

At-Risk for High School

Overview

Thank you for choosing *At-Risk for High School Educators* as a part of your school's professional development programming.

After teachers and staff have completed the program individually, it is best to gather them to discuss their experiences and the material covered. This guide was designed to help you facilitate that

discussion. Such a discussion allows school leaders to localize professional development to the specifics of their school, including their policies and procedures. It also enables participants to raise any questions or issues that may have come up during the simulation.



Group Discussion

The experiences with the simulation will naturally vary, due to the users' ability to embark on different conversational paths in the simulated conversations. For example, depending on the conversation choices they made, teachers may or may not have learned about all the concerns and motivations of the three virtual students in the simulation, and they will have received different feedback depending on their choices. As a result, teachers may express not only a variety of opinions, but also a diversity of experience within the simulation.

Used as either a springboard or a roadmap, this document provides guidance for using the participants' experiences to facilitate an engaging and valuable group discussion. You may want to stray from this guide to follow the interests and experiences of the participants; this is an acceptable and valuable approach to enhancing the impact of the simulation. Another helpful document for the discussion is the Summary of Content, which reiterates key information from the simulation and is available within the Resources section of the simulation and attached to this document.

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This discussion should take about one hour. It can occur immediately after participants take the simulation (for example, with a computer lab set-up and all participants completing the program together) or at a later date. Schools in jurisdictions that mandate two-hour training in suicide prevention may choose to use this discussion to fulfill the mandate.

Preparation

Below is a checklist to use in preparation for the discussion.

- Simulation:** You've completed the simulation yourself and are familiar with its contents. Review the Discussion Guide and Participant Handouts (attached).
- Participant Training:** Participants should have completed the simulation within the past week. The simulation takes about 60 minutes to complete and can be taken in multiple sittings.
- Location/Timing:** For the discussion, consider choosing a location you feel is most conducive, possibly where participants can sit in a circle and see each other as they share answers. The discussion can occur immediately following the training or during a regularly scheduled group or department meeting, once all participants have completed the simulation individually.
- Computer Access (OPTIONAL):** Consider choosing a location with a computer, projector, and speakers for the discussion, so you can refer to the simulation during the discussion.
- Summary of Content:** Print out copies of the Summary of Content and Discussion Guide Handout (attached) to distribute to participants and refer to throughout the discussion.
- Referral Process and Local Resources:** Print out copies of your list of "Local Resources" to refer to during the discussion. Have the group discuss your school's referral process and available resources and write them down on the handout. Otherwise, the form can be filled out as a PDF if everyone has access to a computer.

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INTRODUCTION—The purpose of this section is to revisit and extend the learning around identifying, approaching and referring At-Risk Students

PREPARATION/MATERIALS—Writing Instruments

TIME—1 Hour

PARTICIPATION HANDOUTS—Content Summary Handout, One Sheet Handout

SLIDES: Slides 12-28

If you choose to do the simulation together as a group prior to the discussion, use Slides 1-11 to introduce the simulation. You can also download the “Product Trailer” and the “Logging In” video to introduce the learning and the simulation

Q. What is the referral policy in your school? To whom do you make a referral if you are worried about a student in psychological distress that is not deemed an imminent threat to a student’s life? Is that the school psychologist, guidance counselor, social worker, or nurse?

Q. What is the referral policy in your school for students who may be a danger to themselves or others?

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Q. When and how would a student’s parents/guardians be notified about your concerns? Whose role is it to notify them?

Review: Look over the rest of this document so you can be familiar with the questions you’ll be asking the group and get an idea of what sort of questions and concerns may arise during the discussion. *Note which questions you feel are most important to make time for because you might not have time for all of them.* Edit the Discussion Guide PPT to include only the questions you plan to cover and include your referral process and local resources that you want teachers and staff to be aware of.

