

## Dealing with Suicide-related Curriculum

From classic Shakespearean literature to postmodern fiction, the theme of suicide is woven throughout high school language arts and English assignments. It also appears in history lessons, health classes, and psychology curriculum and may be impossible to avoid in the course of an academic year. Its inclusion reflects its reality as a provocative and unsettling social concern. Students who have had no personal exposure to suicide generally react to suicide-related assignments and classroom discussion on the topic with no incident. In many ways, it is simply academic material that is no different from content that addresses other complex social and psychological issues.

For students with personal exposure to suicide, however, the topic may be troubling and upsetting. The curriculum can become what is called a “traumatic reminder” of their experience or loss. Unsuspecting teachers have reported students bolting from classroom discussions of *Romeo and Juliet* or breaking into tears during screening of the contemporary film *Stand by Me*, in which a group of friends search for a corpse allegedly hit by a train.

Ideally, a teacher would like to know ahead of time which students in his or her classroom have been affected by suicide (or any type of loss, for that matter) to be prepared for traumatic reminders and to give students the option of alternate assignments. Sometimes this is possible, but more often than not, it isn't.

So here are some suggestions that reflect a teacher's sensitivity to the reality of traumatic reminders as well as give students permission to emotionally take care of themselves.

- Approach the topic of suicide in any classroom material thoughtfully. Avoid using the expression *successful suicide*, which may seem like an insult to those who have been personally affected by suicide. Substitute *completed suicide* instead. Also avoid the term *committed suicide*. In our society, the word *committed* is usually attached to a crime or to the mentally ill. Again, *completed suicide* or *died by suicide* are acceptable substitutions. These may seem like simple semantics and, in some ways, they are. But they reflect a degree of sensitivity to the subject that tends to be greatly appreciated by anyone whose life has been touched by the tragedy of suicide. You are also modeling for your students how to choose sensitive language to address difficult content.
- Empower your students to take care of themselves. At the start of the academic year, inform them that if they find certain academic curriculum to be personally upsetting, you are available to talk with them and consider alternative assignments. Be prepared to follow through in case students take you up on your offer.

If there's been a suicide in your school community within the last academic year, there are other things to consider about suicide-related curriculum. Since research has determined that even fictional depictions of suicide can increase the risk level in vulnerable youth, you may want to review your curriculum content to consider replacing material that contains suicide-related themes. If you decide to retain the material, it will be important to interject

discussion about suicide prevention strategies. In English and language arts classes, this could include

- identifying the accumulation of risk factors that led up to the suicide
- listing the warning signs that the characters in the story dismissed, missed, or ignored
- creating an alternate scenario to the suicide, that is, describing the ways in which it could have been prevented. The common theme in these alternate outcomes is usually help-seeking behavior (either the protagonist asks for help or other characters recognize the warning signs and intervene) or secret keeping (someone in the story knows about the intended suicide and refuses to break the confidence of the suicidal character). Either of these themes provides ample opportunity for productive discussion about the ways in which the suicide may have been prevented.

When suicide appears in other course material, classroom discussion and assignments could explore the reasons that suicide is an international public health concern and the strategies that have been successfully employed to address suicide rates. Students could be encouraged to create lists of age-appropriate Internet resources that address suicide awareness and prevention or to develop suicide prevention resources for their peers. An excellent resource that models this latter strategy can be found on the Web site for Washington State's youth suicide prevention program—[www.yspp.org](http://www.yspp.org).

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This handout is provided courtesy of the *Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide*, [www.sptsusa.org](http://www.sptsusa.org).