



Suicide Prevention and Life Promotion Literacy for School Staff

Prepare, Prevent, Respond

Quick Reference Guide

This guide is designed to help you PREPARE, PREVENT, and RESPOND in a situation where a student chooses you for support around suicide. School staff are the EYES, EARS, and HEARTS of the school community. You are well positioned to notice when something isn't right, reach out, and assist students to connect to support when they need it.

PREPARE:

**Know the facts;
know how to promote daily wellness**

As an adult working with children and youth, what are some facts I should know about suicide?

- ▶ Suicide is the second leading cause of death among youth and young adults aged 15-24 in Canada ([Statistics Canada 2024](#)).
- ▶ In Ontario, one-in-six students report serious thoughts of suicide ([OSDUHS, 2023](#)).
- ▶ This means in the average secondary school classroom, there will be students thinking of suicide.
- ▶ Suicide is an issue in elementary schools, as well. It is the second leading cause of death for children aged 10-14, though still relatively rare ([Statistics Canada 2024](#)).
- ▶ We should be especially vigilant for signs of suicide among young people who identify as Indigenous and/or 2S/LGBTQIA+ who have a higher rate of suicide due to disproportionate exposure to and experiences with discrimination, stigma and/or lack of affirmation of their gender or identity ([Suicide Prevention and Life Promotion in Schools](#)).

YOUR ROLE IN SUICIDE PREVENTION

Although school staff are not mental health professionals, you can...

- ▶ help every student to feel a sense of belonging, worth, and achievement at school
- ▶ know your students well enough to notice when something doesn't feel right with them
- ▶ be a good listener when a student reaches out for help
- ▶ engage parents/caregivers, as appropriate, to mobilize supports
- ▶ access school and board staff, who can provide additional needed supports





What causes young people to think about suicide?

Children and youth can experience thoughts of suicide when they feel overwhelmed and helpless about a situation, disconnected from others, and hopeless about the future. Thoughts can also be related to stresses, and feelings of pain and loss, such as those associated with:

- ▶ relationships (conflict, loss of a significant other, bullying, divorce)
- ▶ school (pressure to achieve, learning struggles, feeling they don't belong)
- ▶ oppression, discrimination, and/or feeling unsafe/unsupported (e.g., experiences of racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, poverty, abuse)
- ▶ mental health concerns (depression, anxiety, problematic substance use)

There is no one cause and it is important to be mindful that anyone can have thoughts of suicide.

What can I do to help students to stay mentally well?

One of the most effective strategies for the prevention of suicide is mental health and wellness promotion. As a school staff member, you can help make this part of your daily practice. School Mental Health Ontario has created classroom resources to help, such as the six ways of coping offered in these [Virtual Field Trips](#) and four ready-made secondary school [MH LIT: Student Mental Health in Action](#) lessons on mental health and help-seeking. You can also use [Wayfinder](#), a digital guide of lessons and activities to support mentally healthy learning environments, develop mental health literacy, and promote strategies to support mental health.





PREVENT:

