

"Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world"

- Nelson Mandela



A MESSAGE TO SCHOOLS ON IDENTIFYING AND SUPPORTING LEARNERS AT RISK OF DEPRESSION AND SUICIDE

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What role can the school governing body play?

- Ensure that the School Based Support Team (SBST) is established and is functional.
- It is crucial that any concerns for depression be investigated further. Inform the parent about your concern and request that an appointment is scheduled as soon as possible with the school nurse, mental health professionals such as psychologists and psychiatrists or physician for an examination and assessment.

What role can the school based support team play?

- The SBST should promote awareness on suicide, depression and other psychosocial conditions.
- The SBST should identify learners at risk and facilitate support from relevant service providers and monitor progress.
- A directory of service providers in the vicinity of the school should be developed and made well known at the school.
- Encourage a programme of story writing, book club, poetry, art, music, and dance in the school as well as sports to encourage child participation, increase connectedness and cohesion.

What role can a parent/ caregiver play?

- Build a good relationship with your child.
- Please seek help, should you worry that your child may be depressed or at risk of suicide (Refer to the sections: what are the symptoms of depression and what are the warning signs and risk factors of suicide?).
- Regarding suicide: When the child makes overt threats to take/ end their life, take it seriously. Please also read the section “ what role can the educator play”, for more tips that you can use should your child threaten to commit suicide.
- You can consult a local NGO for support or use the contact details for SADAG at the back of this pamphlet.

- Once depression is diagnosed, the class teacher must note it on the learner’s profile. The class teacher will develop an Individual Development Plan for the learner and request a meeting with the School Based Support Team to provide support with planning of intervention strategies. If the learner needs a high level of support, the District Based Support Team will be involved.

What is suicide?

Suicide is when a person takes his or her own life. Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem.

What are suicidal thoughts? This is where a learner thinks about suicide. They may or may not have a plan. All expressed thoughts of suicide must be taken seriously. Asking questions about how, when and where they plan to commit suicide, will assist to elicit the level of risk for suicide, and thus the action to be taken. **Note:** Asking these questions will not make the person kill themselves.

It is also important to take into account that not all suicides are well thought out in advance; others are impulsive. This is especially true of people who are unable to cope with depression.

What is a suicide attempt? This is where a suicidal plan results in actually trying to end life but is not successful and the person survives. This is also called para-suicide. In some instances, it may be a cry for help rather than an actual attempt at suicide.

What are the warning signs and risk factors of suicide?

If a learner you know seems depressed or gloomy and spends a lot of time questioning why life is worthwhile or why life is so unfair, it is time to pay attention.

Most suicidal young people don’t really want to die; they just want their pain to end. Being able to recognise warning signs in a learner’s behaviour as well as being alert to the risk factors, can both assist in combating suicide.

Behavioural signs

Signs may include the following:

- Pre-occupation with death or dying; reading, writing or talking about suicide;
- Indirect threats such as, “I’ll be going away” or “I won’t be around much longer”;
- Giving away prized possessions (accompanied by the indirect threats);
- Persistent sadness, irritability or talking about feeling worthless and hopeless;

- Expressing rage or anger at the world;
- **Lack of interest in school or poor academic performance;**
- **Missing classes or dropping out of classes and/or hobbies previously enjoyed;**
- Loss of interest in personal appearance and unusual lack of energy;
- Self-inflicted wounds;
- Loss of interest in most activities and withdrawal from others; and
- Use or increasing use of drugs or alcohol.

It is important to note that the above signs may also indicate the risk of other psychosocial conditions and not suicide only.

Risk factors

In addition to the warning signs, there are some key risk factors to keep in mind that increase the likelihood of suicide attempts. These include:

- Previous suicide attempt(s);
- Close family members having committed suicide or attempted suicide;
- Recent significant loss or setback;
- Having a mental illness such as depression;
- Extreme stress or difficulty in coping with stressful or traumatic experience(s);
- Isolation/ lack of connection to family and friends;
- Impulsiveness and risk taking behaviour;
- Fighting or breakup with boyfriend or girlfriend or fights with friends;
- Being a bully or being bullied, teased or ridiculed;
- Poor academic performance/ repeating grade/s;
- Difficulty in dealing with sexual orientation; and
- Unplanned and/or unwanted pregnancy.

Why is it important to identify learners who are suicidal?

Suicide is a significant problem in South Africa and affects everyone including young people. Research indicates that approximately six to eight thousand people commit suicide in South Africa every year, making suicide the third commonest cause of unnatural death after homicide and unintentional causes (such as motor vehicle accidents and drowning). On average 9% of deaths in people between 14 and 35 years in South Africa are due to suicide. This is almost as high as adult suicide rates. Suicidal behaviour among children as young as 10 years has been reported; but most occur in the 15-19 year age group followed by the 10-14 year age group.

About 80% of persons who die display warning signs, making it essential that we all know the signs and can identify learners at risk in order to prevent suicide. It is equally important that educators and fellow learners know the appropriate actions to take.

What role can the educator play?

It is crucial that any concerns about suicide warning signs or evident risk factors be investigated further. Inform the parent about your concern and request that an appointment is scheduled as soon as possible with the school nurse, psychologist and other professionals or physician for an examination and assessment. However, once a suicide plan is communicated, the educator/ school must immediately assist the learner as best as possible in managing the crisis and not leave the learner alone.

- Take suicide threats seriously. Ask directly about thoughts of suicide. Ask questions such as, *“Are you thinking about killing yourself?”*. Note: A detailed plan indicates greater risk.
- Do not act shocked, condemn or be judgemental. Remain calm.
- Listen and offer support allowing the learner to express their feelings. Express your concerns about their suicidal plans in a non-judgmental way. Say things like: *“I’m here for you”, “Let’s talk”, “I’m here to help”*.
- Ask the learner to give up any objects or substances that can cause harm.
- Refer them to professional help. Offer to accompany them to seek help.
- Don’t leave the learner alone if you feel the risk to their safety is immediate; if they have expressed an immediate plan, or have access to a gun or other potentially deadly means. **GET HELP IMMEDIATELY.**
- It is important for educators to not treat a suicidal threat lightly even if the person begins to joke about it. If a learner says that he or she wants to die, it is worthy of attention. At the very least, it may just require a heart-to-heart talk.
- In severe cases, arrange for the learner to be transported to hospital immediately for professional assistance. Stay with the learner until s/he is assisted.