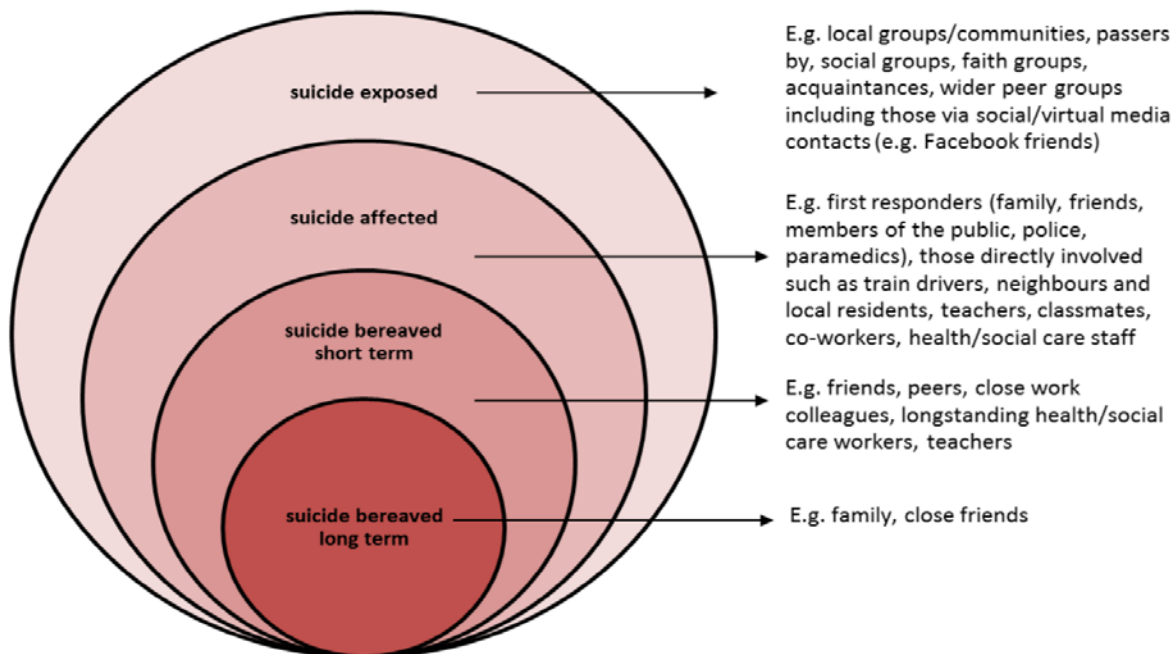


Suicide Clusters: What are they and What Can Parents Do?

A suicide “cluster” is when more suicides than expected happen in relation to a specific geographic area or social group in an accelerated period of time. Suicide clusters account for 100-200 deaths annually, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). These clusters consist of more than three victims, typically ranging from 13 to 24 years old, and occur within approximately a one-to-two-year period. While there is some research cautioning against the glamorizing of suicide deaths and the need for clear intervention with vulnerable persons who have proximity to the victim, there is no single cause or solution to end a cluster. We do know that it will take the dedicated effort of parents, schools, faith groups, public agencies, and community organizations working together.

Circles of Vulnerability



From: Identifying and responding to suicide clusters and contagion A practice resource: Public Health England (2015)

Research shows that students who are most vulnerable include:

- students who backed out of a suicide pact,
- students who had a recent negative interaction with the victim,
- students who now realize they missed warning signs,
- and students with their own set of childhood adversities/previous suicidal behavior regardless of their relationship to the victim.

Key points to remember:

Being honest and talking about suicide is important for teens who are processing but avoid overexposure to graphic details of how the death occurred. Postvention is critical – engaging youth in conversations and debriefing to provide opportunities to process and to assess their vulnerability.

What Can Parents Do?

Listen more.

When we actually do get a moment with our kid, we sometimes fill it up with a multitude of questions and suggestions instead of listening. Every child is different and it is important to find out what will bring out the conversation from each one. A couple questions you might try are: "What are some of the challenging issues you are facing right now?", "What are the things you worry about?" or "Tell me what I can do to be a better parent or how to support you."

Overcome the stigma and share what's going on.

It can be hard to talk about depression, mental health, therapy, medications, and those things that can bring a social stigma or judgment. But we know that sharing information is one of the best tools parents have to keep their kids safe and healthy. It may not feel comfortable to tell the school or your pastor, or your extended family about something that is going with your child – but they could be critical components in keeping them well. And it is even harder when you know something concerning about someone else's child. If you can't get yourself to have an in person conversation, share it via www.Safe2Tell.org.

Prepare for the fact that your kids are being exposed to challenging issues like alcohol, drugs, vaping, sex, harassment, suicide, and risk-taking.

Parenting an adolescent is hard. Right at the time when they begin to struggle with big life issues, they naturally are pulling away from parents. It can be really easy to take the approach of "wait and see" with your teen. It is more comfortable to not push the issue or ask the hard questions when you aren't sure what is going on in their life. But it doesn't help your adolescent when you pull back. And the issues aren't going away. Get involved, ask the hard questions, share your values and expectations, be open and communicate with other parents, and say "no" even when they will be upset with you. This also means you need to actively know what they are doing on their phones and ask hard questions about where they are going, who they are with, and talk about how to manage risky situations.

Let it be okay for them to have problems.

We often take it personally when our kids struggle. It is natural to not want your child to fail or have problems. But our kids need to know that it is okay to not be perfect. Many teens are afraid to disappoint their parents and know very well that their problems will "reflect" on their parents. Some kids report that their parents don't believe them when they are expressing issues and that even truly caring adults don't understand the true magnitude of their feelings. Until they grow into an adult brain, adolescents need to know that you are willing to hear and respond to the things that are impacting their emotions and mental health. Let them know you will love them no matter what problems they are facing.

Stop and consciously redefine "success" with your child.

As parents we often send mixed messages to our kids. We tell them we just want them to be healthy and happy but then we constantly ask about their grades and tell them what they need to do to get into a good college. Often by high school, kids have taken on this success persona and feel like they will be a failure if they don't get on the varsity team, pass the AP exams and get into the "right" college or career. Help your child know that success is about finding your own path and being healthy and mentally well. They need to believe that you are okay with them doing something different than the traditional model of success.