

# ADDRESSING SUICIDAL CONCERNS IN A VIRTUAL SETTING: A GUIDE FOR SCHOOL STAFF

## A Message to Division Administrators:

Schools have a legal and ethical responsibility to recognize and respond to suicidal thinking and behavior in both the brick and mortar setting as well as a virtual one. This resource is meant to assist school divisions in developing their own policy and procedures for addressing suicidal concerns in a virtual setting.

It is important to recognize that if a student displays signs of suicide in a virtual learning environment, our teachers will need to be equipped with specific procedures on how to respond. School-based mental health professionals can plan for, prepare and support teachers in how to intervene should they suspect a risk of suicide or self-harm in a virtual setting. This resource document can be adapted and modified to fit your division's needs and should be disseminated in conjunction with training.

## Helpful Resources:

[VDOE Suicide Prevention Website](#)

[Signs of Suicide Wallet Card](#)

[Crisis Support Team](#) (CST) is a collaborative effort between The Jason Foundation, Inc. and Acadia Healthcare. The only national service of its kind, CST is a free resource for guidance and advice when dealing with traumatic events that could affect students' and young people's emotional health in a school, church, youth organization, or other setting. CST will provide telephonic assistance from clinical professionals who will listen and share insights on the most appropriate way to handle a crisis event. This service is NOT crisis counseling for individuals, but rather guidance for administrators or leaders responding to groups dealing with adverse events.

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## Important Contact Information:

Mental Health Team Member	Cell Phone

Community Resource Contacts	Phone Number
Child Protective Services	
Local Police Dispatch	

(You may want to consider saving these numbers in your cell phone so it can be quickly located in the case of an emergency).

Teachers should also have up-to-date contact information printed for all students that includes home address, address of where the student is doing online learning (if different than home address), caregiver phone numbers, emergency contact phone number.

## A Message to School Staff Working in a Virtual Setting:

You cannot predict death by suicide, but you can identify people who are at increased risk for suicidal behavior, take precautions, and connect with your school-based mental health team as soon as possible. Take seriously all suicide threats and always err on the side of caution.

### Please note the following:

1. If the student has indicated that the reason for being at risk of suicide relates to parental abuse or neglect, contact shall not be made with the parent but instead the local department of social services should be notified.
2. If a threat becomes evident outside of school hours, follow your school division's after-hour procedures for reporting a concern of suicide, or call 911 to request a welfare check to be conducted.

**Use the guide on the following page if you are engaging with a student in a virtual setting and their behavior causes you to suspect significant emotional distress or there is a concern of self-harm.**

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Keep the student connected or online. As soon as you can, send a message to your school risk assessment team letting them know that you need assistance.

## **If you are concerned there is an immediate or high risk of suicide.**

See if you or a member of the mental health team can connect with the parent/guardian or emergency contact of the student while the student remains connected.

**Should the student disconnect, immediately call the local police dispatch or 911 to request a welfare check on the student.**

- If other students are present, you may wish to disconnect them so you can best support the student and protect the student's confidentiality. You may need to resume the lesson later.
- Ask directly about suicide (e.g., "Are you thinking about suicide"). Focus on your concern for their well-being. Avoid being accusatory (e.g., don't say, "You aren't going to do anything stupid are you?").
- Acknowledge and validate the student's feelings. "I can tell you are very \_\_\_\_\_ right now." Say, "I'm going to get you some help." Reassure them that there is help; they will not feel like this forever. Never ignore or agree to keep information a secret.
- Listen attentively to everything that the student says, and try to learn as much as possible about the situation.
  - Are they home?
  - Who else is in the home/building with them?
  - Where are they in the home/building?
- If the student begins to cry, scream or swear, resist the urge to correct them. Suicidal feelings are very powerful, so allow the student to express them. Avoid using language that is judgmental and allow the student to express emotions without negative feedback.
- Stay calm, be supportive, sympathetic, and kind. Keep talking and listening to the student.
- After you have a good understanding of the student's problems, summarize the problems back to him or her. This helps to avoid misunderstandings and lets the student know that you are being attentive.