

## Students call for bigger discussion on suicide

*Survey: More than a quarter of high-school students in Idaho struggle with feeling sad, alone or bullied*

When junior Collin Freese sees freshmen walking down the hall, sometimes he'll stop and think, "One of those could have been my sister."

His younger sister, Camille, died by suicide two years ago. She was 13.

"I didn't realize how sick she was until it was too late," said her mother, Melissa Freese. "I would have done whatever it took to help her."

More than a quarter of high-school students in Idaho struggle with feeling sad, alone or bullied, according to the 2015 Idaho Youth Risk Behavior Survey.

Twenty percent of the students surveyed had seriously considered suicide. That was up 4 percent from 2013, but was still an improvement from 1993, when almost 30 percent of students said they had considered suicide.

Freese said he and other students put pressure on themselves to act tough, rather than turning to adults for help or being honest with their friends about what they're going through.

"They're afraid of what their friends will say," he said. "They laugh it off, like, 'Oh, I was kidding.'"

This school year, the West Ada and Nampa school districts have each lost at least two students to apparent suicides.

A Meridian High School student killed himself in April, just days before Freese hosted a suicide prevention fundraiser at the school. The death shocked and overwhelmed the students, Freese said, even those who didn't personally know the student.

In Nampa earlier this year, Twitter users responded to the news of a student suicide with empathy and a call to action.

"I feel like Nampa seriously needs an assembly about suicide awareness and such," one tweet read.

A reply followed: "Telling us counselors are available isn't enough."

Scott Parker, Nampa school district director of secondary education, said an assembly anytime soon was unlikely, and there is a deliberate reason for that.

"You really have to think about the families who are impacted first and foremost," Parker said. "And I think it's always good not to be reactionary. ... It's always coming together as a team and thinking about, 'What

are some things that we can still do proactively, with all students,' and sometimes that's a process that isn't immediate."

West Ada, similarly, does not promote school-wide assemblies or memorial displays after a student suicide. Doing so could actually have a harmful effect, said Jeanne Buschine, West Ada supervisor of student support services.

"If we give it too much attention and the wrong kind of attention, that's what we have to be very careful with," she said. "Some kids on the edge might think, 'OK, this is the way that kid got attention, and I won't really go through with it. ... I just want to feel like people do care about me.'"

Instead, the districts send in a crisis response team of counselors, administrators and other staff to help students and school staff work through the tragedy of a student death. The team will first reach out to students who likely knew the victim on a personal level, such as teammates or fellow club members, Parker said.

"You spend a lot of time together in some of these groups," Nampa school district spokeswoman Kathleen Tuck. "And so (we) want to make sure that (we) are aware of those students and that they got the help that they need because they might be affected a little bit more than someone who just sat next to them in English class."

The crisis response team also looks into how the student who died was connected to other schools in the district, such as if there were siblings who are affected. Another example is if the student was a freshman, the middle school they just came from might be affected.

### ***13 reasons why***

Parents in the Treasure Valley may have received an email from their child's school about the Netflix series, "13 Reasons Why," which was released March 31. The show, based on a book of the same name, has created concern because of the way it depicts suicide.

The National Association of School Psychologists discourages vulnerable youth from watching the series because it could influence them to romanticize revenge suicide.

"Sometimes they don't think through how it's permanent and it will affect their loved ones the rest of their lives," Melissa Freese said.

A handful of West Ada students have processed the show with their school counselors, Buschine said.

Idaho Suicide Prevention Hotline supervisor and clinical lead George Austin said at least 12 people have contacted the hotline in reference to the show, though the exact number is tough to track.

"For most of those, the show served to trigger past trauma and was cited as among the reasons for their contacting us," Austin said.

In “13 Reasons Why,” the main character leaves behind 13 tapes to individuals whom she said played a role in her decision to kill herself. The show’s creators said they wanted to promote discussion on suicide and other difficult topics.

Collin Freese said he finds the show’s message offensive and wants to see a different approach to suicide awareness.

“It should be the opposite, of 13 reasons why you are loved and cared for,” he said.

## ***Prevention***

West Ada students start learning about how to deal with bullying in kindergarten, Buschine said. As they get older, they talk about self-harm and suicide prevention in health class.

Parker, with Nampa school district, said classes address suicide prevention in the health curriculum. Students also learn to recognize depression and other warning signs of suicide in their friends.

Parker said he knows Idaho is one of the leading states in suicide rates, and he knows suicide is related to mental health.

“The state needs to think about, ‘How do we give families support on that mental health end,’ and that’s where I think the bigger problem is,” he said. “It’s definitely not a Nampa problem, it’s an Idaho problem.”

