Recognizing and Responding to Students in Distress

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We’ll consider:

- Distress and violence - some proportion
- Suicide 101 - Things we’ve learned (so far..)
- Suicide prevention on a college campus
- Recognizing and Responding to Students in Distress
- Resources and training options
Violence in proportion

Out of 100,000 people:

5,000 will consider suicide
12 will die by suicide
6-7 will die by homicide

98-99% of people who die by suicide do not hurt anyone else.
(Of the 1-2% who do, it’s almost always involve an intimate partner or family member)

Distress is common. Violence is rare.

Violence toward others is even MORE rare.
The good news.....

Most people who are distressed do not consider violence.

Most who consider violence don’t act on their thoughts...

Something else happens....
Suicide 101...

Some things we’ve learned.
Suicide 101...

People who talk about, joke about or make frequent reference to suicide... may be thinking of suicide.

(this may be how they let others know of their distress)

We need to take them seriously...
Suicide 101...

Most people who consider suicide have terribly mixed feelings about **LIFE** and **DEATH**.

*Most are desperate for relief.*
*Most want help....*
Mixed Feelings?
Suicide 101...

Most who are having thoughts of suicide let others know of their distress...
Suicide 101...

Early identification and intervention are key.

As with everything else, it’s easier to deal with problems when we catch them early.
Suicide 101...

Asking someone directly about thoughts of suicide lowers anxiety, opens up communication and lowers the risk.*

(*It helps to have training).*
Some other things we’ve learned:

- College students at HALF the risk of suicide compared to age-mates.
- Mental/emotional distress is the most common reason for medical withdrawal from college.
- Supporting distressed students increases retention rates.
- Suicide prevention can reduce risk for other forms of violence.
Some other things we’ve learned:

♦ Early Identification and Intervention are an important part of a comprehensive campus suicide prevention/health promotion plan.

♦ A part.......so what else?

♦ Suicide prevention on a college campus- the big picture
The Jed Foundation
“Bubble Chart”

Details for each “bubble” available at the Suicide Prevention Resource Center pages on campus planning: http://www2.sprc.org/collegesanduniversities/comprehensive-approach
The Jed Foundation/ Suicide Prevention Resource Center “Bubble Chart”

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Recognizing and Responding to Students in Distress
(the demo)
Who might be in distress? ANYONE

How will you know?
We’ll look at:

- Statistics
- Red Flags
- Warning signs
Population statistics (patterns across large groups) *don’t predict risk* for an individual.
Recognizing distress....

We have to focus on *individuals*...
...on *individual* behavior
Red Flags & Warning Signs

The more things you see, the more often they occur, the longer they last..... the greater the concern.
In general, we are worried about:

CHANGE FOR THE WORSE

And remember, that can be different for everyone.........
“RED FLAGS”
CAUSE FOR CONCERN...

But don’t (by themselves)
predict risk for violence.
“RED FLAGS”:

- Withdrawal from others
- Increased conflict with others
- Increase in school absences
- Neglect of personal care
- Decline in academic or work performance
- Sleepy/lethargic/change in sleeping patterns
"RED FLAGS":

- Change in appetite or weight
- Slowed movement and speech
- Increase in minor illnesses/aches/pain
- Crying or angry outbursts
- Dropping previously enjoyed activities
- Impulsively/ recklessness
- Self-injurious behaviors
“RED FLAGS”:

- Prolonged sadness or anger
- Prolonged apathy and boredom
- Exaggerated guilt
- Persistent anger
- Disconnectedness—particularly marginalization
- Hopelessness
- Helplessness
Untreated or undertreated mental illness:

- Depression or dysthymic disorder
- Anxiety disorders
- Substance abuse disorder
- Bipolar disorders
- Schizophrenia (Disturbed beliefs, suspicions, delusions or hallucinations)

(First symptoms often seen in young adulthood)
Once I recognize a student in distress...

HOW CAN I HELP? (and what’s my comfort level?)

WHAT ARE MY OPTIONS?

WHAT ARE MY RESOURCES?
Planning a response:

Consider your options....

1. Consult with someone else... who would that be?

2. Talk with the person yourself

   “You OK? I’ve been noticing.....”

   “You don’t seem like your usual self....”

   “I’m worried about you because....”