Discussion Questions: Connecting with Students

“Psychological distress” is used broadly in the simulation to suggest reasons to be concerned about a student’s mental health. Signs of psychological distress might suggest an underlying mental health problem or be the result of a situational crisis, unmanaged stress, inadequate sleep, or a combination of factors.

What is most important is that we know what to look for, what to say to a student, and where to refer that student for more help.

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QUESTIONS

- Q.** What about a student's academic performance, behavior, extracurricular life, or appearance might make you concerned about their mental health?
- Q.** How might talking with a student and learning more about them save you time in the long run?

Discussion Questions: Bringing Up Sensitive Topics

In the conversation with Rene, you practiced four effective techniques for having “tough” conversations with students:

1. Use “I” statements (with terms like “I think,” “I feel,” or “it seems”) to soften your observations.
2. Avoid negative labels.
3. Don't exaggerate.
4. Be specific.

QUESTIONS

- Q.** Which of the four techniques seem easier and which ones seem more difficult for you?
- Q.** If you have had concerns about one or more of your students in the past and have initiated conversations like Mr. Lyons, what worked well for you?

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Discussion Questions: Getting Students to Open Up

In the conversation with Joey, you got him to open up by using two techniques:

1. Open-ended questions, which require more than a yes or no answer
2. Reflecting statements, which are responses that reflect what you think the student is saying, thinking, or feeling to make sure you understand

Using both techniques encourages a student to share, because you're showing that you want to understand their situation and how they feel.

QUESTION

Q. Do you have to agree with a student to reflect what they are feeling? How might agreeing and reflecting be different?

As Joey opened up to you, it became clear that he needed to be connected with the counselor as soon as possible.

QUESTION

Q. How comfortable do you feel suggesting a student speak with the school counselor (or relevant resource)? How comfortable do you feel referring that person to speak with a student?

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The simulation provided examples of effective tactics for talking to a student about seeing the school counselor.

- Explaining that the counselor has helped other students with similar issues
- Discussing how it can feel good to talk about the stressors in our lives
- Describing how the counselor can help the student meet their goals (like stress management, confidence, etc.)
- Offering to introduce the student to the counselor

QUESTION

Q. Which of these have you successfully used in the past?

At this point in the discussion, please have your group fill out the questions regarding your school's referral process in the Discussion Handout. You should also instruct participants to fill out the Local Resources section, using information from the Local Resources page you've printed out from within the simulation. These should include a list of community resources with relevant names and telephone numbers; you should be prepared to help teachers understand the referral process.

Discussion Questions: Building Stronger Relationships

In the conversation with Rob, your goal was to establish a relationship and get to know him better. You did this by, again, asking open-ended questions and using Reflecting statements and by avoiding disagreeing, giving advice, and criticizing.

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QUESTIONS

- Q.** What words do we often use when we're approaching a student as an authority figure? (Some possible answers if discussion stalls: "should" and "don't") How is that different from approaching students as a supportive adult?
- Q.** How do you know when to discipline a student and when to encourage them to open up? What are some effective strategies for going back and forth between these two roles as needed?
- Q.** How can you prepare yourself for a conversation in which you want to avoid disagreeing, giving advice and criticizing?

Wrapping Up

Thank you for taking the time to complete the simulation and to have this discussion. Because of stigma, psycho-social development, or other barriers, high school students often can't identify or articulate their needs. However, students experiencing psychological distress often exhibit behavioral patterns that are detectable in the school setting. Because of your unique position in student's lives, teachers and other school personnel like yourself can help. It is vitally important to reach out and talk to these students and, if necessary, take appropriate action. Even one conversation can really make a difference.

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Taking the Simulation

Recognize when a student is exhibiting signs of psychological distress and manage conversations with three virtual students to connect them with appropriate services within the school. After completing the simulation, you will be better equipped to identify warning signs of psychological distress, manage conversations that help students build resilience, and make effective referrals to school support personnel.

