REACHing out to save lives

Christina Drain onCampus Staff

A young man boards an elevator in a campus parking garage. He pushes the button for the rooftop level, bent on ending his life. He spots a poster in the garage. He presses the button for the elevator in a campus parking garage. He spots a poster in the garage. He pushes the button for the elevator in a campus parking garage.

Moments later, the Ohio State campus police respond and are able to reason with the student.

The Ohio State University Suicide Prevention Program is called in to provide further help. One life saved.

More than 40 students at Ohio State have committed suicide in the last 10 years, most recently in October and December, according to Darcy Haag Granello, principal investigator for the program. There are more than 600 attempts a year.

But as stark as those numbers are, she says, Ohio State's statistics are consistent with findings at other universities.

Suicide is the second leading cause of death in college-age students.

Studies have found that depression and mental illness are at the heart of suicide attempts. The Suicide Prevention Program offers training to faculty, staff and graduate students to help them identify a student who might be at risk.

"The program is specifically designed not to teach people how to be counselors but how to recognize when someone might be at risk, how to reach out appropriately and how to get them to the services that already exist," Haag Granello said.

The REACH (recognize, engage, ask, communicate and access help) Program, formerly the gatekeeper program, has trained more than 6,000 people in six years, but the demand is still so great for the training that the first "train the trainers" day-long certification seminar is scheduled for Jan. 25, according to program director Wendy Winger.

Haag Granello and her husband Paul Granello are professors of Counselor Education in the College of Education and Human Ecology and researchers and advocates of suicide prevention. Paul Granello recently studied mental health needs in more than 14,000 students in 100 Ohio schools and found that about 20 percent had mental health needs. Those same children will be dealing with mental health issues in college, he says.

"Twenty percent or more of the students who come to college have pre-existing mental health needs," Paul Granello said. "Most kids never get care. But even if they have gotten treatment at home, a lot of times they get to college and there's no follow-up, they go off their medications and there's acerbations due to the stress of going to college and they are worse."

"Part of the crime here, is that this is really treatable. Eighty percent of depression is highly treatable."

In the vast majority of suicide cases, there were clear warning signs, according to Winger. "Research has shown that 80 percent have actually told somebody they were thinking about suicide," Winger said. "It may have been in an indirect fashion, but they presented that information. Yet, most of the responses to those indicators was silence because as a culture, we don't talk about this stuff."

That's why it takes the whole campus community to get involved, Haag Granello said. The program not only targets faculty for training, but also others the students may come in contact with on a regular basis, from Student Life to the housekeepers in the residence halls. Housekeepers are among the first to recognize when a student isn't going to class, she said.

REACH training is 90 minutes long and can be conducted in the workplace. There also is an online training program if people can't fit the class into their schedule, Winger said.

Winger says that in providing training across campus, she can match the kind of trainer with the audience.

"If I get a request to train the residence hall janitorial staff or dining services staff, I can match people who have experience and have worked in those areas so they can draw on that experience," Winger said.

In follow-up surveys administered a year or more after the gatekeeper training, one-third of participants before training said they tried to intervene if someone mentioned suicidal thoughts; after the training, 89 percent of those who saw warning signs attempted to intervene.

"I think people are so afraid of doing or saying the wrong thing that they say nothing," Haag Granello said. "What we do at the gatekeeper training is give them the skills and give them the confidence about reaching out and how effective that would be and what a difference that would make for a person that was in such distress."

"The very fact of someone reaching out saves lives, we know this to be true."

The Ohio State University Suicide Prevention Program has developed Android and iPhone apps RUOK:OSU that contain quick access to local and national suicide prevention hotlines as well links to OSU resources, a list of warning signs and much more. Download the app by searching for RUOK:OSU in the appropriate app store or by reading the QR code below.

How to identify students in distress

Below are some common signs that can serve as guidelines for identifying students in distress:

Academic
- Excessive procrastination and very poorly prepared work, especially if inconsistent with previous work.
- Infrequent class attendance with little or no work completed.
- Dependency and/or repeated requests for special consideration (e.g., the student who hangs around or makes excessive appointments during office hours, frequent deadline extensions).
- Inability to make decisions despite your repeated efforts to clarify or encourage.
- Impaired speech and disjointed thoughts.

Behavioral
- Listlessness, lack of energy, or frequently falling asleep in class.
- Behavior that regularly interferes with effective class management.
- Frequent or high levels of irritability, unreasonably abrasive or aggressive or threatening behavior.
- Expressions of suicidal thoughts (e.g., referring to suicide as a current option).

Appearance
- Marked changes in personal hygiene.
- Excessive weight gain or loss.
- Overly nervous, tense or tearful.