



SAN FRANCISCO  
SUICIDE  
PREVENTION

## **SF SUICIDE PREVENTION: RECOMMENDATIONS ON SOCIAL MEDIA**

It has become apparent that social media sites on the Internet, such as Facebook or Twitter, are vehicles of communication that can have both healthy and unhealthy effects on a community after a youth suicide. When asked in the classroom, almost all youth in San Francisco indicate that they use social media sites such as Facebook or Twitter. Post suicide, youth can use message boards and walls to express grief in a healthy and appropriate way, similar to the ways people use journal entries, letters and obituaries as healthy expressions of emotion when they go through the grieving process. Recently, San Francisco youth have been posting messages that contain messages of specific healthy ways that youth can help themselves and healthy ways to help others after a suicide. At SF Suicide Prevention, staff have noticed direct quotes from mental health brochures and literature being posted by youth in response to messages that are posted by other youth indicating pain or suffering. By using Facebook, Twitter and other social media sites to connect people, there can be an effect of diminishing fear, anxiety and isolation.

Facebook and other sites can also be used to spread rumors, post disturbing images, and express anger that is offensive, derogatory and inflammatory. Since these messages can heighten fear and are not supportive they can spread inaccurate information and increase stress in a community.

As mental health professionals we have learned effective ways to work face to face and with traditional media to monitor messages carefully and diminish contagion or the risk of “copycat” or “cluster” suicides. The fact is that most youth today do not engage with traditional media but receive almost all of their information from sites such as Facebook and messages from friends. Without more monitoring of messaging on these sites, we as a community risk contagion.

Historically, cluster suicides have been typically found within a single geographic area or a single school. With the ubiquitous use of the internet and the almost immediate connectivity of youth at multiple schools that stay connected, there is a need to monitor rumors and posts more closely since San Francisco youth are all inter-connected through the internet. In the past, there was more time to craft appropriate messages, responses and healthy information to distribute to a single school but now we need to monitor and be aware of all schools after an incident. We have also noted that during a heightened period of crisis, events and suicides that occur outside of San Francisco are posted as an event that happened in San Francisco, as a rumor. Even tragic events that happened a year ago or many years ago re-surface as current rumors on the internet during periods of increase tension and anxiety only adding to the level of fear.

We have also seen that Facebook and Twitter posting can be used with great speed and efficacy to help and prevent danger when youth post disturbing messages or suicide notes. We've observed that when monitored, friends, other youth, parents, health officials, and school counselors have taken swift action when they have been alerted, usually by other concerned youth to a post that indicates high risk and immediate danger. These instances call for widespread training of our youth on how to respond when they see messages from peers that are of concern.

Often, when people are suicidal and planning imminent action, they tie up loose ends, make a definite plan and do things such as closing their Facebook, Blog or Twitter accounts permanently. When people notice this odd behavior as a warning sign, again, the sites can be used as a tool to quickly help those in need. For helping a youth with severe depression or sudden loss, monitoring Google searches can be important.

Also of note, through the use of social media sites, young people can be bullied on these sites by peers or develop feelings of diminished self worth because of personal popularity on the site or by having their relationship status or relationship changes broadcast to the world. For some, social media sites are sources of great embarrassment and stress.

In summary, San Francisco Suicide Prevention encourages schools and mental health professionals to be aware of how youth use social media sites and to monitor and use these sites more regularly. Additionally, youth such as peer support or peer educators who are interested in helping their friends can be educated about what to look for on the internet and what resources are available. We encourage social communities to develop safety plans in the event of a high risk situation or post. This training and information would help everyone keep safe.