

Q & A from Lakota Community Forum on Suicide and Grief May 1, 2019

What is the process used in determining which agency/organization is represented at each school?

Julie: Each school goes through an interviewing process with interested organizations to see which agency is the best fit. Depending on the needs of the school, there may be agencies better suited for each school.

Lori: Julie is correct. Each building completes a needs assessment with our district partner, MindPeace. MindPeace takes that needs assessment and seeks willing partners to meet those needs. The building then compiles a team to interview the potential providers. The team then chooses the appropriate partner for the building.

Can we do more social emotional education in schools to be more proactive in prevention as opposed to just treatment?

Julie: There are ways that we have worked with the school administration to be proactive in regards to education and prevention. Here are some of those ways: coffee chats with parents, presentations to teachers and staff, presentations to classrooms, small groups, newsletter tips. But, there are always more things we could do and are open to what else we can do.

Jennifer: I suggest to schools that they offer some education where parents are already engaged. For example- a school sporting event, theatre production, or orientation...use a half page handout, with risk factors and warning signs on one side, and resources and coping tips on the other side. Make it easy on parents to receive and consume the needed information. Then, follow up with a more in-depth skill building seminar at an event like CommUniversity, etc.

At what age should parents start talking with children about suicide?

Julie: I like to think of it more as talking about social/emotional health. That starts as soon as a child starts talking in age appropriate ways. When you start the foundation for talking about issues, then children feel more comfortable talking. For suicide, it is very important to talk about understanding when someone says something to you that makes you feel uncomfortable, say something and do something right away. There are tips on respected websites. As a parent, you will have to gauge how much and at what age you start to discuss it. So, there's no easy answer to this, but start by being comfortable in talking to your child about everything and being open and available to them.

Jennifer: In the field we discuss this often because we have young children contemplating suicide and even dying by suicide. Our junior Hope Squads begin in the 4th grade, and these kids are competent and dynamic in how they understand and use the age appropriate material. In the last [Grant Us Hope Newsletter](#) we had an entire section on "how to talk to your kids about suicide" divided by age group. Very helpful info.

When you ask your child if they have thoughts of suicide and they say NO, how do you know that means no? How do you know when to believe them?

Julie: If you are alarmed at changes in behaviors and see signs that makes you wonder, then act. Tell them what you see that makes you worried. Then agree at what you will do to address it. Give them opportunities to discuss things with you or encourage them to talk to a trusted adult. Monitor and give opportunities to talk to a professional. If your kids feel comfortable with a pediatrician, then start there. If they talk with a school counselor, then ask them to discuss it with your child. You know when your child is struggling with something, so continue to check in and tell them when you are worried.

Jennifer: I echo Julie, and I'll also add that if a parent is concerned that no might not mean no, patient persistence could help. Be open, allow the child to talk freely, say that you will not judge them, no matter their answer, and that you understand their feelings are real and important (use validation). Then continue to monitor and keep the dialogue going over the course of days and weeks to gauge the student's level of risk.

How can we help our kids' friends that may be at risk if we aren't close to the family?

Julie: This is a hard one and one that I used to have to deal with while raising my kids. First talk to your kids to see what they know. You may have to act if you feel there is danger. But, your first priority is to make sure kids are safe. I always tried to include a parent when I was concerned. Sometimes it went well and other times it didn't depending on how the parent took it. I always let kids know that my house was a safe zone--- we could talk about anything and they were welcome there. I also told kids when I needed to tell someone else.

Jennifer: To add to Julie's response, I have also contacted the school when I have found the parents are not getting their child emergency help. The school can use means necessary to get the child help if the child is truly in danger (getting child and family services involved). This is usually rarely needed as parents are most often concerned. I've also talked to parents who are not familiar to me to discuss their child's potential risk. They were grateful. Make sure to have resources on hand (the mindpeace website is excellent and has a large database of providers), such as the Children's Hospital PIRC line number 513-636-4124.

How can we help our kids to help their friends at risk?

Julie: First I would listen to them. Sometimes that's what they need. Then talk about what they can do to support. I often would role play or practice what they could say. Then let them know that you are there to step in if they need help.

