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Winter 2022

Connections: Youth Suicide Prevention and Awareness

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Recommended Citation

Baxter, Catherine, "Connections: Youth Suicide Prevention and Awareness" (2022). *WWU Honors College Senior Projects*. 533.
https://cedar.wvu.edu/www_honors/533

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CONNECTIONS



Youth Suicide Prevention & Awareness



**GIRL SCOUTS OF WESTERN
WASHINGTON**

Dear Leader,

Youth suicide prevention and mental health awareness can be a heavy topic to discuss, especially with young people themselves. This can lead to many of our Girl Scouts never being taught the necessary coping skills needed to protect themselves and to support their peers. Along with teaching Girl Scouts how to recognize warning signs of suicidal thoughts and how to address such emergencies, the *Connections* program was created to teach and foster resilience skills and mental wellness for all Girl Scouts, hopefully long before they reach a place of crisis where suicide is considered. There is always hope for anybody in crisis, and it is vital to show our Girl Scouts that there are resources available for those who need help.

Looking at the statistics for youth suicide in your local council can feel discouraging and even terrifying. This training focuses less on the numbers, and more on giving young people the tools and coping skills they need to be supported and to support others. Included in the *Connections* training is a number of breathers. These quick rests are important to allow Girl Scouts to process the information they have been given, and can also be taught as a way to decrease stressors in their everyday lives. If your Girl Scouts need an extra breather or a little more time to stretch and decompress between activities, take the time they need. The content of this training can always be stretched into another meeting.

During your meeting, keep an eye out for participants who may be having a tough time with the topic, such as a Girl Scout who is normally engaged in meetings with their head down on the table. Some members of your troop may have lost somebody close to them through suicide, or might be struggling with mental health themselves. Due to the subject matter, you will need to have parents/guardians complete a high risk/sensitive topic permission form prior to your meeting. It would be a good idea to let parents and guardians know beforehand the content of the today's meeting.

<https://www.girlscoutsworld.org/content/dam/girlscouts-girlscoutsworld/documents/parent-guardian-permission-for-overnights-high-risk-activities-and-sensitive-topics.pdf>

Some participants may need to take a break during the meeting, or may opt to not attend at all. That is completely okay. Have a safe space set up for your Girl Scouts to take a break in if needed, and don't hesitate to check in with any of the participants afterwards.

It is very possible a Girl Scout may come to you during or after the meeting to admit that they or somebody they know are feeling suicidal. Before you start the meeting, have a mental health professional either present at the meeting or easy to reach. You can reach out to the local schools of your Girl Scouts to talk to their counselors, who are usually very willing to help. Stress to your Girl Scouts that if the first person they contact doesn't help, you are there to help them.

You are encouraged to reach out to local organizations in your area for additional resources that may be available to your scouts. In creating this program, I partnered with MAD-HOPE, a youth suicide prevention program based in Whatcom County. The resources, information, and activities they shared with me proved invaluable in creating this program. *Connections* may be shared outside of Girl Scouts with other youth organizations, teachers, and anybody who may benefit from or wish to improve upon the content within. By pooling our resources and working together, we can help improve the lives and well-being of the young people in our community and beyond.

Breather Activities

Time for Activity: varies

This will be a difficult training for many Girl Scouts and leaders. Please insert breather breaks or mindful activities in between the main modules. The number and length of them is up to you, as some troops may need more or longer breaks. Some activity ideas are listed below, but feel free to add your own. If your troop loves Quack Diddly Oso or any specific game, you are encouraged to insert familiar activities! It is better to have more breathing time and need to extend the program into another meeting than to not give the participants enough time to process and stay as comfortable as possible.

