



Educators Making the Difference in the Age of COVID-19

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Opening Remarks

- I am a survivor of my father's suicide and responded to my first student suicide 40 years ago (poem)
- I have been involved in 20+ legal cases where schools were sued after a tragedy and many of them involved bullying (lessons from cases will be shared in the break out session)
- Many tragedies could be prevented if all students had **go-to-adults** at school and in the community
- Schools are safe places
- Suicide prevention is a challenge in the age of COVID-19
- Increasing numbers of elementary age students are suicidal
- Virtual learning has increased isolation and provided many opportunities for cyberbullying
- Self-care and mental health services may never have been more important than they are today

Stay C.A.L.M.

- C for **calmness** and **control** what you can which is your reaction to the pandemic and following medical advice.
- A for being **available** to your students even though you may be teaching remotely. Be **alert** to their emotions and worries.
- L is for **listening** to your students and recognizing the stress everyone has been under for a long time.
- M is for your **modeling of coping** and **management** at school and at home for your own family.

What can I do as a staff member and parent to help everyone cope?

- Take a deep breath and recognize things will get better and say, “I can manage this and I will model optimism and hope. I will get some exercise and seek out the people in my life who are positive and I will be positive for others.”
- “I know my reaction will be the most important factor in how my students and my own children respond to the changes in life the virus has brought about.”
- “When I respond to my students it will be with compassion and kindness and recognition of what they are going through.”
- “I want my class when this is all over to feel more connected than before the pandemic.”

Lessons as a crisis responder

- Primarily I listen, but one question that I always ask is, “Who or what has helped you when you had to deal with difficult things before and who or what can help you now?”
- I emphasized many times to Parkland MSD parents that children who live in a stable home and are shown unconditional love can overcome almost anything.
- Seek out the people in your life who are positive and be that person for others!



Signs of stress

- Anxiety, worry and fear
- Feeling on the edge
- Changes in appetite, energy and activity levels
- Sleeping problems
- Concentration problems
- Increased irritability
- Increased use of drugs and alcohol

Managing stress

- Take care of your body: take deep breaths, stretch, meditate, exercise, get plenty of sleep and avoid alcohol and drugs.
- Stay in the moment and do not worry about things that have not happened yet.
- Remember we can choose how we respond!
- Connect with others such as close friends and extended family
- Avoid too much exposure to the news.
- Seek help! SAMHSA has a national helpline 800-985-5990

Dealing with worry and helping children

- Select a worry time and limit your worrying to that time (example: 7:00 pm to 7:20 pm).
- Interrupt worry cycle through exercise, yoga, meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, deep breathing, mindfulness.
- Build a strong support system.
- We must recognize there is much uncertainty and we do not like uncertainty! Life is a struggle right now but there will be a future!
- Help children by listening and validating their feelings. Find the shared time when your students and children will truly talk to you and answer their questions. Let them express their emotions through talking, writing, music or artwork.

