



Suicide Prevention Focus Groups in San Francisco Schools May 2012

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Four Focus Groups at Four High Schools in San Francisco

- Dates:** All focus groups were conducted between May 8, 2012 and May 16, 2012
- Number of Groups:** Four focus groups at four different high schools in San Francisco. Two private schools and two public schools in the city of San Francisco.
- Group size:** 10-15 young people in each focus group
- Gender:** All mixed, both young women and young men
- Age:** 9th-12th grades
- Time Length:** Focus groups were 25 - 60 minutes long

**Some of the young people were Youth Outreach Workers (YOW) or associated or affiliated with the school's Wellness Program or Wellness Centers.*

Which services do you think your peers are most likely to use?

- a) Chat service by going to a website**
- b) Calling a youth hotline or suicide prevention hotline**
- c) Using a text service sponsored by a suicide prevention agency**
- d) Talking to a school counselor about suicide or depression**
- e) None of the above**

Responses were diverse. Some young people preferred phone services and mentioned that hearing someone's voice had the benefit of feeling closer to a helper. Others said that they wouldn't feel comfortable calling, or having to explain verbally what they are trying to say. Many young people hypothesized that their friends would appreciate the opportunity to have text or chat services since they might want more anonymity and might feel more comfortable if there were online services. Some young people said that they would definitely prefer text or chat over the phone. Some young people stressed that they thought the best option was going to a school counselor and seeing someone face to face. The consensus of all the groups was that it would be most helpful to provide all four types of services because young people all have different preferences.

When a young person is feeling depressed or possibly suicidal, who are they going to outreach with first?

Nearly all of the young people said that they would talk to their friends and peers first when they were feeling depressed or possibly suicidal. Some young people said they thought their peers would most likely tell a significant other, boyfriend, girlfriend, or partner. Some mentioned also going to parents, family members, school counselors, teachers and coaches in addition to friends. Some young people mentioned a stigma around going to talk about it to a counselor because other kids could know that there is something wrong with them if they are at the Wellness Center or counseling office. Some students mentioned that a survey at their school asking kids if they would like to join a group to talk about thoughts and feelings received an overwhelmingly positive response, but when the group was formed, no one actually showed up. They thought that a group of kids that got together to hang out and then talked about issues would be more effective. Some cited informal peer groups started by kids for kids as being short-lived but popular and effective. Many expressed concerns about breaking trust.

Why do you think it's difficult for a young person to tell a trusted adult? What are the obstacles?

There were a variety of responses. Most young people expressed the sentiment that even if someone is an "adult," that does not necessarily mean that they are to be trusted, or that they would know what to do in a crisis situation, or that they would be able to help a young person who was depressed. Some young people recommended that adults get more training in suicide prevention. They mentioned teachers and coaches as examples of adults that they thought could use more training in what to do if a student expresses suicidal thoughts. Many of the young people thought that adults in those positions don't know what to do when a young person is severely depressed and tend to make the situation worse. The young people said that this perception is an obstacle to encouraging young people to approach adults when they feel suicidal or depressed.

It might not be realistic but what we would like to happen is that if a young person talks to another young person, we would like both of them to go to a trusted adult. Is that realistic? Is that something we could encourage? Is there a way that we could encourage that to happen?

Most thought that it wasn't very realistic for young people to go to adults. Many expressed the idea that there is a need nevertheless for this message to be given or marketed to young people. Many thought that it was a good idea to encourage and help friends identify a trusted adult and go to a trusted adult. Some students said that their peers may not know if their friends are severely depressed and would want more information and warning signs about what severe depression looks like.

Do you think its a good idea to try to encourage young people who are being used as "confidantes" or "helpers" for their depressed friends to go to an adult about what they hear even if their depressed friend wants it kept in the friend circle or the helper might consider sharing to be "telling" or "snitching on someone"? Do you think it's likely that information will be kept a secret? How do we make that transition to get "it's serious" and encourage people to go to the counseling center?

A lot of young people noted this has happened to them and they've been asked to "keep it a secret." Some of them said that they did go to a trusted adult like a parent or to teacher or to the wellness center. It seems that the majority of the young people have friends and siblings already coming to them with serious problems. Many young people thought that this is a very difficult issue. They do feel like they are "betraying" or "telling" on their friends if they talk to an adult about a friend who is depressed. There weren't many suggestions on how to encourage young people to go to a trusted adult. Many young people said that friends are really concerned about trust and keeping confidence. They said it also depends on how close the friend is. One young person said that it would be important for a friend to know that there is one peer that they could always go to and talk to and that person would take them to the counseling office. Some young people said that their peers feel like it's their problem or their responsibility to "fix" their friends and felt concern for the friends who were now in the role of "helper." Many young people discussed gossip in friend circles, making it difficult to talk to peers and friends about deeper emotional issues. Some young people discussed the risk in telling a friend because they might tell others and that it might be better to encourage peers to go directly to a counseling center.

Do you feel that there are trusted adults that would be helpful for young people to talk to in crisis?