Ideas:

1. Close your eyes and sit up straight. Picture yourself sitting in your favorite place. Breathe deep. What are 5 things you hear? What are 4 things you smell? What are 3 things you feel? If you opened your eyes, what would you see?
2. Starting with the letter A, what is something that makes you happy? Continue through the alphabet. A=art, B=bunnies, C=chocolate ...
3. Have simple mandala type coloring pages and coloring utensils available for participants to doodle throughout the meeting on breaks.
4. Have Girl Scouts color things that make them happy on their Trusted Adults Gingerbread Template outside of the gingerbread person, or draw their gingerbread person surrounded by their favorite place like the beach or a meadow of flowers.
5. Have participants close their eyes. Call out a color, then have the participants call out things that color that make them happy. Pink=cotton candy, carnations, bunny noses, cat toe beans...
6. Divide group in two. Stand in the middle of the room. Ask questions from the Pepsi vs Coke game. Everyone who likes Pepsi go left, Coke right, no favorite stays in the middle. Chocolate vs Vanilla, Cats vs Dogs. Mountain hike vs walk on the beach.... Just simple preferences, no feelings involved. Let participants move and make noise.

Introduction Activity: Sheep Scale and Emotion Wheels

Time for Activity: 10-15 min

Objective:

- Girl Scouts will check in with leader about current emotions
- Girl Scouts will be introduced to mental health in a fun and engaging way
- Girl Scouts will be introduced to one way of identifying how they feel

Materials:

Copies of Sheep Scale and Emotion Wheel (one for each participant)

Activity Directions:

1. At the beginning of the meeting, ask participants how they are feeling right now. Any and all answers are correct. Explain that it might sometimes be hard to identify how we're feeling in the moment.
2. Explain to participants that mental health is a collection of our feelings and how we behave as a result. Explain that sometimes, just like with physical health, people might struggle with being mentally healthy. Sometimes, when people struggle with their mental health, they might want to hurt themselves or die by suicide, which means taking their own life. Being able to identify our emotions and how we're feeling in the moment can help us stay mentally healthy. Just like with physical health, there are professionals available to help people who are struggling with their mental health. Hope and help are always available for people struggling with staying mentally healthy and for people thinking about suicide. We'll be working on several ways to help support ourselves and others during this program!
3. Hand out a copy of the Sheep Scale and Emotion Wheel to each participant. Ask participants what sheep they feel like today, either by shouting out or holding up fingers.
4. Explain to participants that even something silly like some funny pictures of sheep can be a tool for us to use when thinking about our mental health. The sheep scale is a funnier version of the emotion wheel. To use an emotion wheel, you start in the center of the circle, and work your way out to help identify difficult emotions.
5. Ask participants: "Which one works best for you?". After participants have been given the chance to share, explain that both the sheep scale and emotion wheel are awesome ways to identify how we're feeling. This shows that there is not one single way to approach mental health, and that it is important to check in with ourselves, including during today's meeting.
6. At this time, explain to participants that if at any point during the meeting they grow overwhelmed or need to take a breather, they are more than welcome to do so. Taking care of yourself takes a lot of courage!

Activity 1: We Are Connected

Time for Activity: 20-30 min

Objective:

- Girl Scouts will identify protective factors in their lives
- Girl Scouts will understand the significance of community
- Girl Scouts will understand that they are all important

Materials:

Soft ball of string/yarn that is easily thrown and unwound

Activity Directions:

1. Have participants stand in a circle. Make sure there is enough room between them to toss the ball of yarn.
2. Before beginning the activity, ask Girl Scouts: "What is a community?". All answers are correct!
3. Explain that in a community, we are all connected. Humans are hardwired for connection, and it's often connection to a loved one that keeps a suicidal thinker from acting on suicidal thoughts. Feeling lonely or isolated can be hard. What helps with those feelings of loneliness is connection, and connections can look different from person to person.
4. Explain that the ball of yarn represents the connective threads of their community. Knowing what activities, people, and things help us feel connected are protective factors- they help us stay strong and get through difficult times. When a participant catches the ball of yarn, have them state something that makes them feel connected or happy. This can be a person, a pet, a game, a club, anything!
5. Before the participant throws the ball across the circle, make sure they hold on tight to the string. This will begin a web. The adult leader should also participate, with each participant being tossed the ball at least twice. If the web is loose, have participants in circle back up until the web becomes tight.
6. When the web is finished, explain that it represents our community. When we lose a member of our community, everybody is affected. Have the leader or an adult volunteer (not a scout or teen volunteer) drop their string and step out of the circle.
7. Have everybody who had a string connected to the leader drop their strings as well, but stay inside the circle. Explain how this represents that the loss in a community is felt by others. Now, have everybody who had a connection to a dropped string drop theirs as well. Repeat this until the web has collapsed.
8. Explain to Girl Scouts that our community is like a web. We are all connected, and when somebody is lost, it affects us all. Every strand is important. If we feel somebody's strand begins to break or fray, we have the power to support each other and reach out to a trusted adult for help.

