

Deaths focus attention on suicide prevention

By Merri Rosenberg
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An Orlando high school student recently killed herself in the high school auditorium after asking permission to go to the bathroom, and two survivors of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School have died in apparent suicides. Such tragedies send chills through school officials. Could this happen in your district?

Depression affects nearly 20 percent of teens. Arguably, the problem is getting worse; a 2016 study published in *Pediatrics Journal* found that between 2005 and 2014, depression in children ages 12-17 rose nearly 3 percent.

Students are being affected by a variety of sources of stress, including academic competition to get into college, family dysfunction, problems in relationships and normal anxieties amplified by social media.

Recognizing the problem, New York State has mandated, since July 2018, that schools provide mental health education as part of the health curriculum. While the State Education Department does not require a specific curriculum, all districts are required to teach elementary, middle and high school students about mental health issues. In middle and high schools, physical education and health teachers usually deliver these lessons.

"It has been our experience that many schools are already providing mental health education as part of their K-12 health curriculum," said Amy Molloy, project director for the School Mental Health Resource and Training Center at the Mental Health Association in New York State. "The law and the guidance from SED, developed by the Mental Health Advisory Council, provide a recommended framework which has been extremely helpful for schools, as they assess their current curriculum and identify new resources."

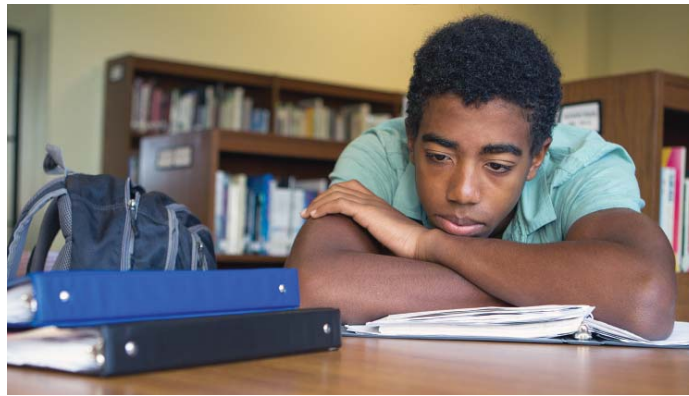
The Mental Health Association lists curricular resources for educators on its website, many of which are available for free.

One free curriculum comes from Erika's Lighthouse, a non-profit created by the parents of an Illinois teen, Erika Neuckranz, who took her own life at the age of 14 after a yearlong battle with depression.

"Erika's Lighthouse is one example of the many excellent resources available for schools," said Molloy. "It includes many elements that we encourage schools to consider, such as implementation support from educators, youth experiences and small group/classroom activities and discussions."

"It's real scary for administrators to say, 'we're going to talk about suicide,'" said Peggy Kubert, director of education for Erika's Lighthouse. "We have to begin to de-stigmatize and make it less stressful."

There is no easy answer to the question of what causes young people to take their lives, Kubert noted. "There's a sense



Managing unhealthy thoughts and beliefs

It is estimated that 80 percent of our thoughts are negative. Examples including ruminating, negative self-talk and catastrophizing.

The best strategy is the one that works for YOU.

Get moving. Exercise provides a distraction, releases endorphins, boosts physical energy, promotes the growth of neural connections in the brain and releases physical tension in the body. Exercise will also help you sleep which provides its own restorative benefits.

Schedule a worry break. Allow yourself 20 to 30 minutes to think about what is bothering you most. Write your concerns on paper so they are clear and real. Decide what you want to do with the list – throw it out or use it later for a problem-solving exercise. If problems

creep into your mind at other times of the day, remind yourself you have scheduled time for worry and let it go.

Try mindfulness, meditation or simple deep breathing exercises. Take the time to explore some apps, such as Calm. Meditation and mindfulness can be challenging for beginners. If your mind wanders, be patient and try to redirect yourself back to the exercise. Start off with just a few minutes of practice.

Happiness is contagious. Do something nice for someone. It could be a smile, a kind word or volunteering for your favorite cause.

Practice gratitude. Identify all the things you are grateful for each day.

