Talking About Suicide

**Tips for reducing the risk of suicide contagion**

Research has shown that all of us – parents, teachers, the media, and health providers – can help reduce the risk of more suicides by taking care in the way that we talk about it. Some key tips are:

- **Give accurate information.** Talking about suicide in a calm, straightforward manner does not “put ideas” into kids’ minds.

- **Suicide is not simple.** Most people who commit suicide are struggling with a mental disorder such as depression or anxiety, or substance abuse disorder. These disorders can cause considerable psychological pain, but may not always be apparent to others who aren’t familiar with the symptoms.

- Although the circumstances of a suicide can help us identify ways to better support our youth, blaming others or the deceased does not acknowledge the reality that the person was battling a mental disorder.

- **Avoid oversimplifying the cause** of the suicide (e.g., “student took his own life after breakup with girlfriend”). This is a very simplistic picture of a complicated mental health issue.

- **Always mention that help is available** for any person who is struggling with mental health issues or suicidal feelings. Most people with depression or a substance abuse disorder respond very positively to treatment.

- Talk about suicide with youth **individually or in small groups** so that discussion is possible and reactions can be observed.

- **Do not talk in graphic detail** about the location or the manner of death – this can increase the risk of contagion. If asked, it is okay to give basic facts, but keep the conversation focused on how to cope with feelings of sadness and loss.

- It is difficult – but very important – to balance the need to grieve with not unintentionally glamorizing or romanticizing a death by suicide. As much as possible **discuss an untimely death by suicide the same as an unexpected death from any other cause.**

- **Accept expressions of anger** and explain that these feelings are normal.

- **Reassure those who feel responsible** or think that they could have done something to save the deceased. “This death is not your fault.” “We can’t always predict or control someone else’s behavior.”

- **Encourage help-seeking.** “This is an important time for everyone in our community to support and look out for one another. If you are concerned about a friend, be sure to tell an adult.”