Activity 2: Trusted Adults Template

Time for Activity: 15-20 min

Objective:

- Girl Scouts will identify trusted adults in their lives
- Girl Scouts will learn identify how they can contact trusted adults for help
- Girl Scouts will be given a list of resources for mental health

Materials:

Copies of Trusted Adults Gingerbread Template (one for each participant), writing/coloring utensils

Activity Directions

1. Hand out a copy of Trusted Adults Gingerbread Template to each participant, along with writing/coloring utensils. Encourage adult volunteers to join in to show that everybody, including adults themselves, should have a trusted adult. Explain that we'll be working on identifying trusted adults in our lives and how we can reach out to them for help.
2. Ask Girl Scouts: "What is a trusted adult?". There are no wrong answers!
3. Explain to participants that a trusted adult is somebody you can go to for help. Trusted adults are good listeners, accepting (non-judgmental), show up, believe you, and are there for you when you need them. They are somebody you can go to not just if you need help, but also someone you should go to if you see a friend struggling.
4. Point out the heart of the gingerbread person. Ask participants to write down somebody who is a trusted adult for them. Explain that this can be a parent, guardian, teacher (current or old, it is always alright to reach out to your elementary school gym teacher!), a coach, neighbor, school counselor, anyone they would feel comfortable reaching out to for help. A trusted adult can also be their Girl Scout leader or even a friend's parent.
5. Point out the left hand of the gingerbread person. Ask participants to write down where they can find their trusted adult. Explain that this might be at home, school, a place of worship, their YMCA, anywhere.
6. Point out the right hand of the gingerbread person. Ask participants to write down how they would feel most comfortable reaching out for help from their trusted adult. Explain that even though just talking might be easiest, they might also feel more comfortable writing their trusted adult a letter, sending them an email, calling on the phone, texting, or whatever is the most comfortable way for them to ask for help.
7. Point out the left leg of the gingerbread person. Ask participants to write down the contact information (phone number, email) of their trusted adult, even if their trusted adult is their parent. They may not know the contact information for their trusted adult yet, and that's okay! Explain to scouts that this template is meant to be a tool for them to use in the future, so when they have time after the meeting it's important that they find this information to keep it with them.
8. Point out the right leg of the gingerbread person. Ask participants to write down the name of another trusted adult in their lives. Explain that sometimes, we can't reach our first trusted adult, or they might not be able to help us. If your first trusted adult doesn't help, always reach out to another person. We all deserve to get help when we need it.
9. Point out the gingerbread person's balloon. Explain that these are resources that anybody can reach out to for help from. If the troop leader is able to identify local resources, have participants write those down next to the balloon, or they can be added before copies are made.

10. Explain to Girl Scouts that we can share our trusted adults with others, especially when we see a friend who is struggling. Ask scouts: "If your friend doesn't have a trusted adult, would you be willing to share yours?"
11. Explain to participants that it's important to have a trusted adult to go to, especially in times of crisis for themselves or somebody they love. If you're worried for a friend or yourself, reach out to a trusted adult. Everybody deserves to be helped and supported.

Resources included in handout:

- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>
 - "We can all help prevent suicide. The Lifeline provides 24/7, free and confidential support for people in distress, prevention and crisis resources for you or your loved ones, and best practices for professionals in the United States."
- Crisis Text Line: <https://www.crisistextline.org/>
 - "Text HOME to 741741 from anywhere in the United States, anytime. Crisis Text Line is here for any crisis. A live, trained Crisis Counselor receives the text and responds, all from our secure online platform. The volunteer Crisis Counselor will help you move from a hot moment to a cool moment."
- The Trevor Project: <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/>
 - "The *Trevor Project* provides 24/7 crisis support services to LGBTQ young people. Text, chat, or call anytime to reach a trained counselor."

