

Let's prevent suicide

Schools offered free training program

BY DAMON CRONSHAW

SUICIDE prevention training for teachers is a crucial step towards supporting students at risk, a Hunter school principal says.

Hunter Valley Grammar School principal Rebecca Butterworth said the training is important for schools, so "kids know it's OK to reach out".

"It helps people know what to do in the moment," Ms Butterworth said.

Teachers and school staff are being offered the "suicide first-aid training" through LivingWorks Australia to support students in the Hunter.

The free training is available to public, Catholic and independent schools through a \$14 million NSW government grant for mental health recovery during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is also part of a statewide initiative to create a network of safety and support around young people.

Suicide is the leading cause of death among Australians aged 15 to 24.

About a third of deaths in this age group are attributed to suicide.

In 2020, 381 Australian young people aged 18 to 24 took their own lives. A further 99 deaths by suicide occurred among children and adolescents aged 5 to 17, with 74 per cent of those in the 15 to 17 age bracket.

The latest figures for the Hunter show 422 people - of all ages - took their own life from 2015 to 2019.

Everymind director Jaelea Skehan said "suicide is less common among younger people than older

age groups".

"But when it occurs, the impacts can be devastating for friends, families and communities, including the school community," Ms Skehan said.

"It is important that we take a comprehensive approach to suicide prevention across our communities.

"Part of that is ensuring everyone who could come in contact with someone thinking about suicide, knows what to say and what to do to keep the person safe and connect them with support."

Ms Butterworth said suicide prevention was a "whole community effort".

She said the training was about building "everybody's capacity to intervene and support young people and recognise warning signs".

"It's important we educate as many adults in our community as possible to create a community around the child and identify if there's a real and legitimate risk of self harm and suicide."

LivingWorks Australia CEO Shayne Connell said "we hear often from teachers and parents that they really want to know how to have conversations about suicide and suicide prevention with young people".

"It's the most common request we have," he said.

The *Newcastle Herald* reported this month that Mayfield's Jennifer Van der Baan took her own life in March at age 15.

Her mum, Debbie Van der Baan, said more should be done in schools on the issue of suicide awareness.

Ms Van der Baan welcomed moves to train school



LEADERSHIP: Hunter Valley Grammar School principal Rebecca Butterworth says suicide prevention training is important for schools. Picture: Simone De Peak

staff in suicide prevention.

"I think every teacher, parent and student should be trained to look out for warning signs," she said.

"This is a big, important thing that everybody has to do together. Everybody has to look out for each other.

"Talking about it is most helpful. Talking to somebody could be the first step in helping them."

Ms Butterworth said suicide was "no longer a taboo subject".

"By doing the training in schools, we're saying to all those involved and our students that it's OK to say you're not OK. And we're trying to have people on the ground that can support you through that.

"Asking somebody whether or not you're OK is validating that as a legitimate question," she said.

She added that the training would "give people the skills to listen and really hear whether somebody is truly

OK or not".

She said the training teaches people to "learn how to listen for the right words, phrases and behaviours that signal a concern".

She said mental health in schools is a huge issue.

"I'm quite passionate about it. If we want our students to thrive and flourish we have to look at them holistically.

"We've got to take care of their physical health and support them academically, but we also need to develop that capacity to support them emotionally and mentally. Only when they're well are they really able to thrive as learners."

She said there was also "real scope with an organisation like LivingWorks to also train parents in how to recognise these signs in their children and friends and know what to do in that moment".

Mr Connell said when stories come out of a celebrity or local person having taken

their own life, people will often say "I wish I knew about it and had recognised the signs and knew what to say".

But people are often concerned that "they'll say the wrong thing and make matters worse".

"That's where the training comes in. People can learn how to approach a conversation, how to recognise when someone is having thoughts of suicide and that it's not just up to the professionals. It's about how to talk to someone if they're struggling."

The training program is also open to parents and carers of teenagers, along with anyone who works with or supports high school students.

It is also on offer to police, Aboriginal leaders, small business owners and managers and community club members.

LivingWorks Australia director of suicide prevention Marc Bryant said, in reality, anyone can do the training program.

Mr Bryant urged the *Herald* to publish a QR code that enables "all readers to do the online training for free".

"The government has funded it," he said.

Mr Connell said anyone can be "the first person to reach out and start a conversation" whether they're a parent, teacher, friend or peer".

He said the training can be done online and in-person.

It will help people recognise when "someone is having thoughts of suicide", how to engage them and connect them to further help.

LivingWorks Australia will also host 10 "safe talk" workshops, covering intervention skills, at Charlestown [August 30 and September 15], Swansea [August 31 and September 13], Maitland [September 1 and 14], Newcastle [September 6 and 21], Cessnock [September 7] and Singleton [September 15].

The training is available at livingworks.com.au/NSW.

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