

Video Discussion Transcript
Written by Jerry Ciffone
School Social Worker
For the SEHS Suicide Prevention Program
Revised October 30, 2009

Day 1:

School social worker shows a 15-minute video filmstrip entitled "Choosing Life: Ashley's Story"

- A. Introduces the video filmstrip - "I'm going to start by showing you a 15 minute video filmstrip about a teen-age girl named Ashley who attempts suicide and a teen-age boy named Jake who died by suicide. This video consists of a series of still pictures with a dialog. I chose this format for two reasons. First, the girl narrates her story and we get to hear how she thinks and this is important. Second, this format allows her to summarize to us what she did and what the boy did. So we learn about her and the boy in about 15 minutes. If their stories were acted out in an action video it would take over an hour to convey the same information. This allows for more class time for us to discuss the important points of their story.

In the middle of the video there is a scene with blood. If you don't like to look at blood just close your eyes when you see Ashley standing in her bathroom and keep them close until you hear her talking in the next scene.

Now some of you may be thinking this won't be important or interesting because 'suicide doesn't apply to me.' However, about half of you in this class will meet someone who is thinking of suicide before you graduate. So even though this may not personally apply to you it could apply to an important person in your life such as a friend, a brother or sister, or a college roommate. So I would like you to please pay close attention to this."

- B. Leads a discussion -

The following is a transcript of discussion questions, related statements and preferred responses, preceded by a hyphen (the presenter should allow at least 40 minutes to cover the 19 sections):

1. How many of you think there are kids here like Ashley? (Usually half of the class raises their hand.)
2. How many of you know someone who has threatened or attempted to commit suicide? (Usually a third of the class raises their hand.)
3. How many of you personally know someone who died by suicide? (Make a mental note of who raises their hand, usually 1-4 in a class size of 28.)
4. Now, about the filmstrip, do you remember hearing Ashley say how lonely she felt after she felt ditched by her friends? - she said "I felt so lonely, I just wanted to die." Do we all agree that she wasn't handling her feelings of loneliness very well? -yes. Cutting

one's wrist is not a normal thing to do. Before Ashley went to Sarah, the social worker, she had some unhealthy views about life, her friends and her parents.

5. For example, Ashley hated living at home and thought that to survive living with her parents that she "needed friends to be happy, they were my whole world." Is it okay to have this kind of attitude about friends? - no. What's the problem with this attitude? - Friends can't be with each other all the time. Ashley was too dependent on the approval of her friends. She made choices based on her sense of what her friends would like, not on her own true needs. In Ashley's case, when she got into a fight with her friends she felt cut off and completely isolated.

6. There are several things a person like Ashley can do to avoid feeling so lonely, isolated, depressed and confused, what are they? (The following can be addressed in any order:)

-find ways to cope when alone. There was a study done on feelings of loneliness and age groups, what age do you think most people feel most lonely? - age 16. I would like to ask you all very personal question. How many of you have had feelings of loneliness at least once in the past 30 days? The past 60 days? Keep your hands up and look around the room at all the hands that are up. Loneliness is a very common feeling at your age. No matter how popular or busy you are everyone has to deal with those feelings. Why do you think that it peaks around age 16? Are you as emotionally attached to your parents as you were at age 10? Are you married yet? - many 16 year olds are in a period of life where their emotional attachments are shifting from their family to others their own age. Friendships are not always stable and reliable, so when things don't go well with friends it can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness. Those who are able to cope with feelings of loneliness seem to have the healthiest friendships.

- she could have had a variety of friends who were her own age. She could have been a more honest person. She lied to her parents about Tyler (he was more than just a friend) and she lied to her friends.

- she could learn how to better handle rejection. To accept limits from her parents and friends without a lot of emotion; without being "angry at everyone."

- she could maintain a good relationship with her parents. Have you noticed that when your getting along with your parents that you tend to have a smooth week in school and when your fighting with them you get stressed out much easier? Believe it or not most teenagers have a satisfactory relationship with their parents. If you are really dissatisfied with the relationship with their mom or dad you should think about how you could make things better. You would be a happier person if you had a positive relationship with your parents.