Excerpted from www.mentalhealthdny.org. Full text at bit.ly/2JSbiXx.

of hopelessness, despair, a loss of choices. There's not one element to point to, but a combination of biological, environmental and situational factors."

The curriculum, which targets middle and high school students, is used in 230 schools in 28 states including New York. The organization offers the materials on the web and will provide help as educators tailor it to suit a particular school or district.

The curriculum can be adapted to a school's needs, with one, two, three or more lessons. "It's meant to be flexible," said Kubert. "It depends on how much time you have to dedicate to it. There's a resource portal on the web. We wrote the program to be turnkey, where the educator doesn't have to do any extra work. Or they can use our materials as a supplement."

In middle school, the focus is on depression awareness and what leads to good mental health. In high school, the topics include self-injury, suicide, bullying, and trans-gender issues.

One teacher who uses the Erika's Lighthouse curriculum is Douglas Carpenter, a health teacher at Byram Hills High School. "Mental health is the biggest barrier to [students'] overall health," he said. "Kids put a lot of pressure on themselves."

In Byram Hills, Carpenter has found that the resources from Erika's Lighthouse

fit well into a unit he teaches on stress management.

"We want to discuss depression as much as diabetes or cancer," he said. One of the key takeaways is the idea that anyone can suffer from depression, and there's no shame about that diagnosis; what matters is getting appropriate help.

Students initially watch a video featuring teenagers who've suffered from depression or contemplated suicide. Then students participate in a targeted discussion about triggers, strategies to manage depression, and ways to seek help or support a friend who's experiencing the problem.

Students are asked to consider how they cope with stress, or depression, and work in small groups to figure out ways their school can better support students with depression.

Some of the issues that the students in the videos tackle include bullying, coping with a parent's depression, or parents' divorce, being transgender, anxiety about being an immigrant, and pressure to succeed – with an explicit message that no matter what the problem, you can overcome it.

These videos show students at sports, hanging out in a field with friends, or going to get ice cream. "They look so normal," said Carpenter. That's precisely the point; it's normal to feel overwhelmed at times,

and there are ways to deal with it. "I talk about stress, and offer different stress management techniques to the kids."

One of the most meaningful tools, said Carpenter, are the self-referral cards that Erika's Lighthouse provides, which he hands out to students as a form of check-in. Students can indicate they want to speak with a counselor, don't want to speak with a counselor, or want to speak to a counselor immediately. All students fill out these cards to preserve confidentiality.

Carpenter also works with student peer leaders, who've been trained for these roles, to help students during health class. He also advises a student club that focuses on student wellness and helping students with healthy behavior.

"Erika's Lighthouse is so student-friendly, and very current," said Carpenter. They've already updated their curriculum. It's so gentle, and fosters really good discussion."

Red Hook, in Dutchess County, is another New York State school district that uses the Erika's Lighthouse curriculum.

Linden Avenue Middle School health teacher Patrick Caltabiano has been working with the curriculum for the past four years with his seventh graders. Especially effective, he said, is that the materials feature "real life stories that allows kids to recognize kids like themselves. It's not just a bunch of actors."

During the past year, the curriculum was expanded to include more mental health topics. Caltabiano uses Erika's Lighthouse for about two weeks, making modifications and tweaks as needed. Working with the school psychologist, he opens the discussion to students after they watch the "authentic story" segment, which makes "kids more open. Some kids didn't realize that talk therapy can be short-term."

For Caltabiano, Erika's Lighthouse "gives the [students] coping skills, so they can go and seek help. We've had kids share their stories."

Still, he added, "there are a few times kids have stayed after class to talk to me. Some kids are afraid to speak in class. They started crying, and they go to the school psychologist."

Having students feel comfortable seeking help is one of the program's goals.

"What helps is for students to know they're not alone," said Kubert. "Help doesn't have to be a counselor. It's about getting them to someone who can help."

"The recent news about teen suicides is a stark reminder that students are hurting, and they should know that they can turn to adults in school when the world suddenly seems horribly dark," said NYSSBA President William Miller. "Part of the solution involves high quality curriculums that reduce the stigma that prevents students from seeking help and gives young people a way to better understand their feelings."

For more information, see www.erikaslighthouse.org and www.mentalhealthdny.org.