



Oregon Youth Suicide Awareness Campaign – Article #2

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There is no single cause for any individual suicide. Each person is different and factors that contribute to a person's suicide are unique to the individual.

However, we know there are many risk factors that contribute to suicide. These fall into three general categories: health, environmental and historical.

- Health includes depression, substance abuse and other mental/behavioral health conditions that make the individual more vulnerable.
- Environmental factors include issues that place stress on the individual that exceed his/her ability to cope, such as parental divorce, a death in the family, or exposure to suicides of others.
- Historical factors include exposure to the suicide of a family member or a family history of suicide attempts.

Bullying

Environmental stressors and health also include bullying. While research has not established a direct causal relationship between bullying and suicide, studies have shown that being a bully, the victim of bullying, a person who bullies and is also a victim of bullying, or is an observer, increases social isolation, withdrawal, depression and anxiety all - of which are involved in suicidal behaviors.

Thomas Joiner has presented a theory of causes of suicide that includes a person's sense of belongingness and connectedness to friends, family and community. Clearly, bullying undermines connectedness to the peer group and the school community, especially if allowed to continue over time.

Being a witness to bullying increases risk for suicide, especially if the youth feels he/she should have done something to intervene. Also, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Youth who report both bullying others and being bullied (bully-victims) have the highest risk for suicide-related behavior of any groups that report involvement in bullying."

So how can adults intervene with bullying to reduce risks for suicide among perpetrators, victims and observers?

- Recognize that bullying, being bullied and witnessing bullying are not a normal passage of growing up and, in fact, can be risk factors for suicidal behavior.
- Adopt clear and definitive school policies against bullying so youth feel safe at school.

- Consider how your reactions to bullying can influence students' sense of safety.
- Consider how responding exclusively with blame and punishment can misdirect attention from getting help, support and treatment.
- After taking action, monitor the well being of victims, observers and bullies themselves. All are at increased risk for suicide.
- Recognize hazing as a form of bullying that needs to be curtailed. It is not a normal function of adolescent behavior to be taken lightly.
- Be aware that youth are keen observers and will model adult behavior.
- Understand that youth who witness bullying may feel complicit and guilty for not taking action.

While schools can address bullying on campus, a large percentage of bullying occurs off campus and via social media. In these instances, parents and community members in contact with youth should be vigilant about social relationships and online activities to assess for bullying.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth are at high risk of bullying and their rates of suicide attempts and completions also are significantly higher than other youth. Parental acceptance of gender identity and sexual orientation is a protective factor, as are actions by adults to eliminate bullying or assault against LGBT youth.

To learn more:

The Relationship Between Bullying and Suicide, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/bullying-suicide-translation-final-a.pdf>

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, <https://afsp.org/about-suicide/risk-factors-and-warning-signs/>

Washington State Youth Suicide Prevention Program, http://www.yspp.org/for_youth/bullying_suicide.htm

Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide, <http://www.sptsusa.org/>