



Identifying Signs of Suicide and Non-Suicidal Self-Injury

Suicide is currently the second leading cause of death among adolescents.ⁱ Over the last decade, the rate of suicide among adolescents increased by 61.7% with 2,039 youth suicides reported in 2018.ⁱⁱ Educators interact with adolescents nearly every day and are essential to identifying the first signs of trouble.ⁱⁱⁱ This document highlights warning signs of suicide and non-suicidal self-injury, and provides tools for building system capacity to support students through targeted professional development, evidence-based suicide prevention programs and procedures, and targeted resources for families.

Signs of Suicide and Self-Injury

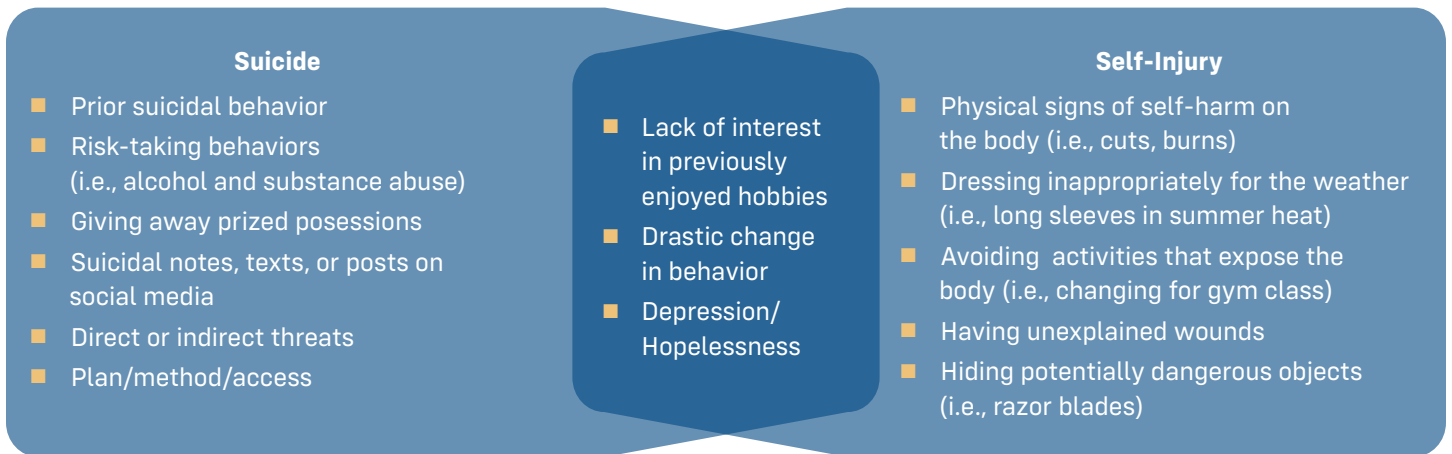
Suicide is the act of taking one’s own life, while non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) refers to actions that are destructive to one’s own body tissue without the intention of dying.^{iv} Both suicide and NSSI are **self-inflicted physical violence**. They are, however, **two separate behaviors** that differ in terms of intention, prevalence, severity, method, and frequency. Although NSSI rarely is lethal, it is much more prevalent and occurs at a higher frequency than suicide. The behaviors also differ in terms of methods, where cutting and burning have been identified as common types of NSSI, and the use of

firearms and self-poisoning are more characteristic of a suicide attempt.^v

Although suicide and NSSI are different, they have been **found to co-occur**. For example, engaging in NSSI might build one’s ability to combat the fear and pain of self-harm, and in turn build capacity for more lethal acts of self-harm.

As both suicide and non-suicidal self-injury cause significant harm to youth, it is critical for educators to recognize the warning signs of each. This diagram outlines warning signs of suicide, those that overlap, and warning signs of self-injury.^{vii}

Warning Signs of...



One District’s Targeted Approach to Suicide Prevention

Effective suicide prevention efforts can take a broader, more proactive approach than simply focusing on crisis management. The Clark County School District, for example, implemented **Lifeline** in November 2020 to assist with student social and emotional wellbeing. Lifeline is a process that identifies students’ social, emotional, and mental health needs and proactively matches timely, tailored, and tiered interventions to those areas of need. The process includes a one-on-one “check-in” intervention provided to students by the school’s **Multidisciplinary Leadership Team (MLT)**. The MLT was started on all campuses when school closures occurred in 2020. This **flow chart** provides the student referral structure for school MLT teams. Once a student’s needs are identified and prioritized based on severity, the necessary interventions, support, and resources are immediately provided to students who are displaying signs or voicing concerns of trauma and/or crisis. Specifically, the Lifeline process provides immediate support for students identified as at risk of suicide while reducing access to means of self-harm. Equipped with this information, schools are better able to plan, prepare, and provide tiered interventions and support to all students to help them to cope with and overcome the vast traumatic experiences in their lives.

Key Practices for Staff

- **Don't be afraid to TALK about suicide.** Talking about suicide doesn't lead to suicidal ideas. It provides an open space for students to share their feelings and may increase the likelihood that they will seek help in the future.
- **Step up outreach and support for students around key events and milestones throughout the year,** such as graduation.
- **Create a safe space** for students to talk and ask questions.
- **Use "I" statements** (i.e., "I've noticed you seem down lately.")
- **Ask direct questions** such as "Are you thinking about killing yourself?"^{viii}
- **Develop and communicate school procedures for crisis response.**
- If danger seems present, **call 911 or a suicide hotline.**
- **Provide families with mental health resources.**^{ix} This may include [sending home resources](#) that describe and give examples of the warning signs of suicide and self-injury.
- **Establish a follow-up plan with parents** after sending home resources.

Action Steps for Districts

Based on your district's readiness for identifying and supporting students at risk for suicide and self-harm, here are **three potential next steps**.

1. **Ensure all schools have procedures in place for identifying and supporting students in crisis.** Many school districts are grappling with increased incidents of attempted and completed suicides. Districts must confirm there are no "gaps in the safety net" and that all schools have a plan in place.
2. **Provide targeted professional development to improve prevention.** Most educators may not have the skills or experience to recognize the signs of self-harm and suicide. Targeted professional development is key to improving early identification and prevention.
3. **Develop materials and resources schools can use for family outreach.** Verify that these resources are available in multiple languages and include contact information and clear instructions on where and when to seek help.

Where to start?

Review/distribute resources such as:

- [Intervening with suicidal ideation: Fact sheet](#)
- [Brief evidence-based video on understanding suicide](#)
- [Research videos on suicide developed by AFSP](#)
- [Recommendations for reporting suicide](#)
- [Sample bereavement letters for staff, parents, and students](#)

Strategies

Provide Suicide Education

- [Host a speaker](#)
- [Host an interactive community public awareness event](#)
- [Offer the SMART program for groups of students who want to implement suicide education](#)
- [Engage with webinar titled "Prioritizing Mental Health During Back to School: A Discussion for K-12 Parents/Guardians, Educators and Staff"](#)
- [Offer free two-hour training on suicide prevention for middle school and high school staff](#)

Implementing Suicide Prevention Practices

- [The Youth Suicide Prevention School-Based Guide](#)
- [Adopt/Implement the "Model School District Policy"](#)
- [Suicide curriculum \(subscription fee\)](#)
- [Social-Emotional Learning \(SEL\) curriculum \(Pre-K-Elementary Edition & Middle-High School Edition\)](#)
- [Adopt trauma-informed practices](#)

Click [here](#) for references.