Many young adults could identify one or two trusted adults that they would go to. Some mentioned that they would rather go to a favorite teacher than their school counselor. Many did not think that parents would be helpful. Some cited language barriers as an issue and said that their parents would not know what to do if they went to them. Some young people suggested more trainings or outreach materials for parents should be in languages other than English. Some mentioned that it takes a lot of courage to come out and say that they have a problem and it would help if more teachers would notice them and ask if everything is okay rather than wait for them to say something. Some young people said that adults tend to hover, talk about the problem all the time, worry, or over-react to situations, so it's hard to go to them, and adults could mishandle the situation. Some said that there is a perception that adults will handle thing in a way that will make them feel worse or increase anxiety.

Would you be willing to encourage a friend or walk with them to a trusted adult? Is that realistic?

The general consensus is that most young people would be willing to walk a friend to the counseling office. Many gave examples of when they have walked with a friend or encouraged a friend to go to the Counseling/Wellness Center. (It should be noted that many of the young people in the focus groups work closely with the Counseling Centers and were in the focus group at the invitation and request of the Counseling/Wellness Centers at the schools.)

Often agencies and schools have a message that says, "If you have a friend who is really down and depressed, don't keep it a secret." Do you think that's helpful? What kinds of messaging would be most effective?

Some young people mentioned how difficult it is to market or outreach to their peers. They talked about the "short-attention span" of teenagers. They questioned whether a hat, wristband or other item would be effective even if it was designed by a young person because it would become a "fad" and young people would quickly lose interest. Many were interested in more long-term efforts and positive messages. Some young people discussed the positive messaging of the campaign "to write love on her arms" instead of "don't cut yourself." Almost all of the young people said that posters were not effective. They said there were too many posters in all of the schools and that they don't bother to look at any of them anymore because there are so many of them. Some young people wanted something small that they could carry around. Most young people thought that simple messaging with a clear statement was most effective. Some young people mentioned that it would be better to have a "mental health campaign" rather than a "suicide prevention" campaign. Some young people came up with and discussed a "Better Safe than Sorry" came up as a campaign idea.

**Young people often post messages on facebook and other social media sites.
What are the current social media sites that young people use?**

Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Formspring were all mentioned.

**When you see stuff on facebook or other sites, do you believe that it's not true?
Can you tell if it's serious? How do you feel about the posts?**

Many thought that if a young person posts on facebook, then it wasn't "real" or "true." Many thought that it wasn't a depressed or suicidal young person who posted but a young person who "was only looking for attention." Some young people called the posts "emo-posts" and felt that they were being "melo-dramatic" and not serious. Many thought they would dismiss or ignore a post expressing depressed thoughts. A few young people had come across posts or statements and had responded by messaging the person back with words of encouragement and love. None of the young people knew that you could tell Facebook about the post and that they had the ability to contact a crisis center to send them a message until we mentioned it.

How do you feel about telling an adult or telling facebook about the suicidal message that you might see?

Many young people seemed skeptical that it would help young people to tell facebook about the suicidal message. Some young people thought that it would be a good message to outreach and market to young people that they should tell an adult.

What are other obstacles to talking to an adult about a message that you see on facebook or a friend?

Many young people talked about the anonymity of posts and talked about how difficult it was when young people post on because then they only get anonymous responses back and many of them are very negative. According to some, cyberbullying and negative posts happen often with Formspring because it's more anonymous. It's a site where young people put up a page about themselves and then other kids anonymously post comments about them. According to the young people it is a "recipe" for bullying and negativity. On the other hand, many young people said that they would never and have never used such a site.

If you see something on facebook that really concerns you, what can you do, how can you respond? What else can you do?

Young people talked about messaging the person back, messaging one of their mutual friends, messaging a friend of the depressed person if they don't know them. A few thought it might be a good idea to tell an adult. Some young people said they might call a friend or text a friend or go to a friend's house. But they said that they expected the person who posted to say "Oh, it was a joke" or "I was just sad but not it wasn't that serious." Many young people said that they would not tell a counselor or the Wellness Center about a facebook post expressing depressive feelings.

Do you think that a campaign or an online campaign about safe options for responding to facebook posts that mention "suicide" or "depression" such as how to alert facebook or encouragement to tell an adult might be helpful?

Most of the young people thought that it would be a good idea. Some questioned the efficacy of such a campaign. Some thought time would be better spent on other things like encouraging young people to go to the counseling centers. Many had never seen a depressed person post on facebook and talked about the idea that a lot of their peers try to show themselves in the best light possible on facebook with the best pictures and funny posts. Some questioned whether a peer who was severely depressed or suicidal would actually post those feelings on facebook.

What do you think a school or an agency like ours could do to reduce suicides? Usually, we have very few suicides in the Bay Area but recently we've seen a small increase. Why do you think that's happening?

Some young people cited cyber bullying as an issue. They mentioned seeing bullying going on in all of the different social media sites and thought it was a very big problem that really affects young people's self esteem and causes severe depression. Some young people said that there should be monitors on facebook. Many students did not think there was much that an agency or school could do about cyber bullying. Other young people did not really see cyber bullying as such a big issue. They mentioned never having seen any cyber bullying and questioned how much it was happening. Many young people mentioned having a campaign to increase self-esteem.