   “I care... I’m worried.... I would want to help”
If you decide to talk to the student yourself:

1. Talk alone in a private setting.
2. Give yourself plenty of time.
3. Let the person know of your concerns.
   Tell WHY you are concerned- specifically: “I’ve noticed...”
4. Allow the person to talk freely. Listen HARD
5. Don’t try to fix their problems. Just listen well.
6. Focus on importance of getting help when appropriate.
7. Have your resources handy.
“At Risk for College Faculty”

• Available to all Virginia campuses at no cost
• Individual on-line training (takes about 45 minutes)
• Guidance and practice for having this conversation with a student
Making a referral.....

Inform and recommend....

Getting help is a sign of strength....

A short story about help seeking?
Warning Signs......

...are more concerning and need to be noticed, reported and investigated.

“A culture of reporting....”
Threats to self or others?

- “Nothing will matter after tomorrow”
- “You’d be better off without me”
- “I wish I were dead”
- “I wish I’d never been born”
- “You’ll be sorry when I’m gone”
- Saying “Goodbye”
Threats to self or others?

- Talking about or threatening suicide
- Having a plan for suicide
- Increased or excessive drug/alcohol use
- Making final plans, giving things away, making a will
- Previous suicide attempt (esp. if no treatment)
Threats to self or others?

- Stated wish to die/preoccupied with death (i.e., thoughts, music, reading)
- Hopelessness (“Things won’t get better.”)
- Lack of resources (or a perceived lack)
- Availability of a lethal means (esp. firearm)
Threats to self or others?

- Threats (verbal or written) to harm others
- Abusive language
- Attempts to intimidate
- Aggression as problem-solving (or response to frustration)
- Stalking or harassment
Continuum of Threats

- Warning of impending violence
- Attempts to intimidate
- Thrill of causing a disruption
- Attention-seeking, boasting
- Fleeting expressions of anger
- Jokes
- Figures of speech

Cornell, 2010
Training and Other Resources
Available in an E-book format at:
CampusSuicidePrevention.org
“At Risk for College Faculty”

• Available to all Virginia campuses at no cost
• Individual on-line training (takes about 45 minutes)
• Guidance and practice for having this conversation with a student
Supporting Vets on Campus
safeTALK

• 3-hour training
• Basic helper skills
• Learn to *ASK ABOUT SUICIDE*
• Learn skills to *CONNECT THE PERSON TO CARE*
ASIST

“Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training”

• 2-day training
• Advanced helper skills
• Learn to ASK ABOUT SUICIDE
• Learn INTERVENTION SKILLS
• Learn needed for SAFETY PLANNING

ASIST is suicide prevention FIRST AID
Mental Health
First Aid

“Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training”

- 2-day training
- Advanced helper skills
- Learn to **ASK ABOUT SUICIDE**
- Learn **INTERVENTION SKILLS**
- Learn needed for **SAFETY PLANNING**
Recognizing and Responding to Suicide Risk: Essential Skills for Clinicians (RRSR)

- 2-day training for mental health clinicians
- *Clinical assessment skills*
- *Treatment planning*
- *Documentation protocols*
Threat Assessment Training for college communities

Virginia Resources:

• The Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services
  Dr. Gene Deisinger, Deputy Chief of Police and Director of Threat Management Services at Virginia Tech

• The Curry School of Education at UVA
  Dr. Dewey Cornell, Prof. of Education at the University of VA and Director of the Virginia Youth Violence Project
References and related reading:


*A Call for More Effective Prevention of Violence* (2012). Multiple authors. *The Curry School of Education News*

*Recognizing and Responding to Students in Distress: A Faculty Handbook*. [www.CampusSuicidePrevention.org](http://www.CampusSuicidePrevention.org)

*The Blind Men and The Elephant*. South Asian folklore
Additional Resources:

♦ The Suicide Prevention Resource Center: SPRC.org
♦ The JED Foundation: jedfoundation.org
♦ The Healthy Minds Study: healthyminds.org
♦ LivingWorks, Inc.: livingworks.org
♦ At Risk: kognito.com
♦ Active Minds: activeminds.org
♦ The Healthy Minds Study: healthymindsstudy.org
♦ What A Difference Campaign: whatadifference.samhsa.org
Questions?

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