

# Safe & Effective Suicide Prevention:

## Planning Youth and Family Events

### How we talk about suicide and mental health matters.

When safe messaging guidelines are followed, we contribute to a hopeful community narrative about triumph over adversity and networks of support. On the other hand, certain types of messaging about suicide can actually increase hopelessness and risk for vulnerable individuals. Please consider the messaging guide from the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention, and the additional tips below, to analyze whether a mental health or suicide prevention speaker, event, or activity, is appropriate for your school.

### FRAMEWORK FOR SUCCESSFUL MESSAGING

*All messages should consider four key elements: Strategy, Safety, Positive Narrative, and Guidelines*

**Safety** is avoiding content that is unsafe or undermines prevention



**Positive Narrative** means “promoting the positive” for example:

- Sharing resources
- Telling real stories of help-seeking, giving support, coping, or resilience
- Describing action steps the audience can take
- Featuring program successes, new research, or how people are making a difference.

**Guidelines** is using any specific guidance or best practices that apply

**Strategy:** Involves planning and focusing messages so they are as effective as possible. Including-

- Integrating communications with other efforts
- Defining clear goals
- Understanding the audience
- Identifying a “call to action”
- Providing resources for taking action

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## BUILD SKILLS, NOT JUST AWARENESS

An evidence-based prevention program that builds coping or life skills is likely to have a stronger effect in reducing suicidal thoughts and behaviors than any one-time speaker or event.

A speaker or activity may be a great way to build interest or energy around an evidence-based program, or educate staff and parents about how to help a youth at risk. Here are some tips to consider when vetting speakers and performances or planning activities.

## Resource Links

You can find evidence-based prevention programs at:

[www.sprc.org/resources-programs](http://www.sprc.org/resources-programs)

[www.blueprintsprograms.org](http://www.blueprintsprograms.org)

[www.secondaryguide.casel.org](http://www.secondaryguide.casel.org)

*We encourage you to also work with partners like your local mental health authority and local health departments to explore funding opportunities to implement a program.*

## Vetting Process

How to review mental health and suicide prevention speakers, films, or performances

Plan in advance what the goal(s) of the speaker or event will be. Do you want to increase help seeking? Get people excited to implement an evidence-based program? Promote healing and connectedness after a loss? The goal should be to encourage action and behavior change, in addition to knowledge.

If a speaker/film/performance will be sharing lived experiences with suicidal thoughts or actions or healing after a loss by suicide, review the [Safe Storytelling Guidelines](#) from the **American Foundation for Suicide Prevention** with them and ensure they will adhere to them. If a film/performance will be depicting a character with lived experience with suicide, review the [Real Stories Depiction Recommendations](#) from the **National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention** to ensure the film/performance adheres to recommendations.

Avoid any stories or depictions of suicide that might glamorize suicide or convey that it is a common response to life's challenges; avoid sharing any descriptions of methods of suicide. Focus on a positive narrative as directed by the [National Action Alliance](#). Share stories of resilience and hope, and focus on solutions, resources, and successes rather than the problem of suicide.

Consider requesting an evidence-based suicide prevention training in addition to, or perhaps instead of, a speaker/film/performance.



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## PLANNING A SUICIDE PREVENTION ACTIVITY:

Plan activities that give opportunities to learn and practice coping skills or life skills. Some examples might include:

- CBT worksheets for classroom assignments- [www.classroommentalhealth.org/in-class/thoughts/](http://www.classroommentalhealth.org/in-class/thoughts/)
- Social-emotional homework assignments- [Aperture Education's Free Home Resources](#)
- Promote mental health literacy- [NAMI](#), [AFSP](#), [Trevor Project](#), or [Childmind](#)
- Guided mindfulness meditation or progressive muscle relaxation
- Utilize evidence-based tools or activities [www.positivepsychology.com](http://www.positivepsychology.com) or [www.crediblemind.com](http://www.crediblemind.com)

Encourage action rather than awareness. Some possible "calls to action" could be:

- Promoting resources to encourage help-seeking behavior- SafeUT and the Trevor Project Lifeline 1-866-488-7386
- Encouraging students to support and refer friends who are struggling [www.seizetheawkward.org](http://www.seizetheawkward.org)
- Promote safe storage of firearms and medications [www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter](http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter) and [www.useonlyasdirected.org/](http://www.useonlyasdirected.org/)
- Encourage increased family communication which includes mental health related conversations (i.e., [Parent Empowered Conversation Starters](#). [Emotional Health Conversation Tips from Intermountain Healthcare](#)).