- she could find a trusted adult to confide in. How many of you have an adult (parent, relative, older sibling, parent of a friend, minister, coach, teacher, etc.) you trust that you could go to at school or after school if you were very upset? When you raised your hand who were you thinking of? (This shows them the variety of people they could turn to. For those who said they would go to a parent reinforce them for this.) State: "I think going to a parent is the best choice when a kid is really upset. I suppose some of you may disagree with me about this but it is my opinion that most of you have parents who know and love you more than anyone else and want you to be happy." For those

of you who did not raise your hand, please consider the idea of finding an adult who is a good listener, can give helpful advice and can be trusted to respect your privacy. You can never predict when you may need some serious help. A really big problem can develop without warning and having an adult you can talk to can help you to make a good decision at a difficult time.

7. Do you think Ashley wanted to die? - no, she just wanted to show her friends she meant what she said and get them to feel sorry for the way they treated her. - she wanted attention. Can a person be seeking attention and suicidal at the same time? - yes, and we should never ignore someone who is talking about suicide even if it seems they just want our attention. Many of those who attempt suicide really want to escape a truly painful situation. They are not seeking attention and are not trying to manipulate their parents or friends. But what about someone who makes threats to stop a boyfriend girlfriend breakup or to see if their friends care? -they obviously have a problem. There are better ways to find out if friends care. How should you react to a friend who attempts suicide? Should you ignore or be mad at them? -no, I liked the way Emily (Jake's sister) talked with Ashley. Let them know you are still friends but be honest and direct, like the way Emily was. A good friend might say (as Ashley said in the video): "There are ways out of every situation; there's a way to cope with any problem, no matter how bad or hopeless it seems to be."
8. We don't know all the facts around Jake's death. Let's say we found out that some bad things happened to Jake. **(Show transparency #1)** That Jake's parents recently told him that they were getting a divorce, a few days later his best friend who he normally talks to moved out of town, then his girlfriend broke up with him, and then few days after that he got arrested for drinking and driving and lost his driver's license. Now that we know these additional facts about Jake, does this make his suicide more understandable to you as a solution? -no. If any of you believe Jake's suicide would be more understandable, then you are basically saying that anyone in this room would attempt suicide if they are under a great deal of stress. But that's just not true. Think about world history. What about prisoners of war, people in concentration camps, hostages, etc. Do you agree that those conditions were severe? Did they all kill themselves? -no, they found a way to cope and survive. Only a very, very small fraction of people will consider suicide after something really bad happens. Most will cope in different and less self-destructive ways. They face their problems, find a solution, and accept that certain things cannot be changed, or they get help. Its not about stress, it's about how one deals with stress.
9. Ashley described for us some of the things she had heard about Jake. **(Show transparency #2)** Is everyone who acts this way depressed? -no. Are some who act this way depressed? -yes. How many of you think Jake may have been suffering from a mental illness at the time of his death? **(Show transparency #3)** Many studies show that at least 90% of those who died by suicide were suffering from a mental illness at the time of their death. (Consider asking those who identified themselves in question 3. to say whether the person they personally knew seemed to be suffering from "depression.") **(Show transparency #3a)** According to the research this is the level of mental illness observed in those who committed suicide.

10. When talking about depression it is important to understand that there are different levels of depression. Most of us have periods of mild depression at some time in our lives. **(Show transparency #4)** But these are the symptoms of the most serious form of depression; “major depression.” Jake was showing some of these symptoms (noted in red). Can a person with this type of depression be helped? Yes, as many as 80% can be helped; with counseling and in some cases medication. **(Show transparency #5)** According to a nationwide survey of about 3½ million teens conducted in 2004: about 5 out of 30 students in the 10th grade had experienced an episode of major depression some time in their life. Tomorrow we will be talking about medication and its effects on people with Major Depression.
11. I would like to show you some statistics on teen suicide. Some have said that teen suicide is an epidemic on the rise. How many of you agree? **(Show transparency #6)** Does it look to you that the rate of teen suicide is increasing? -no. Why the decrease? – more awareness of depression and more are getting help. How many teenagers are there in the US? -about 21 million **(Show transparency #7)** 1 out of about 13,681 (year 2006) is a very small fraction. Even though suicide is very rare it is a serious problem because death by suicide is a death that could be prevented.
12. Do you think teenage boys die from suicide more than teenage girls or girls more than boys? **(Show transparency #8)** Why do you think boys commit suicide at a much higher rate than girls? Are boys under more stress in the teen years than girls? -no, in fact many believe that girls in America are under more stress than boys. The expectations of girls in America are less defined than are expectations of boys, and there are some conflicting messages girls receive in our culture. In addition to that, research shows that teenage girls experience depression and anxiety problems twice as often as teenage boys. Girls think about their negative experiences and ruminate more than boys. When they ruminate and think pessimistically they are more prone to depression. Boys tend to think less and are more action oriented and such actions tend to offer them a distraction from the negative thoughts and feelings.