Matt McCarter, director of student engagement and postsecondary readiness with the Idaho State Department of Education, said the state is working with school districts and community resources — like SPAN Idaho — regarding student mental health.

How mental health is talked about and how it is stigmatized are two areas the state is investigating and updating training for.

The State Department of Education also works with school districts in developing and training their crisis response teams. The State Department of Education gathers data for the Idaho Youth Risk Behavior Survey, which tracks statistics such as how students formulate ideas about suicide.

Renaissance High School Junior Rebecca Steed said she would like to see more emphasis in schools placed on suicide awareness and prevention.

“It’s affected a lot of people,” she said.

Teachers and counselors step in to help students on a one-on-one basis when they see warning of depression or suicidal thoughts, Buschine said.

She urges students to reach out to a parent or trusted adult if they or their friends are struggling with thoughts of self-harm or suicide. Getting help through the darkest hours, she said, can show students that there is a way out and there is hope.

“In high school, you’re trying to figure out who you are ... and how you matter in life,” Collin Freese said. “It’s something we all need to address, that everyone is loved and matters.”

## ***Warning signs***

Common signs that a person is struggling with suicide thoughts include:

- Suicide threats, both direct (“I am going to kill myself”; “I need life to stop”) and indirect (“I need it to stop”; “I wish I could fall asleep and never wake up”). Threats can be verbal or written, and they are often found in online postings.
- Giving away prized possessions.
- Preoccupation with death in conversation, writing, drawing and social media.
- Changes in behavior, appearance/hygiene, thoughts and/or feelings. This can include someone who is typically sad who suddenly becomes extremely happy.
- Emotional distress

Source: National Association of School Psychologists

## ***Resources***

### **Idaho Suicide Prevention Hotline: 1-208-398-4357**

The hotline is staffed by trained, supervised listeners 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The public may also text the hotline number between 3 p.m. and midnight, Monday through Friday.

The hotline provides crisis intervention, emotional support, resource referrals, linkages to local services, and follow-up for all Idahoans, including those at risk for suicide and their families and loved ones.

Source: [idahosuicideprevention.org](http://idahosuicideprevention.org)

To reach the Idaho CareLine for information and referrals, dial 2-1-1.

The Idaho Department of Health and Welfare can connect residents to mental health services, regardless of their ability to pay. A sliding fee schedule is available based on family size and incomes. Call 208-334-0800 or, after hours, 208-334-0808.

## ***What Idaho’s high school teens are experiencing***

**Of the 1,760 Idaho grades 9-12 students who responded to the Idaho Department of Education’s most recent Risk Behavior Survey (2015):**

- 32 percent felt sad or hopeless for two weeks in a row

- 26 percent were bullied on school property
- 30 percent were teased or called names because of their weight, size or appearance within the last year
- 21 percent purposely hurt themselves within the past year without wanting to die
- 20 percent considered attempting suicide
- 10 percent attempted suicide

## ***Calls to the Idaho Suicide Prevention Hotline***

### **In 2016:**

- 5,906 calls came in to the hotline. Of those, 1,325 calls were from Ada County phone numbers, and 575 calls were from Canyon County phone numbers, the highest and second-highest county counts in Idaho, respectively.
- 647 callers reported being within the 10-19 age range.
- 43 percent of overall calls were suicide related.
- 36 percent of overall calls involved self-reporting mental health issues.
- 46 callers received emergency assistance with their consent.
- 61 callers received emergency assistance without their consent.
- 60 callers agreed to go to the hospital.

Source: Idaho Suicide Prevention Hotline

## ***According to the Suicide Prevention Action Network of Idaho:***

- Between 2011 and 2015, 102 Idaho schoolchildren (age 18 and under) died by suicide. Twenty-four were age 14 and younger.
- Suicide is the second-leading cause of death for Idahoans age 15-34 and for males age 10-14. (The leading cause is accidents.)
- Idaho is consistently among the states with the highest suicide rates. In 2015, Idaho had the fifth-highest suicide rate, 57 percent higher than the national average.
- In 2015, 362 people died by suicide in Idaho; nearly one suicide death every day.

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**by Holly Beech**

Page 6 of 6

- In 2015, 60 percent of Idaho suicides involved a firearm.
- Between 2011 and 2015, 78 percent of suicides were by men.
- In 2015, there were 44,193 deaths by suicide in the United States, an average of one person every 12 minutes.

The Idaho Suicide Prevention Hotline offers a texting service that is most popular among youth. From Jan. 1 to May 10, the hotline received text messages from the following age groups:

- Ages 10-14: 55 messages
- Ages 15-19: 41 messages
- Ages 20-24: 8 messages
- Ages 25-34: 7 messages
- Ages 35-44: 2 messages
- Unknown age: 121 messages

The number to call or text the hotline is 208-398-4357.

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