Jennifer: This is really important because kids tell each other their problems, and when they are suicidal. Also, kids see all this on social media. We need to educate our kids that when their friends are at risk DO NOT KEEP A DEADLY SECRET, TELL A TRUSTED ADULT.

Is it possible and how do we as adults have an impact on what kids are saying to each other on social media? Specifically, girls blaming girls for a student's death?

Julie: You do have an impact. It's hard to tell at times when they are blasted with so much from social media. I used to talk to my daughter about how we are perceived and that we need to be careful about our footprint on social media. And, I often preached about the type of friend we want to be and need. It is so hard with all that is out there for our kids. I also feel that parents should have access to their kids phones and social media. But, you will have to decide for yourselves how best to understand what your kids see and experience from social media. Take each event as an opportunity for education and discussion.

*Jennifer: Conversation and support. We have to talk to our kids about how social media comments make them feel, and provide them with the coping skills to weather the bad stuff. We need to arm our children with responses that are deterring to the person who is being mean, which may include not engaging and talking through it with supportive loved ones, or talking with supportive loved ones on how to respond in a way that catches the hurtful person off guard. Often, catching that person off guard will deter the behavior. For example:
Hurtful comment on social media "I can't believe Sarah is such a bad friend to Sally. That's probably why Sally killed herself."*

Sarah's options- not respond/do not engage, or respond in a deterring way, such as "I loved Sally, she was one of my best friends. Our relationship was difficult sometimes because most friendships are, but I loved her with all my heart and am so sad she's gone. I don't know why she killed herself, but I do know that suicide is complicated and that I'm not to blame."

For this response, parents and kids will need to educate themselves about suicide. That can be done at the following resources: www.sprc.org (Suicide Prevention Resource Center), www.afsp.org (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention)

How do you talk to kids who missed or received texts from a friend before their suicide?

Julie: Listen, support and tell them that what happened is not their fault. This is a very hard one. Kids will feel guilt and shame. Support them and reassure them that it is not their fault.

Jennifer: The phrase I use with our Hope Squad kids and other kids dealing with a death is “we cannot know 100% of the hearts and minds of 100% of our friends (peers) 100% of the time. It is a painful reality that we may lose some while trying to maintain the goal of a zero suicide school (world, etc.)”. Julie makes excellent points here- we need to reinforce and reiterate to our children who were close to the child that died that suicide is very complicated and that no one event or situation is to blame, and people are never to blame.

Do you have any advice for dealing with perfectionism?

Julie: Perfectionism can be very anxiety provoking. If you feel that it is interrupting your child’s ability to function on a daily basis, it is time to get some help. If they cannot feel happy or enjoy typical daily experiences, then they may need some help. Setting some realistic goals and reviewing what will happen if.... Is sometimes helpful. But, if that stops working, then consider getting some help.

Jennifer: Perfectionism is a serious situation and the research on the link between perfectionism and mental health disorders and suicide is growing. Our kids live in a world where they want 100 likes on an Instagram picture in 30 seconds. This is how our kids are measuring their value and their identity. They also feel the need to be the best at sports, academics and other areas of life. This is a larger cultural problem exacerbated by many things, including social media. Our kids brains are now programmed for it. Kids don’t take breaks from their phones. They require instant gratification and validation. We have to retrain our kids to accept things and experiences that are imperfect. We have to teach them to wait (delayed gratification), to be patient, to be mindful, and to have a growth mindset (I haven’t achieved my goals...yet...).

How long does the lifting of spirits time typically last or is it very individual?

Sheila: Everyone needs their spirits lifted daily and it should be something we practice every day. While the amount of time and intensity may vary, do it with a sincere heart. Letting a person know you care is so important. Spirits can be lifted with listening ears, sharing time with them(quality time), outings, becoming present to their present moment, kindness, compliments, exercise, listening to music together, music, prayer, meditation, a thoughtful gift, making their favorite meal, sharing pictures and memories. Sometimes all a person wants to know is that they are not alone.

What should you do if you have concerns about someone else’s child (especially if you aren’t close to the parents)?

Julie: see above answer

Jennifer: see above

Are there plans to expand Hope Squads into the junior schools?

Lori--Yes, we are still working to fully implement our Hope Squads at the high school buildings, but we do intend to move forward with the junior schools in the near future.