



A free, educational event on teen suicide prevention.

Promotional poster courtesy of YES

Teen suicide prevention event in Bellevue educates parents

YES hosts suicide prevention event to equip parents with tools to support teens.



By Madison Miller

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Bill Becker is slated to be Lake Washington Schools Foundation's co-president next year.

But more importantly, he's a dad.

His youngest son, a freshman at Redmond High School, faces extreme stress to perform well in what Becker considers a high performing district.

"He's in school for nearly seven hours a day and then he's got three to four hours of homework every night," he said. "He has more stress than I did when I was his age. I want him to do well in school but I want him to also have fun."

Becker isn't the only parent who is concerned over their child's mental health.

According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, suicide is the second leading cause of death for people ages 15-24 in Washington. King County's suicide rate has increased by about 18 percent in the last decade.

Inspired by the release of Netflix's "13 Reasons Why" second season, Youth Eastside Services (YES) hosted a free educational event on teen suicide prevention at the Bellevue Youth Theatre Monday.

YES provides free mental health counseling, substance abuse treatment, psychiatric support, education and prevention services for children, teens and families at more than 70 locations across East King County.

The panelists included Michelle Brode, a YES behavioral health specialist, Megan Kennedy, the Manager for Strategic Initiatives for Student Wellness at the University of Washington, Matt Gillingham, Lake Washington School District's Student Services Director, and Teen Link's Youth Services Manager and Educational Outreach Specialist, Renee Jones and Cailyn Griffith.

The event served to host the conversation of how to prevent suicide, help support teens experiencing suicidal thoughts and help those affected by suicide.

Prevention

The primary focus of the event was to equip parents with the tools to detect risk factors and warning signs in their teens and extend support before a suicide attempt occurs.

Common risk factors include alcohol and substance abuse, extreme stress, hopelessness, impulsive and/or aggressive tendencies and history of trauma or abuse.

Warning signs include talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live, talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain, sleeping too little or too much and withdrawing or isolating themselves.

A comprehensive list of risk factors and warning signs can be found at <https://americanspcc.org>.

Performance stress is often a large factor in teen suicide. Brode said that the most common comment from teens about their parents is the fear of disappointing them.

"It's the No. 1 thing I hear. They feel a lot of pressure tied to their grades and achievement in other areas of their life," Brode said.

It's important for parents to show their kids they're capable of having tough conversations.

"Show them that their parents are going to be OK if they tell them [something bad,]" she said.

Monitoring the online gradebook can be detrimental to establishing trust and reinforcing healthy attitudes toward achievements. Teens should experience failure as a part of life. Kennedy said choosing the right moment for parents to approach their teen is key when they display warning signs but refuse to acknowledge the problem.

“A casual conversation while driving can often make the child feel free to open up as opposed to a formal face-to-face setting,” she said.

Griffith, who formally served on the Teen Link hotline, said one thing teens really need is someone to listen to them without judgment. They need someone to validate their feelings and take them seriously.

“Believe them when they’re hurting and let them know you’re there,” Jones said. “I think there’s a lot of fear to talk about it but it’s real. ‘13 Reasons’ talks about that. Engage in conversation. They’re in the dark and when you show them you can talk about it then it sheds light on the dark.”

Outside resources

One way the Eastside community is addressing youth suicide is through [Eastside Pathways](#). It’s a community-wide partnership of more than 60 public, private and nonprofit organizations to support youth “from cradle to career.” One of its goals is addressing student mental health from a systemic standpoint and using community resources to provide better care.

The Lake Washington School District has been close partners with YES for many years. Four years ago, the district formally adopted a suicide prevention plan to better serve students’ mental health needs. The plan includes a triage model to assess if a student is at low risk, moderate risk, high risk or immediate risk. Based on a student’s assessment, different actions are prescribed for the student.

“In the past, if a student said they thought about suicide we would’ve removed them from school and said that they need a risk assessment. What we were doing was removing them from a community that could keep them safe because we were scared,” Gillingham said. “What we’re trying to do now is fine-tune the resources available so we can keep them in their community and keep them safe.”

Eighth, 10th and 12th graders participate in the [Healthy Youth Survey](#) every two years. It publishes data by school and district and measures depressive feelings, anxiety and suicide. The data informs schools how their current mental health plans are succeeding in meeting students needs and where are areas for improvement.

The Lake Washington School District has also been integrating social emotional learning into school's curriculum through six benchmarks. The first three benchmarks include self awareness, self management and self efficacy. It is the district's goal to have its students be able to identify, manage and cope with their emotions in addition to seeking help if their emotions become uncontrollable.

With summer vacation approaching, Gillingham said the school system will continue to serve students' mental health needs. Students who have been seeing the school's counselor or other services will be able to connect with those resources. The school system will also provide counseling services to students enrolled in summer school.

Support for those left behind

In the case where there is a suicide, schools are prepared to support those in mourning.

"We call in additional counselors to provide the support students need as well as provide follow-up support for those who may be at risk," Gillingham said. "We also bring in therapy dogs to provide immediate crisis support to create an environment for students to grieve."

Suicide-related grief is not new to Lucas Sherman. When his mother died by suicide when he was 12 years old, he said that the resources available at the time weren't geared toward his needs.

"There were some resources out there [for coping with suicide loss] but not many geared toward teens," he said.

Now a sophomore at Seattle Academy, Sherman started his own nonprofit to provide people affected by suicide with the resources to heal and grow. The Other Six, launched last April, says at least six people are directly affected by each suicide. The organization connects people to talk openly about suicide and subsidizes therapy costs.

Sherman believes that time does heal, but advises those affected by suicide should talk with friends and family to get through it as well as leave appropriate time to heal.

After the event, many parents commented how grateful they were to attend an event to address this topic. One parent said their youngest son almost hanged himself and they didn't know he was suffering at all. They said it's important for parents to be educated on how they can better serve their child's mental health needs before it's too late.

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