

SUICIDE IN YOUTH AND WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT A FACT SHEET

You may be approaching this project with a mix of questions, concerns and apprehensions. The topic of youth suicide is one that scares most of us, and understandably so. One common reaction to the fears that we have about youth suicide is to avoid the topic in the belief that talking about it will make it happen. However, it is our view that not talking about it creates barriers for young people trying to understand what they are feeling. More importantly, talking can be one of the most effective means of suicide prevention.

You may also feel that your students are not susceptible to feelings of pain or despair great enough to lead them to suicide. However, the evidence suggests that youth suicide is not confined to any one economic, geographical, religious or social group. Nor is it absent from any group. Suicide, by 1984--the latest year for which we have official statistics--has become the second most common cause of death among youth.

In this packet we incorporate information about depression, stress, barriers to communication, and suicide as presented within the context of Romeo and Juliet. We also suggest guidelines and strategies for approaching these topics.

Some information you may wish to keep in mind:

- o In 1960, there were 475 officially recorded suicides among high school age youth (15 to 19). In 1970 the number risen to 1,123. By 1980 it had climbed to 1,767. A similar trend occurred among college age youth (20 to 24). In 1960 there were 764 suicides; in 1970 there were 2,005; and by 1980 it was up to 3,442. And, sadly, most experts agree that the actual incidence is far higher than those reported.
- o In a study of "Suicidal Behavior Among 'Normal' High School students" Smith and Crawford concluded that "suicide is a personal concern of 1 out of 4 of these students. From 1 out of 8 to 1 out of 12 high school students have actually made an attempt. That such unsettling figures are not gross over-estimates of the problem is indicated by the convergence of several other studies. It has become clear that if we wish to be of help to troubled adolescents, we need not target our efforts solely at the seriously suicidal young person; it seems that most high school students may need our attention."
- o Many people, young and old, are unaware of the legal status of suicide and fear the possible consequences of confiding in others about their suicidal intentions. However, although suicide was at one time a criminal offense, it is no longer a crime in any of the 50 states.
- o Young people know about suicide. It may have occurred in their own families or among their peers. They most certainly hear news of it.
- o Young people get indirect messages from many around them that talking about suicide is not appropriate. This can create barriers that prevent the possibility of getting help.

- o Youngsters get depressed and often don't even know that what they feel has a name, much less that others sometimes feel as they do and that help can be found.
- o When depressed or in trouble, we all need someone to listen to us. There is truth in the saying, "A problem shared is a problem halved."
- o Sometimes being open isn't enough. Professional help may be needed and it is available. Many communities have suicide prevention or crisis centers. All communities have local or regional mental health centers.
- o Discussing the topic of suicide in the context of Romeo and Juliet gives you and your students the opportunity to step back and explore the subject in a non-threatening manner.
- o According to some experts, many adolescents show some sort of behavioral changes prior to suicidal actions. Warning signs include:

- Withdrawal from family/friends
- Expressing suicidal thoughts or threats
- Previous suicide attempt(s)
- Major change in personality
- Noticeable changes in eating or sleeping habits
- Outbursts of violent or rebellious behavior
- Running away
- Getting in trouble (with law, friends, authorities)
- Difficulty in concentrating
- Drug and/or alcohol abuse
- Unexplained decline in quality of school work or athletics
- Unusual neglect of appearance
- Feeling "different" from family or friends
- Rejection by boyfriend or girlfriend
- Lack of confidence in the future
- Vague physical complaints
- Lack of energy, interest in friends, activities
- Recent suicide of friend or relative
- Giving away prized possessions.

This material has been prepared with great care, caution and respect for people's concerns and feelings. That youth suicide is an emotional topic is undeniable. That many of us wish we did not have to address the topic is understandable, but the need is there. The statistics compel us.