titled *Brief Suicidal Risk Screening Tools*. The objective of this training is to increase your confidence in your ability to identify a validated brief screening tool to use when a student may be experiencing suicidal ideation.

[https://learning.militaryfamilies.psu.edu/school-resources/modules/suicide\\_16-brief-suicidal-risk-screening-tools\\_201022/](https://learning.militaryfamilies.psu.edu/school-resources/modules/suicide_16-brief-suicidal-risk-screening-tools_201022/)

**Step 6:** In the event of uncertainty, school support professionals may need to gather additional information from other school personnel. Review the next image for examples of what to ask teachers or other school personnel when assessing a student's risk for suicide.

**Questions for Teachers Regarding a Student's Risk for Suicide**

Have you noticed any major changes in your student's schoolwork since school started?

Have you noticed any behavioral or attitudinal changes? What kind of changes?

Has the student experienced any trouble in school? What kind of trouble?

Does the student appear depressed and/or hostile and angry? What clues does the student give?

Has the student verbally, behaviorally, or symbolically (in an essay, story, or artwork) threatened suicide or expressed thoughts associated with self-destruction or death? What kind of expressions?

Sample questions to ask teachers/other personnel when assessing a student's risk for suicide.

**Step 7:** If the questioning indicates that the student is experiencing suicidal ideation, a full risk assessment should be conducted. More information regarding how to conduct a full suicidal risk screening can be reviewed by clicking the button below to visit the training titled *Full Suicidal Risk Screening Tool*.

### **Go to *Full Suicidal Risk Screening Tool***

Click on the link below to visit the training titled *Full Suicidal Risk Screening Tool*. The objective of this training is to increase your confidence in your ability to conduct a suicidal risk screening on a student that is experiencing suicidal ideation.

[https://learning.militaryfamilies.psu.edu/school-resources/modules/suicide\\_17-full-suicidal-risk-screening-tool\\_201022/](https://learning.militaryfamilies.psu.edu/school-resources/modules/suicide_17-full-suicidal-risk-screening-tool_201022/)

**Step 8:** Parents should ALWAYS be notified about concerns even if relative risk levels are low. More information regarding how to engage parents following a suicide risk assessment with their child can be reviewed by clicking the button below to visit the training titled *Parent Notification Following a Suicide Risk Assessment*.

### **Go to *Parent Notification Following a Suicide Risk Assessment***

Click on this button to visit the training titled *Parent Notification Following a Suicide Risk Assessment*. The objective of this training is to increase your confidence in your ability to engage parents following a suicide risk assessment with their child.

[https://learning.militaryfamilies.psu.edu/school-resources/modules/suicide\\_21-parent-notification-following-a-suicide-risk-assessment\\_201022/](https://learning.militaryfamilies.psu.edu/school-resources/modules/suicide_21-parent-notification-following-a-suicide-risk-assessment_201022/)

**Step 9:** If student support personnel know that a student is struggling with suicidal ideation, they may share this information with teachers in order to increase surveillance. Simply state, “(Student name) has been depressed and had some thoughts of suicide. Please keep this confidential but watch him closely in your class for warning signs. If you observe any, please escort him to my office.” More information about warning signs of student suicide can be reviewed by clicking the button below to visit the training titled *Warning Signs and Stressful Precipitating Events of Student Suicide*.

### **Go to *Warning Signs and Stressful Precipitating Events of Student Suicide***

Click on this button to visit the training titled *Warning Signs and Stressful Precipitating Events of Student Suicide*. The objective of this training is to increase your confidence in your ability to identify warning signs and precipitating stressful events of student suicide.

[https://learning.militaryfamilies.psu.edu/school-resources/modules/suicide\\_11-warning-signs-and-stressful-precipitating-events-of-student-suicide\\_201022/](https://learning.militaryfamilies.psu.edu/school-resources/modules/suicide_11-warning-signs-and-stressful-precipitating-events-of-student-suicide_201022/)

## **Application**

**How might this look in my professional practice?**

The goal of this training is to increase your confidence in your ability to:

**Conduct an initial evaluation of a student who may be experiencing suicidal ideation to determine if a full risk assessment should be conducted.**

Below is a scenario that will provide you with practice conducting an initial evaluation to determine a student’s level of risk for suicide and if a full risk assessment should be administered. At the conclusion of this training, you will be provided with a tool to help you conduct the initial evaluation as described in this training.

**Conduct a suicide evaluation with Brandon, a high school senior.**

Brandon's English teacher asked if you would talk to him after he presented a nihilistic speech, stating "Why plan anything? Nothing matters."

**Brandon: “What’s up?”**

- 1) “Hey Brandon, Mr. Meyers asked me to check in with you. It seems like the speech you gave on Monday made him feel worried. Can you tell me about it?”
- 2) “So what was up with that speech last week?”

Correct Answer: 1)

**Brandon: “Yeah, we were supposed to talk about the future or whatever. Other people talked about college and stuff. I just don't buy into that positive crap- stuff is random, you know?”**

- 1) “If you knew what the point of the assignment was and you knew what other people were writing, why would you write something like that?”
- 2) “I'd like to understand that. Can I ask you a few more questions?”