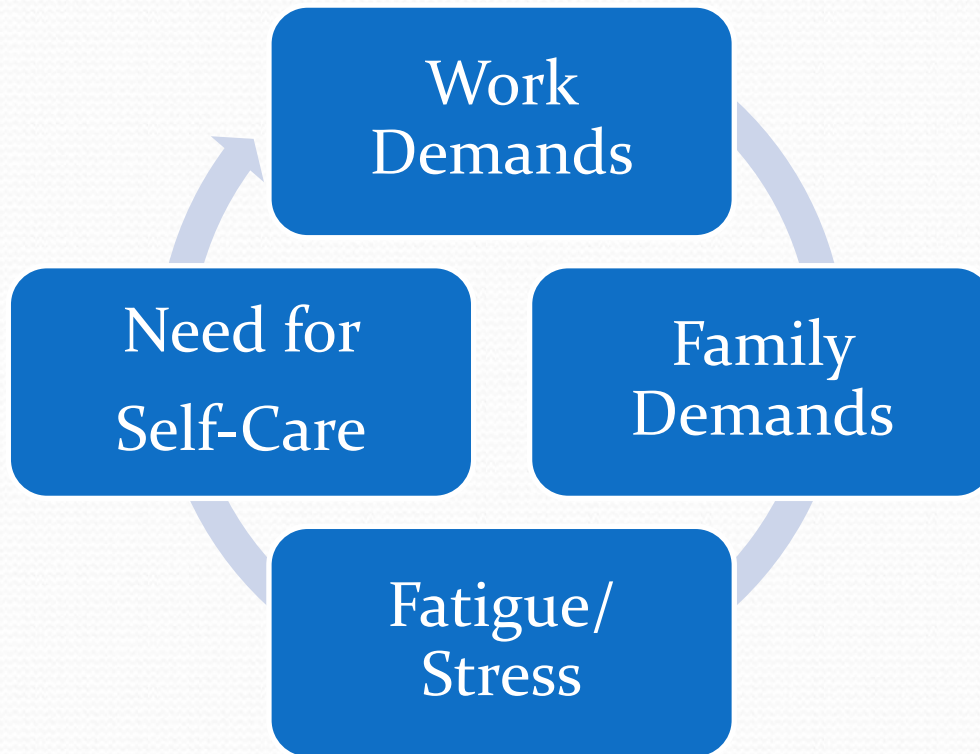
Talking with children

- This is a time for patience as a teacher and parent and to show your students and children how much care about them.
- Lower the bar for expectations for everyone.
- Many adults will “lose it” at some point and it is important to apologize.
- Provide positive activities and talk with them about the heroic actions of medical personnel and suggest writing letters of thanks to medical personnel.
- Be honest and truthful and admit when you do not know something and state you will try to find the answer together.
- Recognize the development levels of children. The typical reactions children have to a traumatic event are regression behaviorally and academically, nightmares, sleeping problems, and worries about the future.

Developmentally, what reactions are children likely to have?

- Preschoolers: toileting problems, sleeping problems, bed wetting, decreased appetite, increased temper tantrums, more clingy or whiny, and fearful of being alone. Older preschoolers may understand the effects of the outbreak and will depend on their parents to feel better.
- Elementary School Age: increased sibling rivalry and need for parent attention, increased aggression and irritability, somatic complaints, sleeping problems, and concentration problems with school work and regular chores.
- Middle school and high school: increased sibling rivalry, somatic complaints, agitation or apathy, increased substance abuse, and withdrawal from family and peers.

Cycle of Normal Stressors



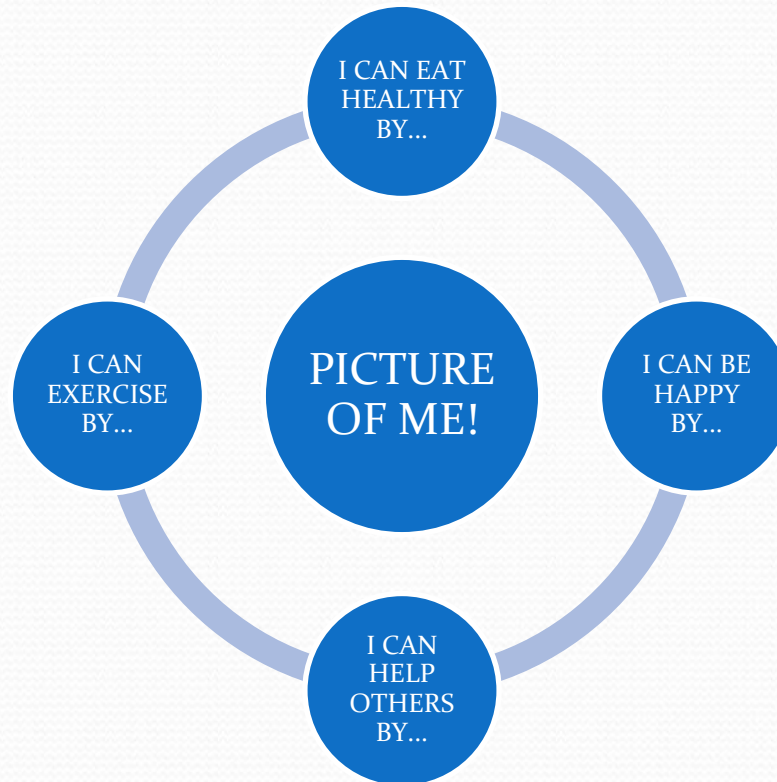
Adult and older children's self care plan components:

