

NUMBERS AND MORE

# Facts about suicide

■ One out of ten Needham High School students (165) have seriously thought about suicide.

■ More than 50 Needham High School students have attempted suicide.

■ At Needham High School, 13 percent (208) of students have self-injured and 14 percent (224) of students have depressive symptoms.

■ At Pollard Middle School, 42 students who responded to the survey have self-injured, 75 students have depressive symptoms, 67 students have seriously thought about suicide and 11 students have attempted suicide.

Source: 2012 Youth Risk Behavior Survey

## You may not know: Suicide is rarely contagious

Although suicide clusters are documented in the research literature, they are in fact quite rare. According to the CDC, suicide clusters, while more common among adolescents, account for only about 1-5 percent of suicides in adolescent age groups. Suicide clusters have varied definitions. The CDC defines these events as "a group of suicides or suicide attempts,

or both, that occur closer together in time and space than would normally be expected in a given community. Source: Centers for Disease Control

## Most completed suicides are not by adolescents but by middle-age adults

Most people who complete suicides in Massachusetts are older than 24. Based on 2010 U. S. data, middle aged people (45-54) have the highest rate of suicide (19.6). People age 65 and up have a rate of 14.9. Source: Massachusetts Coalition for Suicide Prevention

## Jon Mattleman, Director of Youth Services in Needham, says:

Asking someone directly about suicidal intent lowers anxiety, opens up communication and lowers the risk of an impulsive act.

Most suicidal people communicate their intent sometime during the week preceding their attempt.

Suicide is the most preventable kind of death, and almost any positive action may save a life.

# As Newton responds to suicides, Needham offers answers

By Wei-Huan Chen

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Most of the parents arrive early and sit quietly in the neatly arranged rows of chairs in a room in the basement floor of Needham Town Hall.

It's not long before Needham Youth Services Director Jon Mattleman comes to the front of the room. He hands out sheets of paper that say "People who commit suicide..." and tells them to write anything that comes to mind. He shuffles the responses in a brown paper bag, then tells the group to take turns reading them out loud.

People who commit suicide "have lost hope," one said. "Don't trust their parents," said another.

Others said:

"Believe they are eliminating a problem."

"Are looking for a short-term solution."

"Are selfish."

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# SUICIDE

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"Don't realize the impact they have on the ones they leave behind."

What drives a young person to commit suicide, and what can we do about it? Parents, peers and teachers have been grasping for an answer in the neighboring town of Newton, where three teens took their own lives in the same academic year.

But it's also a question that Needham—where four youths took their own lives from 2004 to 2006—believes it has taken large strides to answer over the past seven years.

As the Newton community mobilizes in the wake of Newton South junior Roe Grutman's death on Feb. 6, students and staff in

Needham believe that this town's programs, classes, resources and organizations can serve as a source of inspiration, if not something to model.

"At Needham High School, we've seen a change in culture," said Mattleman at the twice-a-year program, a suicide prevention training seminar called "Question, Persuade, Refer," held on a recent Tuesday evening.

Prior to the spate of suicides in Needham, students were afraid to speak up about suicide, especially when it came to telling an adult about a friend they were concerned about, said Mattleman. Now, students feel more open to talk about suicide, either as a preventative measure or as a way to show to their peers that they aren't the only ones who struggle with depression or suicidal thoughts.

Although QPR programs have existed in many communities, including Newton, it is only one of the many ways the town brings a dialogue on suicide out into the open.

Needham High School's Own Your Peace/Piece Week embodies one strategy that students have taken following the town's wave of suicides—to emphasize the positive, rather than the negative.

In a town known for its high academic achievements—parents in Newton have pointed to a similar culture of high achievement as a contributing factor to teen depression and suicide—members of the Own Your Peace/Piece Coalition aim to remind their peers that it's okay to feel like their head is under the water, and that there are ways to get the support, emotional or otherwise, needed.

"I've had those feelings a lot. I struggled with perfectionism. I felt like I always needed to do the best job I could do at everything," said senior Nathan Rosin, an organizer for Own Your Peace/Piece.

Rosin, like many of his

peers, considers himself a high-achieving student. He takes AP Courses and is involved in countless extracurricular activities. He has been accepted to Columbia University, among others. His awards include the 2014 Presidential Scholars Program.

Volunteering with Own Your Peace/Piece has allowed Rosin to stay motivated without feeling the pressure cave in.

"It's the only thing I do that I don't get stressed about," he said. "I've been lucky enough to learn that others feel the same way," he said of that feeling of caving pressure.

The Own Your Peace/Piece week, which took place in the final week of March, began with a student-produced video that asked students to say who they are, what makes them unique and how they support and care for themselves.

"We at Needham High School embrace a culture of talking, caring and taking action," one student said in the video.

When asked how they care for themselves, one said, "Speaking out and sharing my stories." Another said

she coped with her feelings through art. Another: "I support myself by occasionally favoriting my own Instagrams."

On Make a Statement Day, students wrote statements—personal, political, or not—on T-shirts and wore them to school. Some included facts and statements about teen mental health and depression.

One event, the Speak Out Assembly, has grown in popularity over the years. It is a group of students telling stories of struggles with suicide and depression. The event, which was not open to the public or even parents, started with a handful of participants in its inception and now packs the school's gymnasium.

"Courageous students stood in front of hundreds and hundreds of their peers to share their personal stories and challenges. Their poignant anecdotes about their struggles with emotional and mental health issues, sexual orientation, racism, or learning issues were thoughtful, articulate, and inspiring," said Superintendent Dan Gutekanst in a blog post.

An upcoming sculpture, to

be placed in front of the high school, will take more than 1,000 personal statements as inspiration in an installation dedicated to "owning your peace/piece," a phrase Rosin said symbolizes the importance of valuing who you are.

Yet "there is still a repression of mental health issues and a denial of reality," said Beth Pinals, Youth Director for the Needham Coalition for Suicide Prevention, a townwide group formed after the fourth Needham suicide in 2006.

One out of ten Needham High School students have seriously thought about suicide, and more than 50 Needham High School students have attempted suicide, according to surveys. That's enough to be considered an epidemic, said Mattleman.

That's why it's more important than ever to address mental and emotional health head on, he said.

As Newton forges ahead in its suicide response, student, parent and town-led efforts in Needham could offer valuable answers.

"We are a community of survivors," said Pinals.

