

## SOS Signs of Suicide

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### Description

The SOS Signs of Suicide program (SOS) is a brief, school-based suicide education and screening program for middle and high schools. SOS uses a combination of education and facilitated discussion with students, a depression and suicide risk screening tool, and gate keeper training and materials for parents and teachers. The core of the SOS program is the ACT technique: Acknowledge signs of suicide, respond with Care, and Tell a trusted adult. The aim of the SOS program is to teach middle and high school students to respond to the signs of suicide as a medical emergency, like they would with any other life threatening crisis.

The student education portion uses a 22 minute video, “Friends for Life: Preventing Teen Suicide”, with vignettes followed by a facilitated discussion led by a teacher, counselor, nurse or other school staff. The vignettes show dramatizations of teens who are depressed and contemplating suicide (**A**cknowledge); the words and actions others might use to help (**C**are); interviews with real teenagers who attempted suicide and their friends and family members. Each vignette shows a poor response and then a good response to a person who has just admitted suicidal ideation. The video concludes with school counselors who explain how to react when a person is becoming suicidal, whether it is the student them self or one of their friends, and when and how to let a responsible adult know about the impending crisis (**T**ell). The video and guided discussion stress the relationship between mental illness, especially depression, and suicide risk, seeks to reduce the stigma of seeking mental health help, and emphasizes that depression is a highly treatable illness.

When a girl tells her brother that the boyfriend who recently broke up with her "was the only good thing in my life" and expresses a wish to die, the scene is then played out in two different ways. In the first vignette, her brother tells her she can handle things and should "snap out of it." In the replay of the scene, the brother tells his sister he's worried about her and encourages her to talk to an adult they know. He promises to accompany her. (<http://pn.psychiatryonline.org/cgi/content/full/39/18/14>)

The student education and discussion portion concludes with the ACT technique – **A**cknowledge signs of suicide, **R**espond with **C**are, and **T**ell a trusted adult. Designed to prevent suicide in self or others, the ACT model's goal is to increase help-seeking behavior. For the person considering suicide, the ACT model covers specific information on when, who and how to ask for help in or before a crisis. For a person worried about someone considering suicide, it also includes information on how to respond in a caring and supportive way, while preparing the individual to seek help on their own or with assistance.

SOS uses the Brief Screen for Adolescent Depression – a seven item screening tool for depression. Students that complete screens that score above threshold for risk or that have critical items answered affirmatively are urged to talk to a trusted adult such school staff immediately. The SOS program includes training, protocols and materials to help gate keepers, school staff and parents, respond to depressed and potentially suicidal adolescents appropriately.

### Characteristics

- Population
  - Gender – male and female

- Ages – 13 – 17 years old
- Races – Hispanic, White, Black, Other
- Risk, Protective & Causal Factors
  - Knowledge about depression and suicide (protective)
  - Attitudes towards depression and suicide (protective)
  - Responding to a suicidal person (protective)
  - Reporting a potential suicidal person (protective)
  - Reduced stigma associated with help-seeking behavior (risk)
  - Increased help-seeking from depressed and suicidal people (protective)
  - An increase in referrals for depression and suicidal ideation. (This is a protective factor as long as the school is capable of handling the increased counseling load.)
  - Attempted suicides (risk)
- IOM Category (level of care)
  - Universal - school

### Effectiveness

Compared to randomized control groups, students that participated in the SOS Signs of Suicide program:

- showed greater knowledge about the signs, symptoms and causes of suicide (11.8% gain vs. controls);
- expressed more socially acceptable attitudes about depression and suicide (6.1% gain vs. controls);
- reported lower rates of suicide ideation;
- exhibited a 145% increase in help-seeking. The increase was persistent at three months were 44% less likely to report an attempted suicide in the past three months;
- reported a 68% increase help-seeking on behalf of a suicidal peer at schools implementing SOS;

At schools implementing the SOS program:

- 94% of school staff agreed that the program improved communication about depression and suicide among students and between students and school personnel.
- 90% of school staff reported that the SOS program increased the help-seeking by students who needed the school's attention;

### Program delivery

In the classroom, the SOS program is delivered over one to two classroom periods. The 22 minute SOS video is followed by a facilitated discussion. The SOS program is designed to be conducted by school psychologists, social workers, health educators, school nurses, school counselors, student assistance professionals, and/or health teachers. There are numerous materials such as workbooks, posters, etc. A booster session has recently been developed to maintain the program benefits after the initial training.

