

2nd International Conference on

Adolescent Medicine and Child Psychology

October 06-07, 2016 London, UK

One Texas high school's innovative plan to assist students with mental health issues as a means of preventing suicide

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As a mental health professional employed by a high school with a student population of 2200, I found that the majority of our pupils with mental health issues do not seek help until a crisis occurs such as difficulty with maintaining academic requirements, substance use, relationship problems, and/or inability to perform athletically. We know that suicide is the third leading cause of death in 15 to 24 year olds (almost 5000 each year), and that approximately 2.8 million U.S. youth ages 12-17 had at least one major depressive episode in 2014. Studies have shown that suicide prevention programs which focus on identification and treatment of mental illness and substance abuse and coping with stress are most likely to be successful. With the support of my administrators, I decided to implement a program to help identify students who are experiencing psychological symptoms which could become a diagnosable mental illness, in hopes of providing early intervention. We screen our incoming 9th grade students (with parental permission) for suicide ideation, mood disorders, eating disorders, and substance use at the beginning of the school year. The confidential screening program we use was created by Columbia University in New York. Students who have elevated scales for any area screened are individually counseled with and invited to attend a small group (with parent permission) where they are taught DBT skills to help improve their overall well being. After completion of groups, students are checked on periodically as they continue their high school years. (Also, if at any time deemed necessary for a student's or others safety, parents receive referrals for out of school resources) This plan has greatly impacted the well being of our student body. Unfortunately, we have had one suicide in eight years; however, we know we have prevented others while making a positive difference in the overall climate of the school.

Biography

Candice Conner has completed her Master's in Counseling at the University of North Texas, and her Doctorate in Clinical Psychology at Argosy University. Her internship and Post-doctoral studies were done at the 5th Avenue Center for Counseling and Psychotherapy, New York, NY. She currently serves as the Crisis Counselor at Highland Park High School (Dallas, Texas), and she has a private practice. She has presented to numerous national, community, and parent organizations including the American Psychological Association, the Texas Psychological Association, and the Dallas Bar Association, and she serves on the Advisory Committees for The Elisa Project and the Chemical Awareness and Resource Education Center of Dallas.

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