Know what to watch for; know what to say

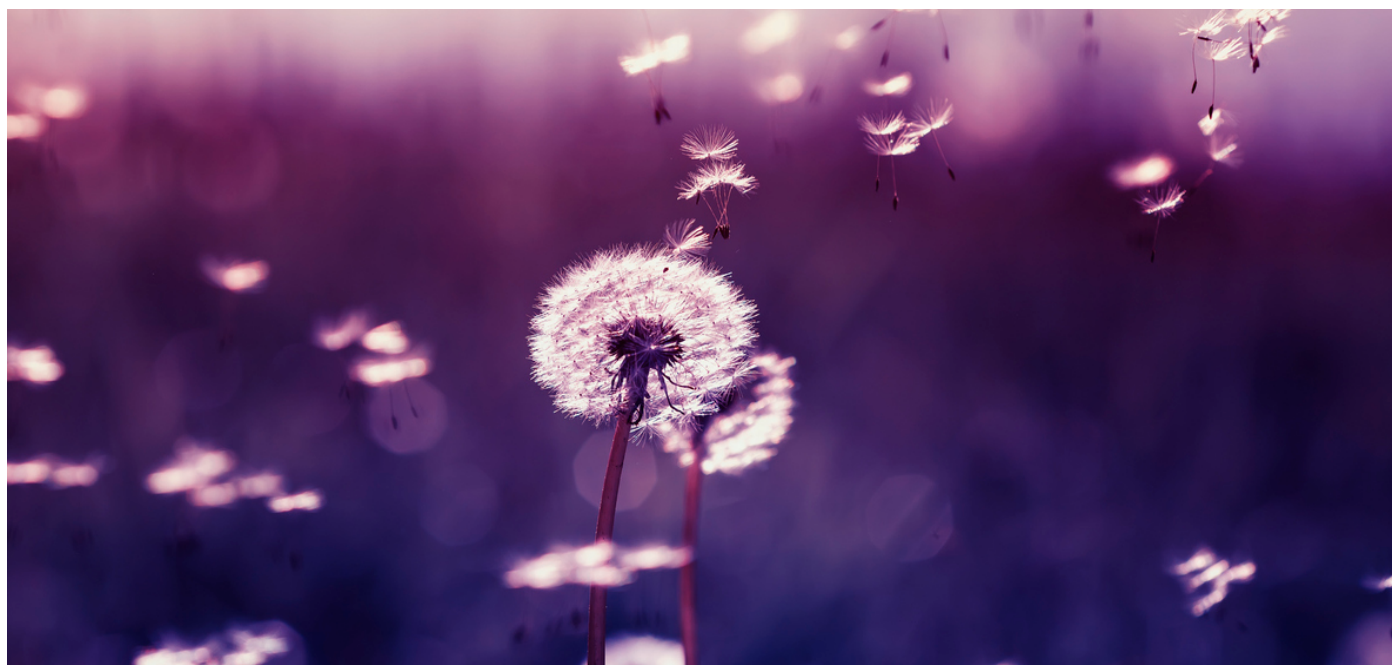
SUICIDE PREVENTION IN SCHOOLS IS UPSTREAM

Suicide prevention is on a continuum and the biggest part of the work includes many practices that occur in schools and classrooms every day. You are already doing this work as you:

- ▶ create safe, caring, inclusive classrooms and schools
- ▶ foster identity-affirming relationships with students
- ▶ check in with students to see how they are doing
- ▶ notice when there are concerns or changes for a student
- ▶ promote social emotional skill development through explicit and identity-affirming instruction

Can talking about suicide put students at greater risk?

Individuals often worry that discussing suicide and asking directly about thoughts of suicide will somehow put these thoughts into a student's mind. As a result, many caring adults avoid the topic. In fact, there is no evidence to suggest that asking someone if they are having thoughts of suicide will increase their risk of developing suicidal thoughts. Rather, talking about suicide shows that you care and that you are available to help in difficult times.





What are some warning signs for suicide?

As a school staff member, you are well-positioned to notice signs of suicidal thoughts and behaviour, when you know what to watch for. Sometimes signs are clear; sometimes they are harder to see. The key is to know your students and **watch for changes**.

Changes in typical behaviours	Issues related to pain and loss	Taking active steps
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> homework quality declines and grades drop daydreaming substance use: sudden onset of use, increased use or misuse of substances negative mood or signs of depression (sadness, irritability, reduced enjoyment of previously enjoyed activities) sudden mood swings neglect of personal appearance withdrawing from classroom, extra-curricular activities, and peers changes in sleeping or eating habits unexplained absences from school violent, rebellious, reckless, or thrill-seeking behaviour 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> loss of an important relationship death of a loved one, especially from suicide loss of self-esteem (school failure, failure to achieve expectations) family disharmony (divorce, parent misuse of substances) family history of mental illness or suicide behaviour frequent family moves serious physical illness physical and/or sexual abuse/assault mental illness conflict with peers, lack of social connection, the experience of bullying and/or social vulnerability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a withdrawn student suddenly becomes outgoing giving away prized possessions talking/writing about killing oneself, e.g. in school work, on social media, in journals, or through artwork verbal or written remarks about being a failure, worthless, a burden and/or isolated collecting or possessing items that could be used for suicidal behaviour (lethal means)