At the school level, there is a brief training for all staff on how to respond to a potentially suicidal teen, who to contact and so on. For the staff who will deliver the SOS program, there is training video and implementation manual. The program materials also include the depression screening forms in English and Spanish, educational brochures and implementation guidelines. A separate module bundled with the SOS program contains information and resources regarding self-injurious behavior.

For families, the SOS program includes a protocol for a school-hosted parent night to present the SOS program, teach parents how to recognize and respond to youth suicidality, depression, and self-injury, and how to seek help for at-risk youth. In addition, there are a fair number of materials designed just for parents, such as the SOS Screening Form for Parents, where the parents can rate their own teen's behavior and determine suicide risk; Family Fact sheets on Depression, Teen Suicide, Bipolar Disorder, and Bullying in English and Spanish. There are also materials for parents about teen self-injury.

#### Considerations for use in Idaho

SOS Signs of Suicide is a brief and effective suicide prevention and screening program that can be implemented in a school or school system for relatively little investment. Existing school staff can self-train using the SOS program materials and only one-two classroom periods are required to deliver the program. In addition to implementation in school systems, the SOS program has also been used in juvenile justice, church youth groups, & social support groups, and forms the basis for several state-level suicide prevention programs (e.g., Massachusetts, Ohio, Texas).

#### Training & costs

Staff training requires a minimal investment of staff time using the SOS self-training materials. The materials include a:

- Training Video : Describes program implementation to staff
- Procedure Manual: Guidelines for planning and implementing the SOS program including sample materials to use as templates. A sample lecture and tips for training staff are also included.
- Self-Injury Packet: Helps raise awareness about the signs of self-injury and to establish action steps for teachers, parents, and school-based clinicians when dealing with an individual who is self-injuring.

On-site training is also available. Contact the program vendor at the number below for pricing and availability.

#### Dissemination & support

The SOS kit is available from the program developer, Screening for Mental Health, Inc. for \$300 (<http://www.mentalhealthscreening.org/schools/index.aspx>). The SOS Kit includes the procedure manual, implementation guidelines, the student education video and the staff training video. The program developer allows the materials to be copied for distribution. Contact the program vendor at the number below to determine what levels and costs of post-implementation support are available.

#### Contact information

Anne S. Keliher, M.M.H.S.  
Director of Programs  
Screening for Mental Health, Inc.

One Washington Street, Suite 304  
Wellesley Hills, MA 02481  
Phone: (781) 239-0071 ext 112  
E-mail: [highschool@mentalhealthscreening.org](mailto:highschool@mentalhealthscreening.org)  
Website: <http://www.mentalhealthscreening.org/schools/index.aspx>

### Other program synopses

- SAMHSA NREPP: [http://nrepp.samhsa.gov/programfulldetails.asp?PROGRAM\\_ID=66](http://nrepp.samhsa.gov/programfulldetails.asp?PROGRAM_ID=66)
- Suicide Prevention Resource Center:  
[http://209.85.173.132/search?q=cache:hl6hAbUObUAJ:www.sprc.org/featured\\_resources/bpr/ebpp\\_PDF/sos.pdf+%22SOS+Signs+of+Suicide%22+evaluation&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us&clie nt=firefox-a](http://209.85.173.132/search?q=cache:hl6hAbUObUAJ:www.sprc.org/featured_resources/bpr/ebpp_PDF/sos.pdf+%22SOS+Signs+of+Suicide%22+evaluation&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us&clie nt=firefox-a)
- Psychiatry Online: <http://pn.psychiatryonline.org/cgi/content/full/39/18/14>

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