



Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention Program®

An outreach program of the Light for Life Foundation of Southern California
1831 South El Camino Real Encinitas, CA 92024
(760) 635-5604 FAX (760) 944-8494
www.yellowribbonsd.org

Background

The Light for Life Foundation of San Diego was established in 1997 as a regional chapter of the Light for Life Foundation - International, after the suicide of a fourteen year-old North San Diego County high school student. The founding board members included the teen's parents, minister, neighbors and friends. Most continue to serve on the Board and have been joined by other dedicated members whose lives have been touched by suicide; among them are survivor parents and siblings.

We began with a vision of enhancing the quality of life in San Diego County by institutionalizing suicide prevention. This includes dispelling the myths about suicide, such as "talking about suicide will cause someone to try it". People in a suicidal crisis need to talk about what they are experiencing - it helps relieve the terrible feeling of isolation that can result in suicide. Choosing to inform ourselves is something each of us can do in the fight to prevent suicide.

The Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention Program® creates strong community links between the consumer and the professional and thus builds a strong, sustainable suicide prevention initiative. We help identify existing community resources as well as train and participate in a network of individuals and groups who can supplement and support the work of professionals.

The goals for the Light for Life Foundation of Southern California are:

- Connect with every middle school and high school in San Diego County
- Seek reliable funding sources to enable us to deliver our message of life and hope
- Increase youth involvement - knowledge and truth empower youth to prevent suicide
- Maintain, strengthen and expand community partnerships

Our Mission

We are dedicated to saving and enriching lives through the use of the Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention Program®.

How it Works

Our community-based, public-health approach directly addresses the issue of suicide and suicide prevention. The effectiveness of the Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention Program® is due to its comprehensive simplicity, plus the partnerships it generates between professionals and community members. Everybody, from the average adult to the professional, teens and children, can understand and follow the simple steps that may help to save a life.

The stigma and discrimination associated with mental illness and suicide cause many people to avoid seeking treatment. Lives are saved when young people learn not to keep a secret, but to seek help. **Everyone can be a link that saves a life.** The American Association of Suicidology reports that 78% of adolescents will turn to their peers for help before turning to an adult. We teach students to reach out to a trusted adult and to get help for themselves or a friend in time of need. Training adults and youth alike ensures that all young people will have at least three close resources to turn to and that ***It's OK to Ask 4 Help!***®

Young people take our message seriously. They behave respectfully during the Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention Program® presentations and are thankful for their introduction to the program. Here are a few quotes from student surveys:

“Thanks you for helping us to help others get help ... I already passed two cards on to friends”

“Thank you for sharing the information ... if I had only known the signs earlier for my close friend ...”

“Thank you for realizing that we are the future generation and that we are not ‘just kids’ ... thank you for telling us that it is okay to ask for help”

The comprehensive, all-school program fee is approximately \$1 - \$2 per student. The program provides educational materials and training for school staff and the community. Each child is issued a Yellow Ribbon Card. School personnel and other adults that work with youth are better informed about the risks and warning signs for suicide and symptoms depression. The Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention Program® teaches how to **enhance protective factors** that help young people in times of need. These factors include:

- Strengthened connections to family, school, and community
- Problem-solving skills
- Nonviolent conflict and dispute resolution
- Easy access to clinical intervention
- Support for those seeking help

Following the staff training, student presentations take place in assembly or a smaller group format. Community/parent evenings are also scheduled to spread awareness of the scope of teen depression and suicide and its preventability. Adult sessions include gatekeeper training of prevention, intervention, and postvention of suicide. Everybody learns the purpose of the lifeline cards provided to the students. Everybody is taught, when presented with a lifeline card, to:

- **Stay** with that person – you are their **lifeline!**
- **Listen, really listen.** Take them seriously!
 - **Get, or call, help immediately!**

A “survivor shares” segment is often included in workshops and presentations. These are touching and sincere stories of how suicide has affected his or her life. Participants learn the origin of the Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention Program® and receive our *Yellow Ribbon Lifeline Cards*. These cards are a physical reminder that “It’s OK to Ask for Help!” and teach a valuable life skill: STAY, LISTEN, AND GET HELP!