Correct Answer: 2)

**Brandon: “Sure. I guess I wrote it because, yes, I have plans for after high school, but those plans don't really mean anything. I could change my major or move across the country, you know?”**

- 1) “Okay, but what I'm wondering if this speech was you trying to tell us that you're thinking about hurting yourself.”
- 2) “I think I understand that. Your teacher was worried that you were thinking the future isn't worth seeing, but it doesn't sound like that is the case.”

Correct Answer: 2)

**Brandon: “Right, I just wanted to tell people that no matter what they plan, it can fall apart anyway, so my point was that people should rely less on plans and more on, like, intuition.”**

- 1) “I hear that. Just to be clear though, I have a few questions to ask. I know this is a lot, but have you ever thought about hurting yourself?”
- 2) “Not make any plans like you're thinking about killing yourself?”

Correct Answer: 1)

**Brandon: “I actually thought about it a little in middle school, but not recently. I know it's not a good solution, and I'm really not depressed anymore. I wasn't trying to say that with my speech.”**

- 1) “Okay, how often did you used to think about killing yourself? How intense were those thoughts? How long did they last? How would you do it?”
- 2) “That's good to hear. I just want to make sure, though- if you ever felt like that again, do you think you would tell someone? Who could you talk to?”

Correct Answer: 2)

**Brandon: “I guess I could talk to my sister or my dad. My dad knows a lot about therapy, so he could help me find something. But I'm okay right now.”**

- 1) “I'm glad you're feeling better and that you have a plan. And you could always talk to me or your teacher, too. Well, I'll let you go. Take care.”
- 2) “Okay, let's sit down and make a safety plan. I'll need to call your dad and make sure he knows to keep an eye on you, too.”

Correct Answer: 1)

**Brandon: “Okay, see you.”**

## Implementation

**How can I effectively implement this content in my professional practice?**

Please review the considerations below regarding potential implementation strategies, barriers to implementation, and collaboration strategies related to this content. This will help you coordinate the next steps as you begin to incorporate the information presented in this training into your professional practice.

**This information can also be found on a handout that you will be able to download at the end of this training.**

## Implementation Strategies

- Conduct school-wide training regarding signs of suicide and how to intervene with students at risk.
- Implement ongoing coaching and consultation for teachers and other staff regarding how to help students who they believe may be at risk.

## Overcoming Barriers to Implementation

- Engage administrative, parental, and teacher-level support for increasing vigilance and reporting of suicidal behavior.
- Encourage teachers who may have misconceptions about suicide (e.g., asking leads to suicidal thoughts, suicidal ideations or behaviors are simply attention seeking) by having ongoing conversations about research evidence that de-bunks these myths.

## Collaboration Strategies

- Be sure that everyone in your school (including office staff, janitorial staff, and volunteers) are all aware of crisis and suicide prevention strategies including who to ask for help, how to help students, and what to do.
- Have regular check-ins with teachers to discuss questions they have, concerns they have about students, or to clarify information.

## Resources

### Are there any resources available to help me implement this content?

Click on the link below to download a tool that you can use to implement this content in your professional practice.

<https://documentcloud.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:bff7a5de-b304-4f39-8430-31109e3e68f9>

## Feedback

### How can I help improve this training?

The objective of this training was to increase your confidence in your ability to:

**Conduct an initial evaluation of a student who may be experiencing suicidal ideation to determine if a full risk assessment should be conducted.**

Answer the questions in the link below to let us know how well this training increased your confidence in your ability to accomplish this objective. Once you have answered all of the questions, click the blue arrow button underneath to submit your responses.

[https://pennstate.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_d771mLr9ZgW3kyx?modulenumber=suicide15](https://pennstate.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_d771mLr9ZgW3kyx?modulenumber=suicide15)

Verify that you have completed each of the tasks below.

Answered all of the survey questions above. You may have to scroll to see all of the questions.  
Clicked the arrow underneath the last survey question to submit your responses.

## Additional Readings

Where can I learn more about this content?

The following resources were used to create this training. If you would like more information about the information presented in this training, we encourage you to start here.

Erbacher, T. A., Singer, J. B., & Poland, S. (2015). *School-based practice in action. Suicide in schools: A practitioner's guide to multi-level prevention, assessment, intervention, and postvention*. Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.

## Thank You!

Thank you for taking the time to complete this training. If you have any questions or comments, please email us at [schoolresources@psu.edu](mailto:schoolresources@psu.edu).

### Proceed to the next training

Click on the link below to move on to the next training titled *Brief Suicidal Risk Screening Tools*. In this training, you will increase your confidence in your ability to respond appropriately to the possible outcomes on the suicide risk screening tool.

[https://learning.militaryfamilies.psu.edu/school-resources/modules/suicide\\_16-brief-suicidal-risk-screening-tools\\_201022/](https://learning.militaryfamilies.psu.edu/school-resources/modules/suicide_16-brief-suicidal-risk-screening-tools_201022/)

### Return to the module directory

Click on this button to return to the module directory.

<https://schoolresources.militaryfamilies.psu.edu/modules/>