Activity 3: Language Matters

Time for Activity: 15-25 min (depending on group size)

Objective:

- Girl Scouts will understand how their choice of words can have an impact
- Girl Scouts will learn how to use empathetic and respectful language
- Girl Scouts will practice how to support one another through conversation

Materials:

Copies of Language Matters Roleplay (one for each participant)

Activity Directions:

1. Split participants into groups of three. There may be a group of four, but adjust the number of rotations instructed below to ensure every Girl Scout gets a chance to play each role.
2. Hand out a copy of Language Matters Roleplay to each participant. Explain that they'll be doing a roleplay activity to learn about how the words we use can impact how what you say is received matter. For example, instead of saying that somebody "committed" suicide, it's better to say that somebody was lost to suicide. This is because the word "commit" is usually associated with committing a crime or a sin. Saying that somebody was "successful" or "failed" dying by suicide are also phrases we want to avoid, because losing somebody to suicide is not a success, and surviving a suicide attempt is not a failure.
3. Explain that one person in each group will be the struggling friend saying either "I'm having a hard time" or "I'm really struggling right now". The second person should respond using the ineffective language, and the third person should respond using the effective language. Ask participants to notice how it feels to be the struggling friend and receive the ineffective language versus the effective language and to notice how it feels to be the person using the ineffective or the effective language.
4. After participants have worked through the rows for about 45 seconds (may be longer or shorter depending on how fast participants work), call for teams to switch roles. Repeat this until everyone has been able to play each role.
5. Ask Girl Scouts: How did it feel when you were the receiver of the ineffective language? Did you want to keep sharing your feelings? Explain that receiving ineffective language can make somebody feel like they aren't being listened to, and that some of the ineffective language can even be unintentionally hurtful.
6. Ask Girl Scouts: How did you feel when you received the effective language? Did it encourage you to want to keep sharing your feelings? Explain that the way we talk to our friends matters. Even if you don't know what to say, just listening and being supportive of your friends is enough. And if a friend is struggling, don't hesitate to tell a trusted adult, or to offer your own trusted adult to your friend.

Activity 4: Eyes and Ears of Your Peers

Time for Activity: 15-45 min (Note: Depending on the needs of your group, the time needed for this activity can greatly vary due to the sensitive nature of the topic. Allow time for discussion and questions with your Girl Scouts.)

Objective:

- Girl Scouts will learn the warning signs for suicide
- Girl Scouts will understand what to do when they see warning signs in themselves or others
- Girl Scouts will learn how to reach out to a trusted adult to help themselves or others

Materials:

Copies of Warning Signs and What to Do (one for each participant)

Activity Directions:

Please note that this is the heaviest module emotionally in the program. Please take care of yourself and your Girl Scouts and allow for plenty of breaks if needed.

1. Hand out a copy of Warning Signs and What to Do to each participant.
2. Let Girl Scouts know that this activity contains emotionally sensitive topics. Encourage participants to take breaks when needed, and make sure there is a breather area available for Girl Scouts to step out if needed.
3. Explain that it can be difficult for somebody to notice that a friend is struggling. We need to be open and observant to detect warning signs for suicide. If you think something's wrong, "trust your gut" and reach out to a trusted adult for help.
4. Ask a participant to read out loud the bullet points from the "Talking About..." portion of the handout. Explain that connection reduces risk, and can help a person in crisis feel supported.
5. Ask a participant to read out loud the bullet points from the "Changes In..." portion of the handout. Explain that some of these changes may include eating too much or not enough, and sleeping too much or not enough. A friend may become more withdrawn and quiet when they are usually very bubbly, or may suddenly seem much better or at peace. Some people may try to use alcohol or drugs as a coping mechanism even though it just hurts them more.
6. Ask a participant to read out loud the bullet points from the "Social Media..." portion of the handout. Explain that young people are often more aware of what is going on with social media than adults.
7. Explain to Girl Scouts that along with reaching out to a trusted adult if they think something is wrong, there are some steps they can take. Introduce participants to the "Follow These Steps" portion of the handout. Explain these points to scouts:
 - Secure your own safety first.
 - You don't need to have all the answers.
 - Asking the question directly "are you thinking about killing yourself?" is important, and it breaks stigma & shame. Asking the question directly lets you know how urgent the situation is and lets the struggling person know that you are able to talk about hard topics. It doesn't plant the seed of suicide in their mind. Research shows that it is actually a relief for someone who is thinking about suicide to be able to talk about it with someone safe.
8. Remind the kids scouts that they should always reach out to their trusted adult for help if they are seeing or hearing warning signs for a friend or for themselves. This is never something a single person should carry alone.