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### CHECKLIST FOR SUICIDE PREVENTION

Yes/No

Review the following questions to determine if content will be safe and effective:  
*(If a member of planning committee has seen this speaker/film/performance)*

- Was a hopeful tone and safe messaging maintained throughout?

For speakers/films/performing artists with lived experience:

- Were they able to share their story without blaming individuals or agencies/organizations?
- Did they appear to be at a good point in their own healing process where they are ready to share their story without having a setback in their own healing?

The event coordinator reviews the speaker/performing artist's piece to ensure what the takeaway for the audience would be in advance.

*(Example: Increase hope, help-seeking, engagement in evidence-based prevention)*

Event coordinator provides the speaker/performing artist with applicable AFSP, Real Stories, and Action Alliance Framework resources and reviews with them in advance.

Lived experiences speakers/performing artists are given a designated time frame for their presentation (about 15-20 minutes) and accompanied by a suicide prevention or postvention training.

Event coordinator provides community and historical context in advance  
*(Example: A recent suicide loss or tension between groups)* so the speaker/performing artist can tailor their presentation and plan to respond to questions appropriately.

Event coordinator provides the speaker/performing artist with a prepared list of local and national mental health and crisis resources. This list is also shared at the event.

**If you are unable to determine the safety or appropriateness of content or you have reason to be concerned, sometimes the best option is to decline.**

Messaging about suicide can increase suicide risk in vulnerable individuals when safe messaging guidelines are not followed.

You may also reach out to Cathy Davis, Suicide Prevention Specialist at USBE for consultation. Email at [cathy.davis@schools.utah.gov](mailto:cathy.davis@schools.utah.gov)

# Safe & Effective Suicide Prevention:

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### CHECKLIST FOR SUICIDE PREVENTION, CONTINUED

Yes/No

Messaging about suicide can sometimes lead to an increase in help seeking. This is a positive outcome, but schools and communities need to be prepared by sharing information about credible resources and/or having training adults available to respond. Consider putting the following in place to support attendees when hosting a suicide prevention event.

Does your school have an updated list of local and national mental health and crisis resources that could provide help to a student at-risk for suicide?

Has your school staff been recently trained on the warning signs for suicide and how to respond?

Will you have trained mental health staff available at the event? This could include school mental health staff and/or representation from your local mental health authority.

Does your school have a written policy of what to do and who to contact (at your school/district) if staff come in contact with an individual who expresses suicidal thoughts? Can the policy be sent out to staff as a reminder before they event?

Have parents been alerted ahead of time about the event, content to be shared, at-home talking points, and community resources (such as through PeachJar or Canvas)?

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## SAMPLE LETTER TO PARENTS

Dear Parents/Guardians,

(School Name) will be hosting a suicide prevention event on (Date and Time). This event will include (description of speaker/film/performance/activity). This event will be open to parents, students, and the community, and we invite you to attend with your teen. An event like this can be a great opportunity to have a conversation with your teen about mental health and suicide. Here are some helpful questions and talking points you could use to start the conversation.

### Helpful question to start the conversation:

- What do you think it means to have a mental health condition?
- What could you do if you were feeling very unhappy or if you were to ever have thoughts about suicide?
- Is there anything stressing you out or weighing you down lately?
- What do you need from our relationship to support you in being mentally healthy?

### Ways to support:

#### Validate

“That sounds really difficult.” “I’m here for you. You don’t have to go through this alone.”

#### Brainstorm

Brainstorm what you can do at home that might help, such as: improving sleep or eating habits, exercising, using healthy distractions, or talking about how they are feeling

Ask which resources they would like to use, if needed:

- SafeUT App
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
- Trevor Lifeline 1-866-488-7386
- Primary care doctor
- Mental health counselor

If your child expresses suicidal thoughts to you, please contact one of the 24/7 resources listed above. The school mental health team is also here to support you and your teen. We hope to see you at our event!

Warm Regards,

Signature