To log in and access the simulation, go to:

<https://www.florida.kognito.com>

Connecting with Students

According to the CDC, 13-20% of children living in the U.S. experience a mental disorder in a given year. In some cases, students may even begin to have thoughts of suicide, which is the second leading cause of death of children aged 10-14. So, we do have many at-risk students in our school system, and these aren't always the students who stand out as being troubled. In fact, any student could be at-risk. We know that stress, depression, and anxiety can have major and lasting impacts on a student's academic performance and can lead to disruptive classroom behaviors. Our school counselors and other mental health professionals are trained to help these students and connect them with resources in and outside of the school.

Connect the student immediately and in person to a supportive counselor, staff member, local service provider or crisis center if you have concerns about students with suicidal behaviors. If you have questions on how to handle a particular situation and you cannot reach anyone in your school administration, you can call The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8522) 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

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School counselors and other mental health professionals are trained to help these students and connect them with resources in and outside of the school. Note that the school counselors mentioned here might have another title or role in your school. It is important that you know who the right person is to go to for support.

While you may not have as much time to help your students as you'd like, the techniques you'll learn won't require any additional paperwork, just a little more observation and a few extra conversations to integrate into your day, and they should help you connect with students on topics other than mental health, as well.

Start with identifying and noticing what's going on with your students: noting worrisome behavior and worrisome changes in behavior.

There are several warning signs of worrisome changes to look for:

ACADEMIC CHANGES SUCH AS:

- Patterns of missed/late/incomplete assignments
- Failing, or falling grades
- Diminishing participation
- Diminishing attendance

BEHAVIORAL CHANGES SUCH AS:

- Withdrawn attitude; lack of social interaction
- Anger; crying; emotional outbursts
- Behavioral issues in class
- Change in personality; mood swings
- Statements about feeling helpless or hopeless
- Constant or excessive worrying
- Frequent complaints of insomnia, stomachaches, or headaches
- Recent impulsiveness or unnecessary risk taking

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APPEARANCE CHANGES SUCH AS:

- Disheveled or worsening appearance; poor grooming/hygiene
- Unusual, bizarre appearance
- Drastic weight gain or loss
- Avoidance of eye contact

Youth Suicide Warning Signs

The presence of more than one of the following warning signs may increase a youth's risk for engaging in suicidal behaviors in the near future:

1. Talking about or making plans for suicide
2. Expressing hopelessness about the future
3. Displaying severe/overwhelming emotional pain or distress
4. Worrisome behavioral cues or marked changes in behavior, particularly in the presence of the warning signs listed previously. Specifically, this could include:
 - **Withdrawal from or changing in social connections/situations**
 - **Changes in sleep (increased or decreased)**
 - **Anger or hostility that seems out of character or out of context**
 - **Recent increased agitation or irritability**

(www.save.org/youthsuicide, 2017)

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Example of Identifying Concerns for Joey

Joey is not a very strong student; lately, his grades have been getting worse and it doesn't seem like he is ever willingly participating in class. He tends to sit away from other students, towards the back of the classroom. His grandmother informed the school that his father died from suicide within the past year. Recently, Joey wrote that sometimes suicide is for the best and people shouldn't look down on it.

WORRISOME WARNING SIGNS TO OBSERVE:

- Deteriorating/poor grades
- Lack of participation in class
- Avoidance of eye contact
- Lack of social interaction; withdrawn
- Experience of grief/loss

These are all warning signs of psychological distress. Add to these concerns that he's often bullied at school, his father died, and he made statements about suicide, and you have a student who really seems to need help. It is crucial to refer this student because of his statement about suicide.

Because of Joey's warning signs, we knew he needed to be connected with the counselor as soon as possible. If he had not agreed to see the counselor today, Mr. Lyons should have gone immediately to the counselor to let her know about Joey. And, if he thought Joey was in immediate danger, he should contact the counselor or another administrator for support, without leaving Joey alone, even for a minute.

Once you identify, you need to approach. That means letting the student know you're concerned and trying to better understand why they're behaving the way they are. Some teachers want to skip approach and go straight to the counselor to refer the student, and that's fine. It's much better to do that than to do nothing at all; in an emergency, it might even be the best thing to do.