9. Explain to participants that if there is a means of harm present (pills, a gun) and/or if there is immediate danger, secure their own safety and call 911. Likely this won't be your situation, but if you are ever concerned, or in doubt, call 911. Putting themselves in harm's way will not help their friend.
10. Explain to participants that it can be hard to notice warning signs, especially if a person is good at hiding them. It is NEVER their fault if they don't see the signs and someone dies by suicide. Even if they try to help someone, friends could still die by suicide because of factors beyond their control. It is NEVER your fault if someone dies by suicide.
11. Review the mental health resources shared on the Trusted Adults Gingerbread Template. Especially stress if there are good local resources in your area! Explain that together, we can make a difference in supporting everyone's mental health and preventing suicide. Please remember to take care of yourself, too. Use your healthy coping strategies, eat healthy, sleep, exercise, routines can help, it's okay to ask for help, do things you love and be with people you trust. It is brave to ask for help and to help others!

Sheep Scale and Emotion Wheel

**On this sheep-scale,
how do you feel today?**



Trusted Adults Gingerbread Template



CRISIS TEXT LINE |

Text HELLO to 741741
Free, 24/7, Confidential

MY TRUSTED ADULT

Where can I find my
trusted adult?

How will I reach out to
my trusted adult?

What is my trusted
adult's contact
information?

Who is another
trusted adult?



Language Matters Roleplay

<i>Ineffective Language</i>	<i>Effective Language</i>
1. What is wrong with you?	I hear you. Do you want to talk about it?
2. Why do you keep doing this to yourself?	I hear you and I feel concerned.
3. I just don't understand you!	I'm here for you. What do you need from me?
4. Why can't you just forget about it?	I know it's hard, would it help to talk about it?
5. Come on, it's not that bad!	I hear your pain, is there something I can do for you?
6. Don't you know that I love you?	I love you.
7. Cheer up.	I hear you.
8. Don't think that way!	Would you like to tell me about it?
9. Don't do this to yourself!	You are important to me, it's hard to see you going through this, can I help in any way?
10. Can't you forget about it?	I know it's hard. How can I help you get through this?
11. Can't you see what this is doing to our family?	We are all concerned about you. Let us know what we can do.
12. You're too emotional.	I appreciate that you are sharing this with me.
13. You shouldn't feel that way.	I understand how you are feeling . OR I can't imagine what this is like but I honor you feelings.
14. I just don't understand you!	I care about you but I feel confused. Do you know what might help?

Warning Signs and What to Do

LOOK AND LISTEN:

Talking About...

- A desire to die
- Feelings of social disconnection
- Feeling like a burden
- Low self-esteem
- No hope for the future

Changes In...

- Personality
- Behavior
- Sleep Patterns
- Eating Habits
- Evidence of self-harm

On Social Media...

- Posts that have an unusual tone/style
- Are posting at unusual hours (insomnia)
- Photos/images are depressing or dark in color
- Joke about distress more than usual

FOLLOW THESE STEPS:

1. Notice the risk factors and warning signs
2. Start the conversation using empathy, and remember, *Words Matter!*
3. Ask the question directly: “Are you thinking about killing yourself?”
4. Reach out to a trusted adult.

TRUST YOUR GUT!

If there is ever an immediate threat or danger to somebody’s life, secure your safety and call 911.