- **Physical self care** includes diet, exercise and proper rest.
- **Mental self care** includes attending to your emotional needs by talking to other adults and examining the problem outside of your body. Let go of self criticism as everyone has made mistakes in the face of the pandemic. Express your thoughts and emotions through journaling, painting, drawing, gardening, and other creative avenues.

Adult and older children's self care plan components:

- **Spiritual self care** even if you are not religious includes living by a set of values you wish for others (compassion, empathy, friendliness, helpfulness, humor, and respectfulness).
- **Embrace nature** by spending time outdoors.
- **Model good values** by being that positive person for your family and others!
- **Engage in “I can statements”** “I can relax myself by-, make myself happy by-, exercise by-, relieve stress by-, be a good friend by-, help others by-, eat healthy by-, and get proper rest by-”

Younger children... self care plans...



Suicide prevention

- Will Covid-19 cause suicide rates to go up?
- Could Covid-19 push someone over the edge?
- Who might be most at risk for suicide?
- Isn't suicide already a big problem in the U.S?
- What age groups might be most at risk?
- What warning signs should we look for?
- What should I do if a student or someone in my family is suicidal?

Utah YRBS H.S. Survey 2019 in the last 12 months

- 36.7% felt sad or hopeless
- 22.3% seriously considered suicide
- 18.7% made a plan
- 9.3% made one or more attempts

US2019

36.7

18.8

15.7

8.9

A brief quiz...

If a student is really intent on killing themselves, there is nothing anybody can do to stop them.

True or False?

FALSE!! Suicide is preventable. A suicidal youth just wants the pain to end and death seems to be the only way out. Anyone can potentially save a life!

True or False?

If we talk about suicide, we may give students the idea to kill themselves?

True or False?

FALSE!! Research shows talking about suicide effectively lessens a young person's anxiety and does not put "ideas" in their heads.



One last question...

Only experts can prevent suicide.

True or False?

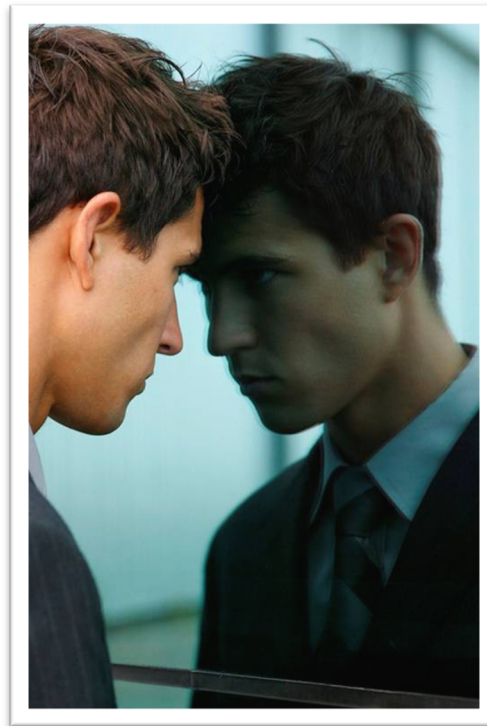
FALSE! You too can save lives. That is the purpose of this presentation....to provide you with information about suicide awareness and warning signs. You see the students on a daily basis...we rely on you!

what would you say
if someone tells you
this . . . ?

