

At-Risk for Middle 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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Students are adjusting to a lot during their middle-school years—figuring out who they are, navigating new academic and social challenges—and all the while their minds and bodies are going through a lot of changes. Starting with identifying, it is crucial to notice what’s going on with your students. Noticing worrisome behavior and worrisome changes in behavior, in particular.

Once you identify *worrisome* behaviors, you need to approach the student. This means letting students know that you’re concerned and trying to better understand why they’re behaving the way they are.

In some cases, referral may be necessary. Referral can mean referring the student to the counselor, referring the counselor to the student, or, better yet, both. Students are often more motivated about seeing a counselor when they’re personally referred by someone they know and trust.

Module 2: Identifying At-Risk Students

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

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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

Appearance changes such as:

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

The important thing to remember is to follow your instincts. If you're worried about a student, approach him or her to see what's going on. It can't hurt to let the student know that you've noticed and that you care. Letting students know we notice and care about their wellbeing makes them feel valued and supported at school. It can alter their classroom behavior and give them confidence to face personal and academic challenges. It can also potentially improve their resiliency.

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Resiliency

Two students can be bullied or mistreated in the same way and have two very different reactions. A student who is called a name, for example, and has the coping skills to get through it with self-esteem intact has something we call *resiliency*. Students with resiliency are able to maintain perspective. They feel empowered to solve their problems or ask for help if necessary. They typically know that they are connected to a support system of at least one friend, teacher, or family member whom they can go to for help.

As educators, there are small but significant things we can do to build resiliency in our students. Whenever you help your students maintain perspective, feel empowered to cope with stress and adversity, and feel connected to others who care about them, you help them become more resilient.

Module 3: Approaching At-Risk Students

Approaching students can sometimes seem difficult, like they may not be receptive to your concerns. But students will know you have noticed them, and that you are concerned. There are some techniques for discussing sensitive topics that can avoid putting the student on the defensive:

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 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.

The way you bring up the student’s behavior makes a huge difference in how the student will respond.

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Bullying

Bullying can take on many different forms. It can be physical, for example, hitting, shoving, facial expressions or obscene gestures, or it can be verbal, like threatening, name-calling, or rumor spreading.

When students are intentionally ostracized or socially isolated from their friends and peer groups, that's a less visible, but just as damaging form of bullying. Also, and equally important, sometimes what we call "bullying" may actually be a violation of federal civil rights laws. These laws cover harassing behaviors based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex (including pregnancy and gender identity), age, marital and parental status, disability, sexual orientation, or genetic information.

As with any at-risk student, aggressors, victims, and bystanders need you, their teacher, to be an authority and a positive role model. You can do that by setting clear expectations at the beginning of the year--for example, making a class contract--and consistently reinforcing those expectations through firm but non-hostile, non-physical consequences. It may be useful to keep in mind that there are no bad kids, just students who need more attention and support.

Module 4: Referring At-Risk Students

There are a few ways to refer: you can tell the student about the counselor, tell the counselor about the student, or both. By talking to students yourself, you can gather information about their situation and increase their motivation to meet with the counselor. Students are more likely to accept a referral from someone they know and trust. When you do talk to students about the counselor, here are some things you can say that may increase their motivation to go:

- ***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."

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- ***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.”

Instead of telling a student that he or she 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 them more receptive to it. Of course, if you fear the student may be a danger to themselves or 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.

Suicide Prevention

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 above. 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, 2020)

It’s crucial that we’re prepared to have these tough conversations with our students in order to connect them to help. Suicide is often preventable. If you fear that a student is considering

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suicide, talk to him or her immediately and be direct. Asking about suicide will not put the idea into a student's head.

1. Gather as much information as the student is willing to share, such as: Are they thinking about suicide?
 - Do they have a plan?
 - Do they intend to act on the plan?
 - Do they have the means to act on the plan?
2. 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) or chat them at <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat/>, both available 24/7.

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, 911, or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

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