



Navigate360

The Leader in Holistic Safety

Preventing Suicide in Your Schools

Administrators' Guide to Addressing & Preventing Suicide



Featured Subject Matter Expert

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Dr. Scott Poland is a professor at the College of Psychology and director of the Suicide and Violence Prevention Office at NSU Florida. He is a licensed psychologist and an internationally recognized expert on school safety, youth suicide, self-injury, bullying, school crisis prevention/intervention, and threat assessment.

Dr. Poland helped Navigate360 develop a new suicide screening and case management solution featuring the Columbia Suicide Severity Rating Scale (C-SSRS), as well as a robust suicide prevention eLearning and training program available exclusively through Navigate360.



A Message to School Leaders

Talking about suicide is difficult and uncomfortable, especially for those without mental health training. Yet, suicide is affecting our schools at alarming rates.

We commend you for the courage and leadership you're showing by engaging with this guide. Together, we'll explore the concerns school leaders have around suicide, examine what we know about youth suicide, and discuss steps you can take to foster a healthier, safer future for your school. Thank you for taking this important step.



Introduction

No one wants to talk about suicide. It's an unpleasant topic that makes most people feel uncomfortable, especially those not trained in mental healthcare. Tragically, suicide is affecting our schools at alarming rates. That's why we must talk about suicide even though we don't want to.

We want to start by applauding the courage and leadership you're taking right now as you read this guide. We'll look at some of the fears that school leaders have about suicide in their schools, as well as what we know about youth suicide and what you can do to lead your school to a healthier future.

Overcoming Common Misconceptions

“I’m not an expert on suicide prevention. I don’t even know much about mental health at all.” We hear those words over and over when working with school personnel across the country. It’s true: educational leadership programs don’t prepare teachers and administrators to help students cope with mental health issues. In fact, most teachers have had little more than an introduction to psychology course. Yet, we are in schools every day with students who have experienced trauma, students who have mental health conditions, and students in despair. We have the opportunity — and the obligation — to help them.

“I might make things worse!” That’s one of the biggest fears we hear educators express. In most cases, that is a myth. When students know that they have someone on their side, someone who cares about them, someone who wants to help them, they are much more likely to ask for help. If you care enough to read this guide, you are that kind of person. You want to help, and that desire will help you avoid making things worse. In fact, students will see that caring in you and respond to it.

“What you need to do is simply listen. Say, ‘I’m here for you. There is help available. You are not the first person to ever feel this way.’ And we need to get comfortable with simply asking directly, ‘Are you thinking you want to kill yourself?’”

— Dr. Scott Poland

“I don’t want to give them the idea of suicide.” This is perhaps the greatest myth people have about suicide. The reality is, talking with students about suicide has the opposite effect. When someone directly asks, “Are you thinking about suicide? Do you have a plan to die by suicide?” the person in crisis is reminded that they have someone who cares. Someone cared enough to ask that question. Often, asking students about suicide opens the doors for students to get the help they may desperately need.

“Will I get sued?” It’s sad to say, but sometimes people fear asking about suicide because they’re afraid of their own consequences. The truth is, most lawsuits following suicide happened when a school **failed to act**, not when they took the initiative to get help for a student in need. Simply put, ignorance is not a defense for inaction when a student is expressing suicidal ideation.

You’re not an expert on suicide prevention, and that’s okay. You are an expert on your school, and you know and understand the demands of your school population better than any outsider could. That’s why it’s so important that you become informed about suicide. Look for warning signs (dark posts on social media, giving away prized possessions, talking about suicide) and learn how to respond if a student is considered at-risk, has suicidal ideation, has attempted suicide, or even if a student in your school dies by suicide. Let’s start that process by looking at what we already know.



“Do not be afraid of this word: suicide. Do not be afraid to bring it up and talk about it. If a person is suicidal, it gives them a chance to unburden themselves, know that they’re not the only person to feel this way, and there is help available.”

