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Media Relations

Study: Suicide Prevention Program Increases Knowledge, Changes Attitudes

May 12, 2011

DURHAM, N.H. – A comprehensive youth suicide prevention program piloted in New Hampshire significantly increases knowledge and shifts attitudes about suicide, finds a new study by researchers from the University of New Hampshire.

The program, called Connect, was developed by the National Alliance on Mental Illness-New Hampshire (NAMI-NH) and is being replicated in several other states around the country. It utilizes an ecological model of prevention, involving not just individuals in a community but also systems like state or school board policies to improve community members' knowledge about youth suicide and preparing them to recognize youth at risk.

"We found that Connect is an effective community-based program for changing attitudes and knowledge around suicide," says lead author Gretchen Bean, who directs the UNH Social Work Outreach Center. "It increased preparedness to respond to people at risk of suicide and decreased the stigma of suicide." Kristine Baber, associate professor emerita of family studies at UNH and former director of the UNH Center on Adolescence, was principal investigator of the study and co-authored the article, which appeared in the journal *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* in February.

Youth suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15 to 24-year-olds nationwide; in New Hampshire, it the second leading cause in many years. This fact, combined with the general consensus that youth suicide is preventable, makes it a compelling public health issue.

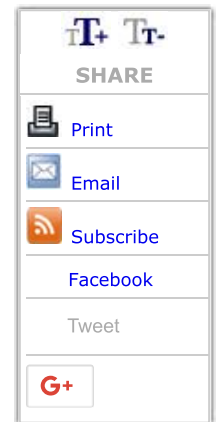
The study built on previous research that found that training key community stakeholders -- educators, parents, police officers, faith leaders, and others – to understand suicide risks, identify at-risk youth, be aware of appropriate community services, and reduce stigma has been effective at preventing youth suicide. Seeking to substantiate these claims, Bean and Baber evaluated the implementation of Connect among more than 600 adults and 200 high school students in two rural New Hampshire communities.

Of particular interest to the researchers was the effectiveness of Connect's so-called ecological model of suicide prevention.

"When Connect trainers go into a school, they're training bus drivers and custodians as well as teachers and guidance counselors, recognizing that anybody can be a gatekeeper," Bean says. "By training a critical mass of individuals in the common procedures for responding to youth suicide, Connect aims to increase not only the competence of individual participants, but also of community members' capacity to respond as a whole." Bean adds that the trainings also encourage integrating program protocols into institutional policies and modifying the social environment to address "macrolevel" issues.

The researchers found a significant positive increase in adult and youth attitudes toward suicide prevention and mental health, including correct knowledge about youth suicide as well as their preparedness to help, responsibility to help, and belief in the usefulness of mental health care, after the Connect training. Further, the results were consistent between the two communities, indicating the program's effectiveness with a broad range of adults and high school students.

"Connect trainings provided a common language and understanding for professionals in the community that facilitated important conversations about suicide and interventions for individual youth," Bean says. "This served as the impetus for policy and procedural changes in community programs and agencies such as improved working relationships and improved access to services and willingness to address other health related behaviors that will have long-term effects and increase the likelihood of sustainability."



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Connect is designated as a National Best Practice Training Program in suicide prevention, intervention, and response following a suicide death. In addition to New Hampshire, Connect has been implemented in Vermont, Massachusetts, Indiana, New York, and other states. Connect's work with the U.S. military to reduce risk and promote healing after a suicide death was identified as a best practice in "The War Within," a recently released report by the Rand Corporation commissioned by the Department of Defense. More information is at www.theconnectproject.org.

Funding was provided by the Endowment for Health the Irving and Barbara Gutin Foundation.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 12,200 undergraduate and 2,300 graduate students.

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