What kinds of suicide prevention workshops or presentations would you like to see in school or at an agency? Peers teaching peers or adults teaching youth? What kinds of prevention activities would you like to see?

Every youth who responded to this question said that it would be better to have young adults or peers present to classes on suicide prevention. Many mentioned the efficacy of hearing personal stories. Many said that they wanted more personal stories of young people or adults who had been through a similar situation and had gotten through it. They said that more young people would pay attention and be more interested in personal stories. Some young people also said that they like role-plays and that role-plays would be effective.

Research Observations and Recommendations

Based on what the facilitators heard from the four groups, there were a few major themes and ideas that emerged.

1) Due to the timing of the focus groups being so late in the school year, these focus groups were put together quickly. There was not much time to prepare and organize them and in some cases we were only able to talk to the young people for twenty-five minutes because of class schedules and finals. We believe this research does a better job of identifying the problems rather than the solutions. These focus groups represent a great beginning, they were eye-opening to the facilitators who have been working with young people in high school for many years. We recommend and plan to do more research and more focus groups later in the fall that focus on targeted specific solutions.

2) Another round of focus groups would be helpful after a few outreach materials and concepts are developed. It would likely be easier to ask young people if they like a particular campaign or think it is effective. It might be helpful to show them a potential solution or plan of action to the issues outlined here to see if they think it would be effective.

3) Any type of media outreach campaign would need to be "simple," "relevant," "interesting," "creative," "new," and able to "capture the attention" of young people.

4) Based on the youth responses, it might not make sense to go forward with an outreach campaign that asks young people to confide in adults when they are depressed or suicidal when the majority of young people don't think that the adults in their lives are prepared to effectively handle this information in a healthy way. The strategy might make sense in the future, once enough adults in the schools are trained.

5) Comprehensive gatekeeper training in the schools of adults seems to be a priority. This might be a good objective for the 2012/13 school year. A group who is interested in such a campaign may need to focus on a community-wide education campaign to teach adults such as teachers, coaches, older siblings and parents healthy and effective ways of receiving this information and providing support to young people with suicidal ideation.

6) Young people often mentioned that it is helpful to have "positive" messaging campaigns. They would want any suicide prevention campaign to seem positive, supportive and helpful, not negative and preachy.

7) The vast majority of youth participants did say that a peer would be the first person that they would go to if they felt suicidal. Young people expressed that they needed more resources and education about suicide to effectively help friends.

Although it is not the responsibility of young people to know what to do when a friend is in trouble, it is clear that they are in fact the first people that suicidal and depressed young people go to first whether they are a best friend or partner.

8) Most young people emphasized that any training of young people should be peer based training. Having adults tell young people "they should tell an adult" would be ineffective. Instead, training by peers talking about what they did when a friend was depressed or suicidal would be more effective. Train by practical example.

9) It seems clear that the idea and "stigma" of "telling on a friend," "betraying a friend's trust" or "snitching on a friend" needs to be addressed in any campaign. It seems clear that there does need to be an outreach message that addresses the idea of not keeping this information a secret. Many young people responded positively to the idea of walking with a friend to the counseling office or wellness center.

10) It seems clear that young people are the ones responding first to their friends' requests for help and are the first people to hear about a friend in trouble. The young people who are designated as "helpers" need to be given emotional support, information and resources on how to help their friends.

11) Placement of posters or information was also important. Putting posters on bathrooms or areas where there are not a lot of posters might be more effective than handing out posters to teachers. Creating a new piece like a "bracelet" or "hat" was met with skepticism that it might become a "fad" that would quickly lose efficacy over a short time.

12) Young people do not appear to have an overwhelming preference or focus on electronic crisis counseling or one particular type of crisis counseling like text. They seem to prefer having a choice or variety of methods to contact counselors. These methods include text, chat, phone and face-to-face crisis counseling. It is recommended that all of these types of services be available to young people. Young people have an extremely varied preferences on the best method of service.

13) There seems to be a strong connection in the minds of young people between bullying and suicide. Whether that is because of day-to-day, personal experience or from messaging from the media and current national anti-bullying campaigns is not clear. Given that there is such a strong connection between bullying and suicide, it seems that any campaign that addresses bullying should take into account how it relates to suicide and vice versa.

14) Social media networks and platforms do seem to be places where young people write messages about their depression and suicidal feelings. Having a campaign that encourages their "friends" and "followers" to take these messages seriously would be helpful. Even if the young person who is posting is not going to attempt suicide, helping other friends even if this is a cry for "attention" or a statement asking for "help," it's important to respond to these "attention-seeking" behaviors with support, resources and alerting an adult or school needs emphasis. Most young people expressed "contempt," "negative," or "dismissive" attitudes toward what could potentially be a real statement about depressive feelings expressed on facebook or other social media. It might be helpful to encourage young people to see these messages as a support-seeking messages or support-seeking behaviors.

15) All of the young people were surprised that you could tell Facebook and Craigslist directly about a high-risk message and these companies would respond by alerting a local crisis center or the authorities. A campaign teaching young people how to alert Facebook and other sites would be helpful.