

Signs of Suicide (SOS)

Agawam Middle School students are joining students across the United States in learning how to save lives through a school-based mental health education and screening program that enables them to recognize warning signs of suicide in their peers and, quite literally, to *act*.

Just as the acronym CPR has become universal shorthand for a medical emergency rescue technique, the Middle School Signs of Suicide (SOS) program teaches students an acronym for a rescue technique of a different sort: **ACT**, which stands for **A**cknowledge, **C**are, and **T**ell.

After learning how to recognize the signs of suicide in a peer, students are encouraged to *acknowledge* those warning signs and take them seriously, let the peer know he or she *cares*, and *tell* a trusted adult.

Screening for Mental Health Inc., a nonprofit mental health screening organization based in Wellesley, Mass., launched the SOS program in 2000. Screening for Mental Health is the organization that founded National Depression Screening Day (NDS) in 1990. According to psychiatrist Douglas Jacobs, M.D., executive director of the SOS program and founder and director of Screening for Mental Health, the SOS program was an offshoot of NDS. "We kept receiving requests from the NDS sites to provide them with materials suitable for teens," he told *Psychiatric News*. "We responded with the SOS program." The program, he continued, provides students with a "mental health checkup, as well as the knowledge to recognize depression and the warning signs of suicide when they occur in themselves or a friend."

Video Promotes Responsibility

Students at participating schools first watch a 17-minute video. The video shows vignettes in which two students, one of whom is depressed and potentially suicidal, interact with one another. Through the dramatizations, students are instructed on the correct and incorrect ways to approach the person who has become withdrawn, verbalizes a wish to hurt himself or herself, or expresses hopelessness about the future. After showing the video to students, counselors hold a classroom discussion about depression and suicide and make sure that students understand the video's content.

Program Increases Help Seeking

Studies show that the SOS program increases help seeking and reduces suicidality among students.

In a study, which appeared in the August 2003 *Adolescent and Family Health*, Robert Aseltine Jr., Ph.D., collected data from 92 schools participating in the SOS program during the 2000-01 academic year. As part of the study, school administrators tracked the

reactions of students, parents, and teachers to the program. They also collected data on the number of student visits to school counselors before and after implementation of the SOS program. Aseltine found that the average number of visits per month to the school counselor or nurse in the year preceding implementation of the SOS program was 6.70, but the number increased to 10.63 in the month following implementation, which represents an almost 60 percent increase in help-seeking behavior.