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Bringing Up Sensitive Topics and Getting Students to Open Up

Once you identify any number of these worrisome behaviors, you need to intervene and approach: let the student know you're concerned and trying to better understand why they're behaving the way they are. Several things may happen when you approach a student:

- They may have a reasonable explanation that alleviates your concern.
- They may say things that cause you to remain concerned.
- Or they may push you away and refuse to talk. That's okay. At least that student knows that someone cares.

These are some effective practices to bringing up sensitive topics, without the student reacting defensively:

- 1. Use "I" Statements.** You don't always know what happens between students, or how often something has happened. Speak about what is or has been observable to you and how you perceive their behavior. "I" statements—those with phrases like "I think," "I feel," or "it seems like"—focus on your perception of the behavior.
- 2. Avoid negative labels.** For example, "rude" is a strong negative label. Using more neutral phrases and descriptions make it less likely for students to deny or shut down.
- 3. Avoid exaggerations.** Students will likely deny being "extremely" anything. Use soft modifiers.
- 4. Be specific.** What happened to give you concern? The more specific you can be, the better.

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If you ask too many questions in a row, a student can feel like they're being interrogated instead of feeling like an equal partner in the conversation. This can shut the student down. As in any conversation, you need to make statements, as well as ask questions; but your statements should encourage the student to continue sharing, not interrupt with your own advice or analysis.

This is also when Reflecting statements are useful, where you reflect what you think the student is saying, thinking, or feeling to make sure you understand. We often use Reflecting statements in casual conversations with friends and family, to clarify what the other person is saying. Notice how often you do this over the next few days. Then, try using it in conversations with students when you want to encourage them to continue sharing.

Examples

POOR STATEMENT:

"You're very needy."

Use I statements: I feel like you're being very needy.

Avoid negative labels: I feel like you're very concerned about what people think.

Don't exaggerate: I feel like you're a little concerned about what people think.

Be specific: I feel like you're a little concerned about what people think. You texted Ms. Sandifer a couple of times yesterday about your article.

POOR STATEMENT:

"You freaked out about every exam."

Use I statements: It seems like you freaked out about every exam.

Avoid negative labels: It seems like you worry about every exam.

Don't exaggerate: It seems like you were worried about the last exam.

Be specific: It seems like you were worried about the last exam. You asked a lot of questions about the answers you got wrong.

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Building Stronger Relationships

Your goal as a teacher is to establish a relationship and get to know your students better. In future conversations, you can learn more and, if necessary, refer them to the counselor or someone else who can help. At least, students will know someone cares enough to ask about these things, which can mean a lot.

There are some key techniques that are most effective in building trust between you and the student, and getting them to open up to you:

- Ask open-ended questions
- Ask follow-up questions for more information or clarification
- Reflect your understanding of what they are saying

As in any conversation, you need to make statements, as well as ask questions; but your statements should encourage the student to continue sharing, not interrupt with your own advice or analysis.

It is important to try to avoid disagreeing, giving advice, and criticizing the students for their behaviors. Sometimes these techniques are fine; it depends on the purpose of the conversation.

If the purpose is talking about a sensitive topic or encouraging discussion, these aren't helpful because they could begin an argument, make the student defensive, or emphasize your authority over them. In an exploratory conversation like this, you want the student to trust you and open up. Asking open-ended questions, asking for more information, and Reflecting what you think they mean are all effective ways to encourage a student to open up.

Before beginning a conversation like this, it can be helpful to switch into the role of a mentor or supportive adult, rather than a teacher. This helps you re-focus so you're ready to just listen for a while. Learning to avoid disagreeing, advising, and criticizing is an important step in mastering these conversations. Don't worry if you stumble a few times. It just takes a little practice. It also helps to control your emotions during the conversation, and to take time to think about what you want to say before you respond.

