



Oregon Youth Suicide Prevention Campaign – Article #6

by Ann Kirkwood, Oregon Health Authority Suicide Intervention Coordinator

Planning May Suicide Prevention Activities

Suicide prevention activities that coaches, athletic directors and trainers are planning will raise awareness about mental health during May 2017. This column focuses on activities athletic staff can initiate, as well as activities schools can undertake to support athletic staff in helping suicidal students.

Before you get started, be familiar with any existing prevention activities in your school, what mental health curriculum is used in classrooms, and procedures for responding to a suicidal youth. Make sure your school is prepared with a protocol for helping youth at risk and counselors are available to help distressed students or staff. **As you raise awareness among youth, you can expect an increase in the number of students and their friends who seek help -- and the school should be ready for this.**

Your May activities should focus on student mental health and emotional wellbeing. Emphasize that help is available and hope is possible. Raise awareness at your school that mental health concerns can be successfully treated and suicide is preventable. **Focus on destigmatizing mental health rather than suicide until your school is prepared with a protocol for helping youth at risk and counselors are on hand to identify distressed students or staff.** Continue reading and see the resources at the end of this article to help you.

Consider events in May that offer a positive, hopeful message to normalize mental health challenges, reduce stigma, and show students how to seek adult help, and from whom. **Do not normalize suicide, normalize mental wellbeing.**

Activities for students:

- *Hold a mural-making project.* By painting on paper tiles, participants can express their interpretations of “Finding Help. Finding Hope.” Construct the mural using these tiles and display it through May.
- *Work with partners to hold a health resource fair.* Include all aspects of physical and oral health as well as mental health, resiliency, depression and stress. *Partner with other organizations.*
- *Host a “Yoga on the Green” event,* where a yoga teacher offers sessions, outside weather permitting, to teach youth relaxation skills. You can consider whether a yoga group could become a standard feature of your school.
- *Hold a basketball tournament for youth, families and school staff.* Distribute behavioral health information focusing on help and hope.
- *Host a “burst the stigma” event by giving youth water balloons and have them burst them open (outside!) to symbolize bursting the stigma about mental health.*
- *Have staff and youth wear green ribbons (for mental health) for a day.* Awareness ribbons are available from the National Federation of Families, <http://www.ffcmh.org/store>

Contact Rob Younger at the Oregon Athletic Coaches Association (ocarob@gmail.com) for copies of materials prepared specifically for your May activities.

Athletic staff events:

Meet with other coaches, athletic directors and trainers to discuss concerns about at-risk students, any needed monitoring over the summer with help from your school counselor, and make plans for next fall. This can include:

- Discuss one of the articles that have appeared in this newsletter monthly since January. Have a general conversation about a topic and brainstorm activities that would be appropriate for your school.
- What services or supports do your students need from coaches to address depression, anxiety and suicide?
- What can you do to provide those services and supports?
- Discuss how you can change how you work with teams and individual students to become leaders, to better identify suicide risk and talk about it with student athletes. Do we put too much pressure on students? Do we know when they're having trouble socially or in class that can lead to hopeless thinking? If they are having difficulties, do we cut them from the team?
- How do we work with parents when we're worried about a student? How can you capitalize on your relationships with parents by pointing out worrisome behaviors or statements and support the parent by mobilizing the right people in your school as they seek help for their child?
- Are there specific youth we're concerned about who might need extra help over the summer?

What your school can do for you:

Systems and Protocol Development

Before a suicide occurs is the time for planning and resource development. Best practices in suicide prevention indicate that each school should have protocols and procedures for suicide prevention and post-suicide response (postvention). These protocols outline roles and responsibilities and processes for faculty and staff to follow. Schools can:

- Make sure the school has a prevention and post-suicide intervention strategy;
- Make sure that protocols are developed, updated, and staff trained to follow them;
- Meet with educators at a staff meeting to review the protocols or form a committee to write them (technical assistance and best practice guidelines are available from the Oregon Health Authority to assist you).

Schools are better prepared for suicide prevention and post-suicide response when educators and staff have training on how to talk to students about suicide in a safe and non-judgmental way. The following are recommended practices for staff training:

- Two staff members should be trained in best practice "Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST)". Not all staff should attend a more in depth training like this, but at least two people from each school should be designated as those who have a higher level of skills to intervene with students at risk for suicide. This program may be offered for free in some instances so please see the resources section at the end of the article for information.
- All faculty and staff (including bus drivers, cafeteria workers, and administrative assistants) should receive a 1-2-hour training in general principles of suicide prevention and intervention, such as Question Persuade Refer (QPR) or More than Sad (MTS). There are organizations that provide these programs for free so please see the resources at the end of the article for more information. These short programs can even be offered to parents at Back to School nights next fall.
- Once Staff are trained and ready to respond to suicide risk appropriately, consider adopting a program focused on and led by youth. One best practice program being used in Oregon is Sources of Strength.

Resources

- **Ann Kirkwood** – Oregon Health Authority Youth Suicide Intervention Coordinator
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- Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST): <https://www.livingworks.net/programs/asist/>
- Question Persuade (QPR): <https://www.qprinstitute.com/>
- More than Sad (MTS): www.morethansad.org
- Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC) to find Best Practice programs for suicide prevention:
<http://www.sprc.org/>
- Model School Policy for Suicide Prevention: https://afsp.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Model-Policy_FINAL.pdf
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA) guides for suicide prevention
<https://www.samhsa.gov/suicide-prevention>