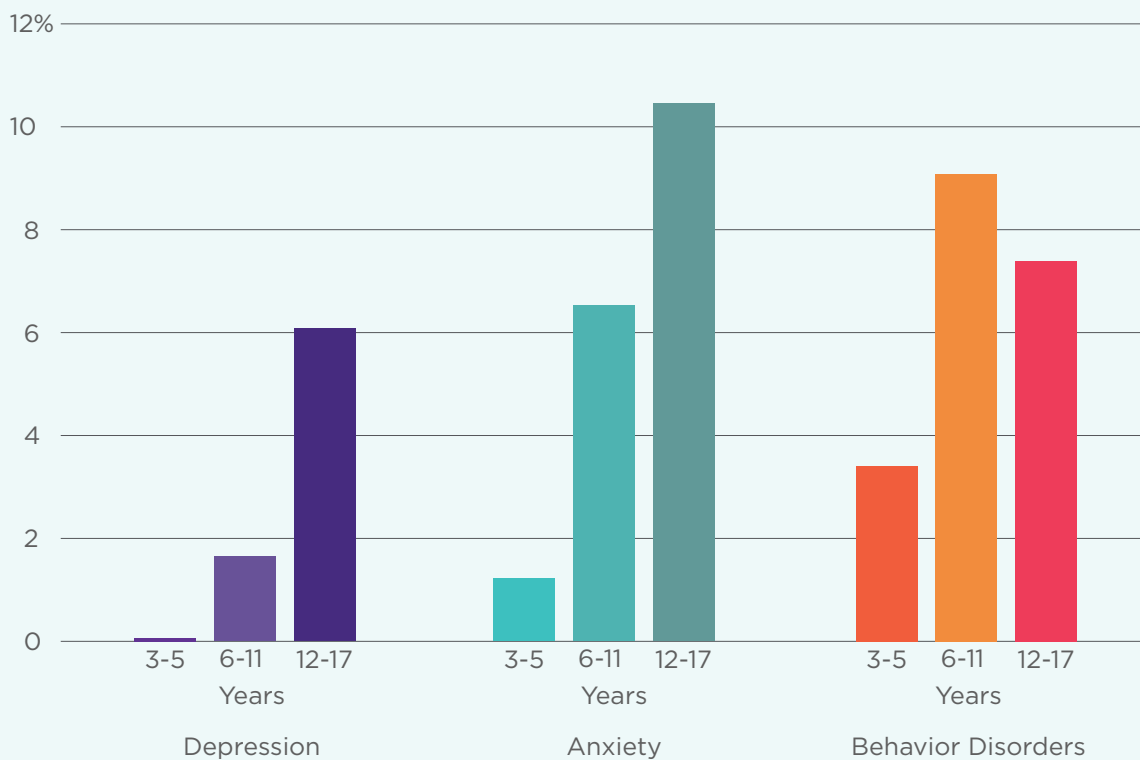
— Dr. Scott Poland

What Do We Know About Suicide?

According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#), mental health disorders among children are common. Nearly 10% of school-aged children are diagnosed with ADHD, and rates of depression and anxiety are steadily increasing. These challenges affect even young children: one in six U.S. children aged 2 to 8 years has a diagnosed mental, behavioral, or developmental disorder, yet many still lack access to high-quality mental healthcare.

Mental health conditions like these can lead to suicide, but it's important to realize that someone doesn't have to be diagnosed with one of these conditions to choose suicide. Suicide affects people of all ages, all genders, and all ethnicities, regardless of socioeconomic background

Depression, Anxiety, Behavior Disorders, by Age



<https://www.cdc.gov/children-mental-health/data-research/index.html>

“Suicide is usually the result of untreated, undertreated mental illness. Often in combination with adverse life experiences, we all simply need to know what to look for, what to do. We need to work as a team in our schools. Unfortunately, there’s still a lot of stigma attached to seeking mental health treatment.”

— Dr. Scott Poland



The Power of Mental Health Education

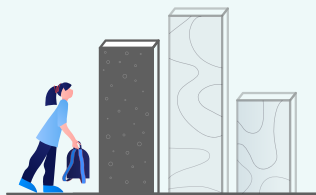
Thoughts of suicide are deeply frightening for those experiencing them and for their caregivers. Yet, addressing this issue is essential. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) suicide is the leading cause of death in the United States.



Second

leading cause of death

among people aged 10-14



Third

leading cause of death
among people aged 15-24



12TH

leading cause of death

OVERALL



We know that education helps. [NAMI](#) reported that “46% of people who die by suicide have a diagnosed mental health condition,” while “90% of people who die by suicide have experienced symptoms of a mental health condition.” At the same time, **we know that mental health education helps students understand and apply positive mental healthcare skills that increase their overall well-being** as they learn to manage stressors, making it an integral component of school-based health services ([Bjornsen et al., 2017](#)). As students learn more about mental health, they also become better able to help others because stigma is reduced and students have a more positive attitude toward people with mental health conditions ([Lanfredi et al., 2019](#)).