So let's try to understand some of the differences. Some girls try suicide to communicate their desperation to end their life and they seem to do this more than boys. They use methods that allow them to change their mind once they start or to be rescued. Boys seem less willing to change their mind. They seem to be more definite once they decide on it and to be sure that they will complete the act they often use more lethal methods to kill themselves. Girls seem to cope with stress and depression differently than boys. In our culture girls are encouraged to talk things out; to express their feelings, to get help and to seek social support. This doesn't happen as much with boys. When boys become depressed they tend to isolate themselves. Talking things out is the best method of coping, and girls are much better at this than boys. It's my opinion that Girls seem more willing to reconsider their options while boys seem to be more determined once they make up their mind. Girls also seem to accept and consider advice more than boys do.

13. Okay, so we know that death by suicide in the teen years is very rare. 1 out of about 13,058 (year 2005) is a very small fraction. However, this small fraction of completers feel very upset about their life especially when they compare themselves to others. In fact, these individuals often do have some terrible things happening to them. (Share personal experiences with students who have died by suicide.) In looking back on the lives of these students I wonder what they could have become, the contributions they could have made to society, the pain and suffering they could have prevented in their family and friends. **(Show transparency #9)** They each had many of these thinking errors. For example, (point to 2) some think that just because they feel like killing themselves that they have to do so, or (4) they incorrectly thought that they were the only ones who ever experience such bad things. If I had you raise your hand as I went through a list of typical social problems a suicidal classmate would be very surprised to see how many in the class are dealing with similar or other serious problems. Another common and serious thinking error of suicidal teens is (6) that they believe that their life will always be terrible. They don't realize that it can get better. That their pain is temporary in the larger scheme of time. Think about what you were the most upset about 30 days ago. Are you still upset about it today? (Few will say they are, however, for those who have raised their hand encourage them to either try a different solution to the problem they are still upset about, to get help, or to accept and adjust to the situation or problem.) Most get over something they are upset about earlier in the day after a good night's sleep. But some do not and dwell on their problem for days, weeks and sometimes for months. Girls tend to do this more than boys. Most suicidal teens develop tunnel vision (8). They don't see that they have different options for coping. It's not about stress it's about how one deals with stress. It's mainly about having certain thinking errors. Some daydream about their death perhaps like Ashley. **(Show transparency #9a)** When Ashley was in a disturbed state of thinking she thought that a person is loved more after they are dead. Is that true? -no. Kids were showing various emotions after Jake's death and Ashley misunderstood that. Let's review the possible sequence of events that may lead to suicide. **(Show transparency #9b)**
14. In the video, Jake's sister, Emily said, "Get some help Ashley... If Jake would have gotten some help from a counselor... who knows he might still be alive and happy again." What does this mean? - that Jake didn't get help from a mental health professional. Many of those who died by suicide never met with a mental health professional. In some cases a friend was the only person who knew about the suicide threat and kept it a secret. The friend didn't help them to connect up with someone who could intervene. **(Show transparency #10** and refer to the caption under the boy's picture.) How do you think his friends felt after hearing about his death? - guilty for not telling someone ...that is an awful feeling to have.
15. *(This section may be deleted. See #1 in the Notes section on page 7.)*
Why do you think some who committed suicide never met a mental health professional? -some avoid talking about their problems because they are afraid that they will look crazy or weak or stupid. **(Show transparency #11)** You can see from looking at this that these situations can happen to anyone and that even someone who usually handles things pretty well could get overwhelmed and have a reason to see a social worker. When a person commits suicide many will talk about the person. The

things on this list that apply to the person may become public. Some of the facts will be exaggerated and some kids will even make up stuff about the dead person.

