CONTENT SUMMARY

At-Risk for High School

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.

Module 1: 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 988 (9-8-8) 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 is the right person in your school 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, and 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 ne. 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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Modules 2 & 3: 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 modi ers.
4. **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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Module 4: 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 ne; 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, sta 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 (8255)** 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 di erence.

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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