



## Preventing Suicidal Behavior Among College and University Students

### Suicidal Behavior Among College and University Students

Suicide is a leading cause of death among youth attending colleges and universities in the United States; however, despite a rise in previous decades the rate has been stable or decreasing since the early 90s (Schwartz, 2006; Schwartz, 2011). College and university students have significantly lower risk of suicide than peers their age not in school (Schwartz, 2011).

- Male students (ages 18 to 24) are more than twice as likely as female students to have died by suicide (Drum, Brownson, Burton, Denmark, & Smith, 2009). However, female graduate students aged 25 and older die by suicide at a rate similar to their male counterparts (SPRC, 2004).
- A recent large-scale study found that approximately 18% of undergraduates reported having seriously considering a suicide attempt at some point, while 6% reported serious suicidal ideation in the past 12 months (Drum et al., 2009). A 2005 study by Westefeld and colleagues found that 24% of college youth considered suicide. Another study found that suicidal ideation among college students ranged from 32% to 70% (Gutierrez, Osman, Kopper, Barrios, & Sacks, 2000).
- Estimated rates of suicide attempts by college youth range from about 1% (American College Health Association, 2009; Furr, Westefeld, McConnell, and Jenkins, 2001) to 5% (Westefeld et al., 2005).
- Commuter students; older students; gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students; and international students are groups that face a higher risk for suicide and have less adequate services available to them than the general population of college students (Russell, Van Campen, Hoefle, & Boor, 2011; SPRC, 2004).

### Suicide Risk and Protective Factors Among College Youth

Students who have specific risk factors are more likely to think about, attempt, or die by suicide.

- A key risk factor for suicide death is previous attempts. All attempts should be taken seriously, and youth who have attempted suicide need follow-up care.
- Most people who die by suicide have a mental illness and/or substance use disorder. College students who attempt suicide are significantly more likely to suffer from depression and eating disorders than those who don't (Haas et al., 2008).
- A major suicide risk factor for college youth is substance or alcohol abuse (Lamis & Bagge, 2011; Westefeld et al., 2006). Numerous studies have shown that alcohol and substance abuse increases the risk of attempting suicide (Arria, O'Grady, Caldeira, Vincent, Wilcox, & Wish, 2009; Lamis, Malone, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, & Ellis, 2010). College students who binge drink alone are more likely than their counterparts who drink socially to experience depression and suicidal ideation. Students who are solitary binge drinkers are more than four times as likely to have made previous suicide attempts (Gonzalez, 2012).
- College youth who have reported suicidal ideation are significantly more likely to engage in risky behavior such as carrying a weapon, fighting, boating or swimming after drinking alcohol, driving after consuming alcohol or riding with a driver who has consumed alcohol, and rarely or never wearing seat belts (Barrios et al., 2000).

- There is much less research on protective factors, but a number of studies have found that social support, such as having an emotional connection to friends and family and being involved in extracurricular activities, is one of the important protective factors for college youth (Marion & Range, 2003; Westefeld et al., 2006).
- Another protective factor for college youth is having a reason for living, especially having feelings of responsibility towards family or friends, fear of social disapproval, or moral objections to suicide (Ellis & Lamis, 2007; Westefeld et al., 2006). One study found that in preventing suicide in college students, it was more important to have a reason to live than to have a reason not to die (Westefeld, Scheel, & Maples, 1998).
- Having reduced access to lethal means, especially firearms, is also a protective factor for college students (Schwartz, 2011).

### Implications for Suicide Prevention

The majority of students who contemplate suicide do not seek professional help (Drum et al., 2009), and nearly 80% of students who die by suicide never received services at their campus counseling centers (Kisch, Leino, and Silverman, 2005). This may be due in part to the fact that only 26% of college youth are aware of their campus mental health resources (Westefeld et al., 2005).

A comprehensive approach to suicide prevention that targets groups of students who are at higher risk is recommended (Surgeon General of the United States, 1999). A model comprehensive campus suicide prevention program should include screening to identify high-risk students, training for campus mental health services staff to be able to identify and address risk factors, crisis management, educational programs to train gatekeepers on the signs and what to do if someone is considering suicide, social marketing to encourage help-seeking behavior, social networking to encourage socialization, coping skill development, and restriction of access to lethal means. Ideally, many campus organizations should work together to promote mental health awareness, well-being, and suicide prevention (SPRC, 2004).

### Important Resources for Suicide Prevention

American Association of Suicidology, Warning Signs of Suicide at [www.suicidology.org/stats-and-tools/suicide-warning-signs](http://www.suicidology.org/stats-and-tools/suicide-warning-signs) and other resources at [www.suicidology.org](http://www.suicidology.org)

Suicide Prevention Resource Center at [www.sprc.org](http://www.sprc.org). See *Promoting Mental Health and Preventing Suicide in College and University Settings*, 2004.

The Jed Foundation at [www.jedfoundation.org](http://www.jedfoundation.org) See Campus MHAP: A guide to campus mental health action planning.

Active Minds at [www.activeminds.org](http://www.activeminds.org)

Means Matter at [www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/index.html](http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/index.html)

Half of Us Campaign at [www.halfofus.com](http://www.halfofus.com)

Transition Year at [www.transitionyear.org](http://www.transitionyear.org)

ULifeline at [www.ulifeline.org](http://www.ulifeline.org)

Higher Education Mental Health Alliance at [www.hemha.org](http://www.hemha.org)

National College Depression Partnership at [www.nyu.edu/ncdp/](http://www.nyu.edu/ncdp/)

Screening for Mental Health, Inc. at [www.mentalhealthscreening.org](http://www.mentalhealthscreening.org)

**If you or someone you know is suicidal, please contact a mental health professional  
or call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255).**

*The National Center for the Prevention of Youth Suicide, a program of the American Association of Suicidology, works to reduce the rate of youth suicide attempts and deaths. AAS is the oldest national organization devoted to understanding and preventing suicide. Learn more at [www.suicidology.org/NCPYS](http://www.suicidology.org/NCPYS)*