

Warning Signs and Stressful Precipitating Events of Student Suicide

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?

It is important for student support personnel (i.e., school psychologists, school counselors, and school nurses) to be well-versed in the factors that predispose students to suicide and NSSIs as part of a broader prevention effort and assessment of students identified as high behavioral or emotional risk. Although risk factors are important, it is also important to recognize warning signs. Risk factors may predispose a student to a variety of undesirable outcomes including suicide, but more immediate warning signs should be considered more serious and proximal to possible suicidal behavior. In general, both warning signs and precipitating stressful events should be considered when trying to identify students who may have highest needs for support. Precipitating stressful events may range from the ending of a romantic relationship, recent death or divorce, or bullying.

Objective

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

Identify warning signs and precipitating stressful events of student suicide.

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

Please click on the link below to submit your response.

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?

Psychological Pain

It may seem obvious, but one of the most important motivators in suicidal behavior is psychological pain. Some scholars have used the term psychache (Shneidman, 1993) to describe the kind of mental and emotional pain that would provoke a student to want to hurt themselves. Joiner (2005), in his Interpersonal Theory of Suicide, described that a combination of perceived burdensomeness (“Everyone would be better off without me”) and thwarted belonging (“I don’t feel like I fit in anywhere”) is the most precipitous in suicidal behavior. If a student believes that others would be better off without them and that they have not been able to meaningfully connect to others in their life, they are in significant pain and more inclined to harm themselves. It is generally recommended that student support personnel should concern themselves, first and foremost, with decreasing psychological pain when working with students who are at risk for suicide (Miller & Eckert, 2009).

If psychological pain and isolation are to be addressed to provide relief and to minimize risk, it is important to know the signs to monitor. Warning signs can be remembered easily by the acronym, IS PATH WARM. As a reminder, the more warning signs that a student displays, the higher their relative level of risk for suicide and self-harm.



Non-suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI)

An important connection with psychological pain includes the relation of NSSIs to increased risk for suicide. Sometimes professionals will view NSSIs as attention-seeking behaviors and not truly lethal. “Those were just superficial cuts” or “She only took five pills” are common dismissive statements that professionals may offer when confronted with NSSIs. However, as students desensitize themselves to physical pain in the course of NSSIs as a direct result of significant intrapersonal pain and distress, those students who engage in NSSIs are in effect “acquiring a capability for suicide.”

Precipitating Stressors

Although warning signs that represent internal states or behaviors of students at risk are helpful to remember, it also helps to know about stressful life events that may put students at risk. Student support personnel may be in a position to assist students who have experienced traumatic events or significant life stressors and demonstrate warning signs for suicide. However, this requires school systems to consider how to appropriately and legally share sensitive information about students.

For example, schools may be able to identify currently scheduled meetings such as grade-level, department-level, or instructional support team/student support team meetings to discuss students who demonstrate warning signs. Additional team members, such as classroom teachers or administrators, may be able to identify significant life events or other risk factors that, when understood in the context of specific warning signs, may allow for a life-saving intervention.

These communication processes require discussion regarding roles, confidentiality, and an individual's "need to know." Specifically, school personnel can maintain a student's or family's confidentiality by simply stating they experienced a significant traumatic event, or are struggling with significant stress, without providing additional detail. Ultimately, the goal of these communications processes is to "catch" students who have known risk factors and demonstrate warning signs for intervention—not to provide the school community details about an individual's situation. See the following image for a summary of precipitating stressors that may trigger suicidal behavior.

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

Precipitating Stressors	
● Breakup from boyfriend or girlfriend	● Bullying or victimization
● Disappointment and rejection (college admission, romantic relationship or dispute)	● Unwanted pregnancy, abortion
● Getting in trouble with authorities (school or police)	● Sexually-transmitted infection, HIV
● Death of a loved one/significant other	● Anniversary of the death of a friend or loved one
● Conflict with family, family dysfunction	● Physical/emotional separation from friends, boyfriend/girlfriend
● Disappointment with school results, school failure	● Relational, social, work or financial lows
● High demands at school during examination periods	● Severe or terminal illness
	● Serious injury that may change the individual's life course

Precipitating stressors that may trigger suicidal behavior

Application

How might this look in my professional practice?

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

Identify warning signs and precipitating stressful events of student suicide.

Below is a vignette that will provide you with practice identifying potential warning signs and precipitating stressful events of student suicide. Read the vignette and answer the questions below. At the conclusion of this lesson you will be provided with a tool to help you identify potential warning signs and precipitating stressful events of student suicide in your professional practice.

A 12th grade student is referred to you by his parent, who calls to ask that you talk to her son about his plans for the future. The student has been a straight-A student for most of his life, does several extracurriculars, and seems to be quite popular in school. However, following a letter of rejection from his top college, his attitude has changed completely. For the last two weeks, she says he has been sleeping constantly, has been skipping his after school activities and avoiding friends who are "just going to move away in three months anyway", and has been hesitant to follow up with any of his fall-back schools. She says she finally decided to call because after failing a major test in physics yesterday, a subject that has never been hard for him, he came home and cried for much of the evening. She is worried, especially by his comments of "it doesn't even matter if I failed. What's the point now?"

What risk factors are present in the vignette?

- Disappointment and rejection
- Bullying or victimization

- c) School Stress
- d) Emotional distance from friends

Correct answer(s): a) Disappointment and rejection, c) School Stress, d) Emotional distance from friends

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

- Know the warning signs and educate colleagues about them. Sometimes even the use of placards that are attached to ID badges during stressful times for students are useful ways for everyone to remember what to look for.
- Empower teachers to let crisis team members know which students may be showing signs of distress or have experienced recent problems.

Overcoming Barriers to Implementation

- Educate all staff regarding warning signs and offer direct consultation and support when needed.
- Be wary of talk of “drama” or “attention-seeking”. Although a student may be experiencing a stressor that feels (to an adult) as a routine part of growing up (e.g., breaking up with a significant other) or frequently be at the center of peer relationship problems, it is no less a concern for risk. Students seeking attention by threatening suicide are, in fact, in need of attention.

Collaboration Strategies

- Schedule regular opportunities for teachers and staff to refer students that are experiencing challenges (e.g., case meetings, grade level or department meetings).
- Make referrals and transmission of information easier for all members of the school community including anonymous tip lines, referral drop boxes, and easy email portals for risk can make it simpler for students to get help.

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:7fad3bfc-7452-42ca-a282-4441b0f84eb1>

Feedback

How can I help improve this training?

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

Identify warning signs and precipitating stressful events of student suicide.

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=suicide11

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.

Joiner, T. E., Jr., Van Orden, K. A., Witte, T. K., & Rudd, M. D. (2009). The interpersonal theory of suicide: Guidance for working with suicidal clients. American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/11869-000>

Miller, D. N., & Eckert, T. L. (2009). Youth Suicidal Behavior: An Introduction and Overview. *School Psychology Review*, 38(2), 153–167.

Shneidman, E. S. (1993). *Suicide as psychache: A clinical approach to self-destructive behavior*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

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.

Proceed to the next training

Click on the link below to move on to the next training titled *Suicide Risk Assessment Best Practices*. In this training, you will 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/

Return to the module directory

Click on this button to return to the module directory.

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