Suicide Prevention in Adolescents: Implementation of a High School-Based Psychoeducation Program

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Introduction

• Approximately 20% of high school age students have a mental health disorder (National Institute of Mental Health, 2015). Suicide is the second leading cause of death for youth between the ages of 11 and 18 (Centers for Disease Control, 2015).
• Few programs specific to depression and suicide have been empirically validated (Katz et al., 2013; Klimes-Dougan, Klingbeil, & Meller, 2013).

--- The Signs of Suicide (SOS) Prevention Program is one of the few youth suicide prevention programs that has shown improvement in students’ knowledge and adaptive attitudes about suicide risk and depression, including a reduction in self-reported suicide attempts (Aseltine & DeMartino, 2004; Aseltine et al., 2007; Schilling et al., 2016).

Focus of Study

• The high school guidance department involved in this pilot study wanted to increase awareness and proactively address specific concerns about student mental health.
• As the high school’s first formal attempt at implementing a psychoeducation prevention program, they wanted to use an evidence-based program targeting a primary mental health concern—depression and suicide.
• The guidance department and school administration decided that the SOS Prevention Program had strong potential to directly address the symptoms, risk factors, warning signs, and prevalence of depression and suicide.

--- One goal of the initial implementation of psychoeducation based on the SOS Prevention Program was to increase students’ basic knowledge of depression and suicide.

--- Another goal was to learn from the implementation process to make necessary adjustments for future mental health psychoeducation programs.

Participants

• 879 high school students in grades 9-12 (13-19 years) from a suburban regional high school in New England
• 53% female; 90% Caucasian

Procedure & Measure

• Psychoeducation was provided through a PowerPoint presentation in each homeroom that was created by the guidance department based on the content of the SOS Program.
  -- The specific content areas focused on the myths, risk factors, warning signs, and prevalence of depression and suicide.
  -- In addition to the PowerPoint, a discussion of coping skills, distribution of depression/suicide related resources for support, and a de-stressing coloring activity rounded out the lesson.
• Prior to the beginning of the lesson, students completed a nine question Likert scale pre-survey.
• After the lesson, students were given a post-survey of the same questions and asked to rate their current level of knowledge.

Results & Discussion

• Paired samples t-tests showed a significant difference across all nine pre-post survey questions and overall score, t(816) = -32.843, p = 0.000.
  -- Analyses demonstrated that psychoeducation based on the SOS Prevention Program was effective in enhancing students’ knowledge and awareness about depression and suicide.
• Although these results are promising, another goal was to learn from the implementation process to make necessary adjustments for future mental health psychoeducation programs.
  -- The high school guidance department in this pilot study plans on providing full advisory lessons for future incoming classes (i.e., 9th grade) and yearly follow-up programs for existing classes (i.e., 10th, 11th, and 12th grade).
• Information gathered from the pre-post survey data and a review of the implementation process resulted in key recommendations to enhance effectiveness for future psychoeducation programs:
  -- Standardization in training teachers to educate students, standardization in educating students, matching psychoeducation content with survey content, survey questions wording, survey Likert scale wording and data points, and integrating psychoeducation content into the school’s day-to-day routine (i.e., culture and climate).