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Referral

If, after approaching the student and talking with them, you still have reason to be concerned, you must make a referral to the school counselor or administrative equivalent. There are useful approaches to this:

Instead of telling a student that they should see the counselor, it's often more effective to phrase it as a question, for example: "How would you feel about talking to the counselor?" This can increase the student's ownership over the idea, which can make him more receptive to it.

If you fear the student may be a danger to themselves or to others, you must be very direct and act quickly—don't let the student out of your sight until you've connected them with the counselor or another administrator who's prepared to help.

Here are some good referral phrasing techniques to use:

- **The counselor has helped students with similar issues.**

Ex: "In the past, when other students have had a problem like this, they've found it helpful to talk to Ms. Ayers about it."

- **Talking with the counselor can feel good.**

Ex: "The good thing about talking to Ms. Ayers is that she's trustworthy and she's a good listener, so you can just let go and be yourself. That can feel really nice."

- **The counselor can help you meet your goals.**

Ex: "Ms. Ayers might be able to help you think of better ways to handle the stress at home and help yourself and your family get through this."

- **I can introduce you.**

Ex: "I know that approaching her out of the blue might seem uncomfortable, so I could introduce you and tell her a little about what we talked about today."

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Connect the student immediately and in person to a supportive counselor, staff member, local service provider or crisis center. If you have questions on how to handle a particular situation and you cannot reach anyone in your school administration, you can call The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at **1-800-273-TALK (8522)** 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Conclusion

Taking time to notice a student's behavior, reach out, and make a referral to the counselor might bring hope to the student's life, help them perform better academically, prevent the escalation of psychological distress, or just let them know someone cares. The conversation you have with a student can open the door to them getting the help they need. If you do this for just one student, you will have made a difference.

After reaching out to a student, follow up in the coming days, weeks, and months to see if things are improving. These don't have to be long conversations. Even a quick question like "How's everything going?" lets them know you're still thinking about them.

And, remember, you're not alone. If you're unsure how to handle a particular situation, you can go to your school counselor, the principal, or a colleague for advice. In an emergency, you can call school security, or 911, or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

If you ever realize that a friend, family member, or you yourself may be at-risk, you can contact the Lifeline or seek a referral for a mental health professional from your doctor or someone you trust.

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Identifying At-Risk Students

Worrisome behavioral changes in students can be identified in three categories:

- Academic changes, like slipping grades and diminishing attendance.
- Behavioral changes, like emotional outbursts, or withdrawn social interactions.
- Appearance changes, like drastic weight gain/loss, and declining grooming and hygiene

Approaching At-Risk Students

You can avoid having the student you speak with get defensive and shut down by using these techniques:

1. Using "I" statements, with phrases such as "I think," "I feel," and "it seems like..."
2. Avoiding negative labels, and replacing them with neutral phrases that avoid accusations, such as "It seemed like you were insensitive..." (rather than "extremely rude")
3. Avoiding exaggerations and using soft modifiers.
4. Using specific examples of observances and/or behavior

Using these techniques encourages a student to share and will create a more open environment for discussion, to avoid the student getting defensive and refusing to communicate.

Referring At-Risk Students

Referral can be a difficult subject to bring up, but you learned about some effective suggestive phrases to increase student motivation to see a counselor:

- "The counselor has helped students with similar issues..."
- "Talking with the counselor can feel good. It can be nice to express your feelings."
- "The counselor can help you meet your goals."
- "I can introduce you, if that makes it easier."

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Your School's Referral Process

QUESTIONS

Q. What is the referral policy in your school? To whom do you make a referral if you are worried about a student in psychological distress that is not deemed an imminent threat to a student's life? Is that the school psychologist, guidance counselor, social worker, or nurse?

Q. What is the referral policy in your school for students who may be a danger to themselves or others?

Q. When and how would a student's parents/guardians be notified about your concerns? Whose role is it to notify them?

Local Resources

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK (8522), available 24/7