What should I do if I think a student is having thoughts of suicide?

- ▶ find a time, as soon as reasonably possible, when you can speak with the student privately
- ▶ ask if they have a few minutes to connect
- ▶ open the conversation
- ▶ **listen**; for many students, creating a supportive space for sharing what they are experiencing can be a powerful protective intervention in and of itself
- ▶ you may find the student is not considering suicide but needs support in some other way, or you may find that you need to **respond** to risk of suicide right away





RESPOND:

Know what to do if you are concerned; know what to do in a crisis

How can I help a student if they tell me they are having thoughts of suicide?

- ▶ remain calm—or try to convey calm even if you do not feel it
- ▶ name the signs/things you have observed that are making you concerned
- ▶ promise privacy but not confidentiality
- ▶ **ask if they are thinking about suicide**
- ▶ listen actively, allow for silence
- ▶ validate the student's feelings but not their thoughts of suicide or plan to die
- ▶ reassure the student that there is help and they will not feel like this forever
- ▶ provide constant supervision, even for a trip to the washroom
- ▶ connect with your school administrator, as per your board suicide prevention protocol
- ▶ support the student as you wait for additional help

Be a school staff member who...

C	Communicates your concerns	"I've noticed that _____. I'm concerned about you. How are you doing?"
A	Asks clearly about suicide	"It sounds like things are pretty tough. Do they ever get so tough that you think about suicide?"
R	Reassures, validates, and acknowledges	"I'm sorry you've been feeling that way. I'm glad that you told me."
E	Expresses support	"You're not alone. I'm here to support you."
S	Seeks connections	"There are other people who can support you, too." "This is too big for the two of us. We need extra help."





WORDS YOU COULD USE TO...

Open the conversation

- ▶ Hey, do you have a minute? I just wanted to check in and see how things are going.
- ▶ Thanks for taking a few minutes to speak with me. I've noticed that you seem really stressed lately. Do you want to talk about it?
- ▶ I've noticed you haven't been handing in your work. That's not like you. Is everything okay?

Ask about suicide

- ▶ It seems like things are really tough right now. Do they ever get so tough that you think about suicide?
- ▶ Does it ever get so bad you think about ending your life?
- ▶ Sometimes when people are feeling really down and they don't think it's going to get better, they think about ending their life. Have you had any thoughts about suicide?

Reassure a student

- ▶ That sounds so hard, especially since you have been dealing with it by yourself. But now I know, and you're not alone anymore.
- ▶ I want the best for you and I'm here to help. Thank you for trusting me enough to tell me what's been going on.

How can I help a student who is actively suicidal at school?

If a student discloses that they have activated a suicide plan (e.g., ingested medications or substances with intent to die) this is a medical emergency and you must follow your board's suicide prevention protocol and call for an ambulance **right away**. The student should never be left alone – even to go to the washroom – unless it is unsafe for you to be with them.

Thank you for taking the time to learn about suicide prevention and life promotion. We hope this guide has helped you see how you can help, just by being the compassionate and caring adult you are. If you have additional questions about suicide prevention and life promotion, speak to your administrator, a school mental health professional, or your board mental health leader.

Related School Mental Health Ontario resources:

- [Prepare; Prevent; Respond – A Suicide Prevention Guide for Parents and Caregivers](#)
- [Personal Resiliency Tips – Take Care of Yourself](#)