Research shows that 90% of suicides studied are people who were clinically depressed. Social injustices in our society, such as bullying and bigotry, are among the root causes of suicide. Suicide can be prevented and depression is the most treatable of all mental illnesses. Students and staff learn to recognize the **warning signs**, such as:

- Abrupt changes in personality
- Giving away possessions
- Previous suicide attempts
- Changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- Use/abuse of drugs or alcohol
- Restlessness and/or withdrawal

Risk factors are delineated:

- Access to firearms
- Problems with school or with the law
- Ridicule or discrimination
- Breakup of a romance
- Loss of security
- Loss of a loved one

Students learn **coping strategies**, such as:

- Expressing feelings openly
- Spending time with family and friends
- Planning for the future
- Getting involved in school and community
- Maintaining a sense of humor
- Eating well and getting regular exercise

Yellow Ribbon Clubs or Teams are formed at area schools and are provided speakers’ training to educate members of their own school, other schools, and community organizations. Students also receive gatekeeper training, enabling them to assist their peers. Additionally, these clubs plan and implement activities that continuously encourage and share the Yellow Ribbon message. They sponsor Yellow Ribbon Week at their schools, where students proactively reach out to others with the life-affirming message: “You are not alone.”

The Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention Program® is NOT a treatment program. It is an outreach program providing a LINK to experts who can diagnose and properly treat the problem.

Sobering Statistics: National to Local

As surprising as it may seem, suicide is a huge problem in our state. There are **three suicides for every two homicides**, and twice as many suicides as HIV deaths (National Vital Statistics Report, 1999, CDC). Suicide is the number three killer and the most preventable cause of death of young people between the ages of 15 and 24 in San Diego County (County of San Diego, Health and Human Services Agency, Division of Emergency Medical Services, Medical Examiner Database, 1996-2001). Accidents are the leading cause of death for this age group and many researchers believe that many accidental deaths are, in reality, suicides that look like accidents.

Every day, sixteen young people between the ages 15 and 24 die by suicide in the United States. More than 1 in 10 high school students report having attempted suicide and twice that number report having had suicidal thoughts. The mean suicide rate in San Diego County for ages 15 to 24 has been 11.23 per 100,000 over the last twenty years, according to the Community Health Improvement Partners (CHIP) report on Suicide in San Diego County (1996 – 2001). According to the same report, the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) showed that the percentage of San Diego City Schools' students surveyed who reported attempting suicide at least once in the preceding twelve months was 10.5%, up from 6.3% in 1991. The national average for 2001 was 8.8%.

The CHIP report goes on to state that completed suicides for this age group in San Diego County average 8.4 per 100,000 from 1996 to 2001, and that **the highest suicide rate** is in the **North County East** Major Statistical Area. Additionally, suicide rates in the 10 to 14 year-old age group have risen 120% since 1990. The number one factor that increases the chance of a completed suicide is access to firearms. Something must be done to stop this growing epidemic.

Making A Difference

The Light for Life Foundation of Southern California has been in operation for nearly six years. During that time we have distributed nearly 350,000 Yellow Ribbon Lifeline Cards in San Diego County. We have provided comprehensive training for 40 middle/high schools through staff/student/parent presentations. We have established Yellow Ribbon Clubs or Teams at several local high schools and formed a county-wide Yellow Ribbon Youth Council. These young people have staffed information booths at school, community and health fairs around San Diego County.

At a Health and Safety Fair held at Cal State San Marcos, students initiated a plan to develop a college age-specific Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention Program® and materials. The Yellow Ribbon Youth Council planned, recruited, and promoted bands for a benefit concert at a regional teen center. Many of these young people have completed Yellow Ribbon Speaker's Training and speak to their peers. In September, 2001, we sent a youth representative (a Poway High School graduate and current SDSU student) to Washington, D.C. to testify before the Senate Subcommittee Hearing on Youth and Young Adult Suicide. His testimony was broadcast live on C-SPAN and aired repeatedly for many months afterwards.

Since 2000, we have been a participating organization in the San Diego Psychiatric Association Alliance's "When Not to Keep a Secret" high school Essay Contest. Light for Life of Southern California co-sponsors the award ceremonies in San Diego and at the California state level. We have trained staff for many community-based organizations such as the Greater San Diego YMCA Youth and Family Services and Independent Living Skills. We have provided training for volunteers staffing the Youth to Youth Helpline and for law enforcement recruits at the Law

Enforcement Academy at Miramar College. Our workshops have been held at conferences for the California School Board's Association Annual Education Conference (1998, 2000, 2001 and 2003); the California State PTA (2000 and 2002); the National Safe Schools Institute (2001); and the American Psychiatric Association Annual Conference (2002), just to name a few.

We have organized and co-sponsored several large forums including, "The Roots of Teen Suicide and Depression: Issues and Answers" (2000) and "Teen Suicide and Violence Prevention" (2002). At each event we hosted speakers who are experts in their fields – 750 in 2002 alone! Each event received TV and print coverage and attendance was at maximum capacity. On a daily basis we provide speakers for classroom presentations, programming for community-based after-school programs (such as "6 to 6"), speakers for civic groups, presenters for health and other informational fairs, and training for peer helpers/advisors.

We can save lives by de-stigmatizing mental health issues and sharing our message: **It's OK to Ask 4 Help!®**

Together we can make a difference.