COVID – 19: Suicide Prevention during the 2020 Holiday Season

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Opening remarks

- Suicide has touched many lives including mine.
- There are millions of suicide survivors. It is estimated that every suicide profoundly affects 18 people in a life altering way and impacts on average 135 people to some degree.
- The vast majority of suicides can be prevented and that will be the focus of today’s webinar.
- You can be the difference to save a life!
what would you say if someone tells you this . . . ?

Read the scenario,
Think of your response,
Say it aloud

“Ever since the breakup, I haven’t been able to study. I just found out that I’m losing my job. I am not sure I want to live.”
how you could respond

You probably said something like this

“You are in pain and overwhelmed. Are you thinking of suicide? If so you are not the first person to have those thoughts and there is help available. I am here for you.”
how you could respond

- Show empathy
  "It’s hard to concentrate when you’re in pain. And now you’re getting hit with another loss. You must feel overwhelmed.

- Ask directly about suicide
  "Are you thinking of killing yourself?"

- Call for help
  "It sounds like you could use some support. I know someone who can help. Let’s call now."
# what *not* to do if someone is suicidal

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<thead>
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<th><strong>DO NOT</strong></th>
<th>What to Avoid</th>
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<td>• Criticize or judge, try to change, or make light of what the person is thinking or feeling.</td>
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<td>• Minimize the potential for harm.</td>
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<td>• Agree to secrecy or try to handle it yourself.</td>
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<td>• Wait to seek help.</td>
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<td>• Believe denials if there are warning signs.</td>
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<td>• Leave a potentially suicidal person alone.</td>
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what to do to prevent suicide

DO - Take all threats of suicide *seriously* and **call for help**.

- Stay with the person. Do not leave them alone. Get help.

DO - Listen *empathically* to what the person is saying.

- Demonstrate that you grasp what they are facing and how they are feeling.

DO - Ask *directly* about suicidal thoughts & plans.

- “Are you thinking about ending your life?” “Have you thought about killing yourself?”
What impact will COVID-19 have on suicide rates?

• Will the isolation contribute to increased suicides? Social isolation is the strongest predictor of suicide.
• Americans have had reduced access to extended family, friends, religious and community support and mental health services.
• Many Americans have lost loved ones to COVID-19.
• Is there a lesson from history we can look to for answers?
Pandemics and suicide rates

• The Spanish Flu (100 years ago) in the U.S increased suicide rates due to fear and decreased social interactions.

• The SARS outbreak in Hong Kong in 2003 increased suicide rates especially for the elderly.

• There have been numerous news reports of increased suicides around the world due to COVID-19.

• COVID-19 will likely adversely affect the following: domestic violence, child abuse, alcohol consumption, access to firearms, and exacerbate pre-existing mental health conditions.
Suicide Rates in U.S.

- Highest in 50 years with over 48,000 suicides in 2018.
- 10th leading cause of death and a suicide occurs every 10.9 minutes.
- Males account for nearly 78% of suicides and females slightly over 22%.
- Significant increase in suicide rates for middle school age youth (up 16% from 2017).
- Suicide rates have nearly doubled in the last decade for Black children.
- Suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death for those 10 to 34.
- Suicide rates have increased for veterans and middle age Caucasian men.
- Suicide rates have always been high for the elderly.
- Guns account for slightly more than 50% of suicides.
Suicide in Perspective
Myth or Fact?

Talking about suicide encourages it.

Discussion about suicide prevention, presented carefully in an educational context, does not cause suicidal behaviors. Given that suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death among college students, does it make sense not to be talking about it?
Suicide in Perspective
Myth or Fact?

Suicide happens without warning and people who talk about killing themselves rarely follow through.

Most people who die by suicide have given some verbal, behavioral, or written clues/warnings of their intention.
Suicide in Perspective
Myth or Fact?

All suicidal people are deeply depressed.

X

Depression is often closely associated with suicidal feelings, but not all people who kill themselves are obviously depressed. Some are victims of harassment or abuse. Other factors contributing to suicide include impulsivity, anger, and substance abuse.
Suicide in Perspective
Myth or Fact?

When people are determined to die by suicide, nothing will stop them.

Even very depressed people have mixed feelings about dying. Many suicidal people view death as a way of ending their pain. The desire to die, can change with successful treatment. Most individuals who survived their suicide attempt never attempted again.
What do we know about suicide rates during the holiday time in late November and December?

- Suicides rates have always been high for adults at this holiday time.
- Suicide rates for youth have peaked more in the late spring and early summer.
- The 2020 holiday season may not be as joyous as we all dream of. It will be very different as families likely will not attend large family gatherings which will increase isolation.
- There are many news reports of family members catching COVID-19 at large gatherings.
California YRBS High School Survey 2019 in the last 12 months

- 45.3% felt sad or hopeless
- 26.6% seriously considered suicide
- 23.7% made a plan
- 9.2% made one or more attempts

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Do most adolescents receive treatment for their depression?