“Resiliency is really a learned behavior. When you’re surrounded by loving and caring family and friends, you do better when you’re optimistic about the future. When you utilize problem-solving skills, when you have the opportunity to vent strong emotions, those are the things that help us be resistant in the face of adversity.”

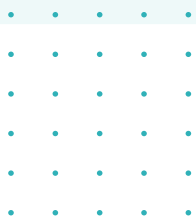
— Dr. Scott Poland

Navigate360’s Together for Zero Pledge

In the face of a growing mental health crisis among students, Navigate360 is committed to leading the way toward a future with zero incidents of self-harm through our Together for Zero pledge. In line with this commitment, schools can sign up and receive Digital Threat Detection: Self-Harm Alerts for free.

This powerful tool utilizes advanced machine learning and evolving language models to scan digital communications in G-Suite and Microsoft to flag self-harm and suicide language, enabling early identification and support.

Scan the QR code to learn more!



What Can I Do?

One of the first things you can do as a leader in your school is to work with school leadership to set up a schoolwide suicide prevention program. This includes creating systems in which teachers learn to care for their own mental health as well as that of their students. As students and teachers learn about mental healthcare together, they will be able to identify positive mental health skills, respond when someone is in a crisis, and be supportive of others coping with mental health conditions.

Planning is integral to a schoolwide suicide prevention initiative. Students, teachers, counselors, and administrators need clear guidance on who to approach for help and what to expect when they do. They must also trust that others will collaborate to ensure those in need receive support quickly.



Know the Signs

Research shows that nine out of 10 individuals who attempt suicide have a history of mental illness or substance abuse, making these extremely important risk factors. Some warning signs of suicide include:

- Noticeable changes in eating or sleeping habits
- Unexplained or unusually severe, violent or rebellious behavior
- Withdrawal from family or friends
- Sexual promiscuity, truancy, and vandalism
- Drastic personality change
- Agitation, restlessness, distress, or panicky behavior
- Talking or writing about committing suicide, even jokingly
- Giving away prized possessions
- Doing worse in school

Source: <https://www.stanfordchildrens.org/en/topic/default?id=teen-suicide-90-P02584>



“I tried to look back on my extensive experience, responding, unfortunately, to tragedies like school shootings and clusters of youth suicide. And the main point is to be there to listen, help me to understand, you know, if there were magic words to say to somebody, I would certainly share them today, but it’s really as simple as, ‘I am here to listen.’”

— Dr. Scott Poland

We must also directly teach students about mental healthcare and suicide prevention. Ask students if they have an adult they can talk to in case of an emergency. If they don’t, that’s already a red flag that the student needs additional support. Provide students with a crisis phone number and text lines that are readily available if (and when) students need them. Provide ongoing mental health education scaffolded across grade levels to help minimize stigma, teach coping skills, and teach students how to respond if they or someone else is considering suicide.

Most importantly, make sure that everyone at your school knows that if they see symptoms of suicide in themselves or someone else, they should speak up immediately. Provide opportunities for students and staff to seek help in safe, supportive ways.

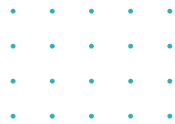
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What's Next?

In the short-term, talk with your school mental health personnel about what can be done immediately to help students, teachers, and other staff who may be struggling with mental health conditions or considering suicide. There may be things you can implement quickly and efficiently right now.

“Do you know what my greatest hope would be? Future generations of Americans would learn the warning signs of suicide, how to get help for yourself or a friend. And they would learn it before they ever graduated from high school. Our surgeon general very simply said, ‘We’ve got to talk about suicide prevention, in our homes, our schools, and our places of worship.’”

— Dr. Scott Poland



You Can Make a Difference

This fact is unfortunate but true: suicide and suicidal ideation are on the rise in this nation's youth, and educators have the critical responsibility of helping these students in their greatest time of need. Knowing how to identify warning signs and help in any way possible to lead students off a path of self-harm is critical. Now is the time to provide students and staff with the mental healthcare and suicide training they need to effectively respond to suicidal ideation or attempted suicide. Having these plans in place now will help you continue to focus on what matters most: Building safe, healthy learning environments where everyone can reach their full potential and thrive.

A Layered, Holistic Approach to Suicide Awareness & Prevention

Schools need education, training, and tools to equip staff and students to care for their mental health and recognize signs of suicide in themselves and their peers. Connect your schools with resources that provide suicide awareness and prevention training, as well as tools for early intervention when it's needed most.



Speak with a safety and well-being expert today about how we can help you build a layered, holistic approach to suicide prevention in your district.