Read the
scenario,

Think of your
response,

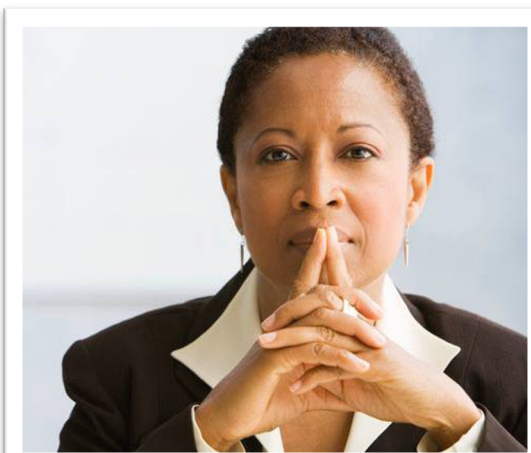
Say it aloud or
Type it in the
chat box.



“Ever since the
breakup, I
haven’t been
able to study. I
just found out
that I’m
flunking out.
I’m not sure life
is worth living
anymore.”

how you could
respond

You probably said
something like
this




“It’s so hard to concentrate when you’re in pain. And now you’re getting hit with another loss. You must feel overwhelmed. Are you thinking of suicide? I know someone who can help.”

Warning signs of youth suicide

- Suicidal notes/texts/social media posts
- Threats
 - Direct: “I want to die” “I am going to kill myself”
 - Indirect: “No one will miss me” “The world will be better without me”
- Depression/Hopelessness
 - Loss of energy/lack of enthusiasm for life
 - **Overwhelmed** by pressure and competition
 - Risk-taking behaviors such as drinking and driving, gun play, alcohol and substance abuse
- Plan/method/access
- Dramatic changes in behavior
- Giving away prized possessions/making final arrangements

Intervention for school staff

- Do not be afraid to talk to students about suicide
- Know the risk factors & warning signs
- Begin and maintain the chain of supervision
- Refer immediately and have student escorted to counseling office
- Join with the counseling team to provide background information
- The counseling team will ensure that parents are notified



Would this student be bullied in a middle school? What class will be the most difficult?

- Had an extensive psychiatric history
- Walked funny and spoke with a lisp
- Had a bad skin condition on his face
- Described as pale, frail and small for his age
- Identified as gay
- Identified as Buddhist

Reality of Bullying

Bullying Facts from U.S. Department of Education Website:

www.stopbullying.gov

- Bullying peaks in middle school
- Studies show 15 to 25% of students are being bullied with some frequency
- Most common forms are being made fun of, being the subject of rumors, being pushed, shoved or kicked
- Cyberbullying creates a special challenge for schools and parents
- Only 1/3 of the victims told an adult about being bullied
- Why don't they tell adults?

Schools and Cyberbullying?

- Take immediate action to investigate cyberbullying.
- Talk with kids about the Rethink APP
- Support the victim of bullying.
- Let all students know that bullying behavior is not acceptable.
- Provide immediate consequences for the bully and refer them to the appropriate personnel.
- Conference with parents.
- Contact police if a bodily harm threat was made.

Bullying and Suicide

- Children who have been bullied have reported a variety of behavioral, emotional and social problems.
- Numerous parents have sued schools after the suicide of their child.
- Research studies reported positive associations between all bullying types and suicidal risks.
- Do not hesitate to ask a student involved in bullying about hopelessness and thoughts of suicide.

Bullying and Suicide

- Bullied children are more likely to be anxious or depressed and more likely to think of suicide. Personal characteristics such as internalizing problems; low self-esteem; and low assertiveness increase the risk of being bullied and these factors are also associated with risk for suicide.
- Suicide is the second leading cause of death nationwide among 10 to 24 year olds but is the **number one** cause of death in Utah.
- LGBTQ students are frequently the target of bullying and have suicide rates much higher than their heterosexual peers
- The U.S. Secret Service Study of Targeted School Violence found that 2/3 of school shooters were the victims of bullying and that 2/3 were suicidal.
- All states have bullying prevention legislation but only 10 states require suicide prevention in schools.
- Utah requires suicide prevention for grades 7 -12 and is now debating adding it for elementary age students.