- Research estimates that 20% of adolescents suffer from depression at some point during their teen years.
- Estimates are that 80% receive no treatment whatsoever.
- Many parents view the signs of depression as typical teen behavior.
- Many parents have been opposed to placing their child on medication for depression as result of the 2003 FDA Black Box Warning that was placed on antidepressants for teens.
- A Harvard research study released this month found that the FDA warning and the fact it resulted in fewer adolescents receiving medication for depression likely contributed to the increased suicide rate for teens. The authors called for the FDA to remove the Black Box Warning.
- California has legislative initiatives to improve suicide prevention in schools.
Kaiser Foundation Survey

- Majority 72% of Americans reported their lives have been disrupted by COVID-19.
- Majority 59% are worried about financial security with 39% already having reduced income.
- Majority 53% worry about a family member getting sick.
- Majority 57% worry about putting themselves at risk because they can’t afford to miss work.
- Forty-five per cent reported COVID-19 stress is harming their mental health.
National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention Survey Fall of 2020

• The majority of the 2000 adults surveyed (81%) said that because of the pandemic suicide prevention should be a national priority.
• Ninety-three percent said suicide can be prevented.
• Sixty-nine percent identified barriers that keep them from discussing suicide with others such as lacking knowledge, being uncomfortable with the topic and not knowing what to say.
Quotes from the field from my interviews which are in the Suicide and Violence Prevention Newsletters

https://www.nova.edu/suicideprevention/

• Suicide prevention is held back because of a lack of funding as suicide prevention funding lags significantly behind that for the other leading causes of death in the U.S. (Dr. Lanny Berman former Executive Director of the American Association of Suicidology)

• Separating an individual from the method that they are intending on using for suicide is the most powerful tool we have to keep suicidal people alive, and I don't think there's a close second. (Dr. Michael Anestis author of Guns and Suicide)
Joiner’s Model of Suicide Risk, 2006

Figure 1: Thomas Joiner’s model of suicide risk, 2006
World Health Organization: What Works to Prevent Suicide?

- Reduce lethal means available to suicidal individuals.
- Increase education about the warning signs of suicide, especially for physicians.
- Provide mental health services to suicidal individuals.
Common Suicide Warning Signs

• Statements about death, dying and suicide either verbal or written.
• Statements about hopelessness and despair or feeling trapped.
• Giving away prized possessions.
• Making out a will.
• Dramatic changes in behavior.
• The majority of those individuals who died by suicide exhibited one or more of these warning signs.
Means Restriction

- Means Matter at Harvard summarized research around the world and reducing access to lethal means reduces suicide.

[www.meansmatter.com](http://www.meansmatter.com)
W.H.O. Protective Factors

- Connections to family, the workplace, friends, school and the community.
- Coping and problem solving skills.
- Access to mental health services.
- Knowing when to seek help.
- Religious involvement.
- Lack of access to suicide means.
Challenges for Suicide Prevention

• Many communities lack prevention resources and mental health services.
• Stigma is associated with seeking mental health treatment.
• Most Americans don’t think it could happen to someone they care about.
• Most Americans do not know the warning signs of suicide and believe myths about suicide.
• Most Americans are afraid to ask directly about suicidal thoughts and plans.
• The foundation of a suicide is usually untreated or undertreated mental illness.
• Guns are available in many homes and not properly stored.
• Suicide risk assessment and management is not a requirement for most mental health professionals.
Review Urgent Warning Signs

- Self-destructive hallucinations
- Extreme changes in mood or behavior
- Writing, talking, or hinting about death or suicide
- Purchasing a gun or weapon
- Stockpiling drugs
- Putting affairs in order (Making a will or giving away possessions)
- Sudden happiness and calm, as if things have improved when they have not
Final Thoughts

• This is a critical time for all Americans to know the warning signs of suicide and how to get help for themselves or their loved ones.

• It is my hope that every student learns in school how to get help for themselves or a friend and the next generation of adults will know how to prevent suicide.

• Mental health professionals need to seek out training on suicide assessment and risk management. California required this for psychologists beginning in 2020.

• Suicide prevention funding, which significantly lags behind the funding to reduce the other leading causes of death for Americans, needs to be significantly increased.

• Do not be afraid to simply ask, “Are you thinking of suicide?” I wish that I had asked my father that question the last time I spoke with him!

• Self-care plans for ourselves, our loved ones, our employees and our families are very important during the pandemic which will extend over the holidays!
Suicide Prevention Is Everyone’s Responsibility

“No one can do everything but everyone can do something. And if everyone does something, then together we can change the world.”
Giovani Martine

More Information at NSU Florida Suicide and Violence Prevention Program (SVP)

www.nova.edu/suicideprevention

“Suicide in Schools” by Erbacher, Singer & Poland 2015 Routledge (Revision expected 2021)

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24/7 crisis resources

Suicide Prevention Lifeline
1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255)
Ask and Siri/Google will connect you

Crisis Text Line
Text "HOME" to 741741

Tell Siri on an iPhone

Go to the nearest hospital emergency room
Additional Resources

American Association of Suicidology
www.suicidology.org

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
www.afsp.org

Suicide Prevention Resource Center
www.sprc.org

Download the Suicide Prevention Resources PDF at
QUESTIONS?

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Thank you for your participation!

Keenan