-confidentiality issues: such as fear that parents and teachers will find out what is said to a social worker. Before age 12 what kids say to a counselor can be repeated to parents. But in this State, (Illinois) consent is required from students age 12 and older. Exceptions are #17 through #20 (on the list). In cases where there seems to be a serious suicidal risk parents have to be notified. -fear of hospitalization: Hospitalization is a good idea when the person doesn't think they can stop themselves from attempting suicide. If it doesn't seem that serious I'd call the parent and just suggest counseling with someone in the community like Sarah the social worker.

16. Lets talk a moment about all of the shootings that occurred in schools across the US. **(Show transparency #12)** How many of you remember at least one of these events? **(Show transparency #13)** In each of these shootings the killers were teased, humiliated or bullied, felt desperate about their situation, most were suicidal, had access to a gun, were not talking to a trusted adult about their troubled feelings, and each gave warnings to peers who did not tell an adult they trusted. Now they are either dead or serving life in prison. **(Show transparency #12a)** These shootings are one of the reasons why I come and speak to health classes. I don't think this talk today will automatically stop someone from killing themselves, **(Show transparency #14)** but most of those who think of suicide or homicide may come to someone like you first. Many of you already know of someone who has threatened suicide (those who raised their hand to question 2.) Although these are reasons given I don't believe they are true nor are they good enough excuses for keeping the threat a secret. Look at the key words here (point to), "didn't believe, assumed, afraid, afraid." A true and loyal friend isn't afraid and doesn't assume. A good friend understands that when their friend talks about killing themselves, or killing someone else, their friend needs professional help! Think about it; what's worse, number 4, having your friend be mad at you or **(Show transparency #13a and point to 7)**, not having your friend at all because he is in jail or dead?
17. Everyone in this room can do something to reduce the chance that someone in this school will commit suicide. What are some things that can be done? **(Show transparency #15)** If I we can give you the right information, than you, as the first person to get involved can maybe do something to stop a potential suicide or homicide at this school.
18. **(Show transparency #16)** If you ever have a friend who seems seriously depressed, has some of the thinking errors we talked about or begins to talk about suicide the most important thing you can do is to talk with him or her. Ask them questions. Take them seriously and listen to them. Most people feel better when there is someone who will simply listen. Persuade the person to get help. (Suggest they think about the conversation between Ashley and Jake's sister Emily as an example of a proper peer-to-peer intervention.) Make sure the person is going to follow through and get help. Go with them or if they refuse to get help go by yourself to the person you already trust (as identified in section 6.) When a person talks about suicide or homicide something

is seriously wrong and they need help. Your involvement can make a big difference in your friend's life.

19. If any of you thought of suicide or tried hurting yourself in the past or if I have said something that now concerns or upsets you please talk about it with an adult you trust. If you don't have an adult that you feel you can go to then talk to a friend about it.

20. Are there any questions?

Day 2 the school social worker or health teacher:

- Shows the 24-minute video *More Than Sad: Teen Depression* and then spends about 20 minutes reviewing related discussion questions. A transcript of this session can be viewed at:

Day 2 or day 3 the health teacher:

- Distributes and reviews two handouts; one provides suggestions for identifying and helping a troubled friend and is entitled "A Friend in Crisis?" the other describes the symptoms of Major Depression.
- Gives students the 20-question quiz (and after all of the students have completed the quiz the teacher highlights the correct answers to the class to reinforce the points made over the past two days).
- Distributes and reviews the handout entitled; *Top Ten things to know about Teen Suicide*
- Refers students who give a specific response to the quiz to the school social worker.

NOTES:

1. All of section 15 including transparency #11 can be deleted if a freshman orientation to school-based mental health services is utilized. At South Elgin High School transparency #11 is shown and some of the points made in section 15 are discussed in the freshman orientation program.

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3. The video *Choosing Life: Ashley's Story* is available in VHS format for \$12 or as a DVD for \$15.50 through: Infinite Video Productions, 1880 Fabyan Parkway Batavia, Illinois 60110 at 630-389-0000 info@infinitevideo.com

4. If this transcript is being considered for a new suicide prevention program in the wake of a recent suicide then numerous modifications to this transcript may be necessary. If this is the case contact Jerry Ciffone for information about how this transcript can be modified so that it effectively integrates the attributes of the person and the event within it.