Bullying and Suicide

- Student surveys about bullying are needed to determine the extent of the problem.
- Create a task force and increase bystander intervention training.
- Train all staff in bullying and suicide prevention.
- Clarify the differences between teenage moodiness and depression especially for parents.
- Conduct depression screenings for secondary students
- Everyone needs to work to overcome the stigma attached to seeking mental health treatment.

Best Practices for Parents

- The world has changed and does anyone remember when phones had a cord on them?
- Develop technology savvy and don't rely only on your child to be your technology guru!
- Encourage friendly interactions between children and be alert for early gateway “mean behaviors.”
- Develop a technology usage plan for your child with their input and insist they follow it and use it wisely.
- Help them understand the impact of technology and the misinterpretation of online communication versus face to face communication.

How Can School Staff Help a Student Who is Bullying Others?

- Contact and conference with their parents using the “sandwich approach.”
- Consider referral for mental health treatment.
- Help them to develop empathy for others.
- Encourage involvement in pro-social activities
- Reward them for appropriate behavior towards others.

Key Points for School Staff

- Do not require students to meet and work things out.
- Share information with other staff about the bullying incident.
- Let the bully know that you and other staff will be watching them closely and consequences will escalate in severity.
- Let the victim know the next steps that will be taken and urge them to report any further incidents.

Student Involvement is Key

- Student survey input is needed especially about safety and cyberbullying to determine the extent of the problem (floor plan example).
- Teach all students digital citizenship and begin in early grades.
- Common Sense Media is a great resource
www.commonsensemedia.org
- Gain a student commitment through safety pledges and anti-bullying pledges
- Teach students to use the Safe Utah Mobile App

What is resiliency?

- It is the ability to bounce back from adversity.
- It is a learned behavior.
- It takes time and effort and involves a number of steps.
- It involves dealing with strong emotions and taking actions to deal with living.
- It involves self care.



Keys to resilience

- Caring and loving family and friends.
- Capacity to make realistic plans and carry them out.
- Positive view of self and skills in communication and problem solving.
- Capacity to manage strong feelings and emotions.
- Maintaining a positive view of the future.



World Health Organization: What Protects Kids?

- Family cohesion and stability
- Good relations with peers
- School connections and success
- Coping and problem solving skills
- Access to mental health services
- Knowing when to seek adult help
- Religious involvement
- Lack of access to lethal weapons

Carnegie Foundation: All Children Need:

- Three or more significant adults in their lives in addition to their parents.
- A sense of safety and belonging in their home, school, and community.
- Three or more hours of organized activities weekly.
- Volunteer work (especially for adolescents).

Me as Big Brother to Young Rodney...



Years later, still keeping in touch with Rodney...



Final Thoughts

- School staff have made done extraordinary efforts to support students during the unprecedented pandemic.
- Everyone's behavior is very important as the spread of the virus can be stopped if we follow CDC recommendations and get vaccinated.
- Schools need to have students sign COVID-19 safety pledges.
- Your children and students are looking to you to see how you are handling this very difficult and anxiety provoking time. Model coping and hope!
- Remember as an adult you have had a life time of experiences to learn what helps you in difficult times.
- Remind yourself every day and with every challenge that you and your family and students will get through this!
- The 4th R is relationships and ensure that every student has a go-to-adult at your school.

Best Practices: Final Thoughts

- Provide training on bullying and suicide prevention and post prevention information on the district website
- Increase staff supervision in areas where bullying occurs the most and take immediate action
- Provide consequences for bullies and support for victims and engage bystanders in prevention
- Recognize the association between bullying and suicide
- Schools and parents must collaborate
- It is a difficult time and everyone needs a self care plan

Prevention Is Everyone's Responsibility

- **No student** should ever feel that they deserve being bullied!
Unfortunately when something happens to a child enough they start to think they deserve it. School staff and parents must work together for prevention!
- A success story
- Suicide in schools (2015) Erbacher, Singer & Poland: Routledge a revision expected in 2021
- Lessons from U.S. school shootings (expected 2021) Poland & Ferguson: Springer Publications
- NSU Florida www.nova.edu/suicideprevention

Model policy:

HOTLINE RESOURCES

