

GENERIC EVALUATION DESIGN FOR GATEKEEPER TRAINING

Philip Rodgers, PhD
210 West Washington Square, Mezz. #19
Philadelphia, PA 19106
Voice: 215-238-0407; Fax: 215-238-0408; Email: prodgers@afsp.org

Note: This represents one of many possible types of evaluation designs for assessing the effectiveness of gatekeeper training programs. Therefore, the methods proposed here can be considered flexible with two firm exceptions: to rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of gatekeeper training programs there must be a control group and actual help-seeking behaviors, not just knowledge and attitudes, must be measured. This is also a brief prospectus; specific details would have to be included, depending upon the particular setting, resources, etc., before it could be considered a complete evaluation proposal.

Introduction

Suicide is a serious problem for adolescents in the United States. In response to this problem, numerous suicide prevention programs have been developed and implemented in schools across the country. One of the most popular types of school-based suicide prevention programming is that of gatekeeper training. While evaluations of gatekeeper training programs have shown improved knowledge about suicide and an increased willingness on the part of participants to intervene with those they think are at risk, they have not adequately measured actual help-seeking behaviors. Until gatekeeper training programs demonstrate increased help-seeking behavior, their effectiveness in decreasing suicide risk will remain in doubt.

Background

Suicide was the third leading cause of death for U.S. residents' ages 15-19 years in 2001 (CDC, 2004). While adolescent suicide has a relatively low base rate (7.9 per 100,000 for 15- to 19-year-old students in 2001), in 2003 16.5% of ninth- to twelfth-grade students in the U.S. reported making a suicide plan and 8.5% reported that they had attempted suicide during the previous year (CDC, 2004). Based upon a high school age population of 16 million, the 8.5% figure suggests that approximately 1.4 million high-school-age students attempted suicide last year.

To address the problem of adolescent suicide, the need for school-based suicide prevention programs was codified in Objective 4.2 of The National Strategy for Suicide Prevention (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 2001), which stated, "By 2005, increase the proportion of school districts and private school associations with evidence-based programs designed to address serious childhood and adolescent distress and prevent suicide" (p. 64). Major categories of school-based suicide prevention programs include awareness campaigns, curriculum modules (Ciffone, 1993), screening (McGuire & Flynn, 2003; Shaffer, Scott, Wilcox, Maslow, Hicks, Lucas & Garfinkel, 2004), and gatekeeper training (Stuart, Waalen & Haelstromm, 2003). Unfortunately, little is known about the ability of these programs to decrease suicide risk (Gould, Greenberg, Velting, and Shaffer, 2003).

Gatekeeper training is a popular type of school-based suicide prevention program (Gould et al., 2003). The purpose of gatekeeper training in school settings is to provide teachers, administrators, staff, and sometimes students with the requisite knowledge and skills to effectively identify students at-risk for suicide, provide a supportive initial response, and obtain appropriate help (Kalafat, 2000). Gatekeeper training programs are usually components of larger, comprehensive suicide risk reduction strategies.

Evaluations of gatekeeper training programs have demonstrated increased knowledge about suicide and attitudes towards help-seeking (Kalafat, 2003; Kalafat & Elias, 1994; Stuart, 2003; Wagner, n.d.). Unfortunately, either these evaluations did not measure help-seeking behavior as an outcome (Kalafat & Elias, 1994; Stuart et al., 2003) or did so unsystematically (Wagner, n.d.). This is a serious

deficit because knowledge and attitudes are not reliable predictors of behavior (Kraus, 1995). Kalafat (2003) acknowledged this deficit, stating:

Changes in knowledge and attitudes do not necessarily translate into behavior. Research needs to be done that provides evidence for the relationship between these proximal outcomes (knowledge and attitudes) and such intermediate behavioral outcomes as increased identification and referral of at-risk youth by school-based adults and students. (p. 1217)

Evaluation of gatekeeper training programs, using methods designed to measure actual help-seeking behaviors, would greatly benefit the field by examining the link between the proximal outcomes of increased knowledge and attitudes with the intermediate outcome of increased help-seeking behavior. If a relationship between gatekeeper training and increased help-seeking behaviors can be demonstrated, theoretical support for the impact of gatekeeper training programs upon decreased suicide risk would be greatly strengthened.

Research Questions

The proposed research would examine the impact of a popular school-based gatekeeper training program upon the help-seeking behaviors of students. Research will be guided by three broad questions:

1. Is knowledge of suicide and attitudes towards help-seeking improved in those who participate in gatekeeper training?
2. Does gatekeeper training increase the number of students who seek help for suicidal ideation or are identified as at-risk for suicide?
3. What is the relationship between knowledge about suicide and attitudes towards help-seeking and subsequent help-seeking behavior?

Methods

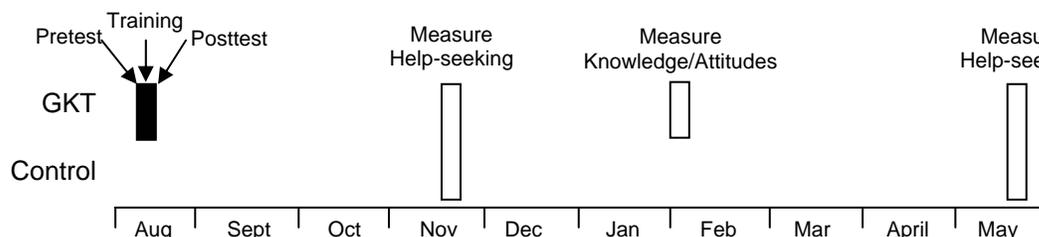
Design

At least two high schools (more are preferable), with no history of substantial suicide prevention programming and matched on relevant demographic criteria (ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and locale [urban, suburban, and rural]), will be randomly assigned to either the gatekeeper training or control conditions.

Measurement

Questionnaires will be created to measure (1) participant knowledge about suicide and attitudes towards help-seeking prior to training (pretest), immediately following training (posttest), and at six months; and, (2) help-seeking behaviors at three and nine months.

Figure 1: Data Collection for Gatekeeper Training (GKT) and Control Schools



Knowledge and attitude questionnaire. This questionnaire will assess gatekeeper knowledge and attitudes prior to training, after training and six months following training. The knowledge domain would include facts about suicide, warning signs of suicide, appropriate resources, and referral mechanisms. Attitude domains would include willingness to intervene with at-risk individuals.

Help-seeking questionnaire. Different versions of the help-seeking behavior questionnaire will be created for adult gatekeepers and students. For the adult gatekeeper version, items will assess the number of encounters they've had with students who sought help or were identified by them as possibly needing help, the circumstances of the identification, and the nature of the referral. For students, items will assess the number of times they've sought help for themselves or others, and the avenues they've employed to do this. Both questionnaires will be administered at three and nine months. The student version can be administered to a sample of students.

Staff and administrative logs. A continuous log system will be created to track the number of students presenting for help to key staff and administrators (counselors, psychologists, and other applicable school personnel).

Analysis

A chi-square test of independence will be used to determine the statistical significance of differences in help-seeking behavior between conditions (GKT and control). A multiple regression analysis will be conducted to assess the impact of participant knowledge upon later help-seeking behavior (Table 1)

Table 1: Research Questions, Data Sources, and Analyses

No.	Question	Data Source	Analysis Type
#1	Is knowledge of suicide and attitudes towards help-seeking improved in those who participate in gatekeeper training? Is this knowledge retained over time?	Gatekeeper trainees. Pre- and posttest questionnaires; 6-month questionnaire to assess retention.	t-test for pre v. post t-test for post v. 6-month follow-up Standardized mean difference effect sizes for all comparisons
#2	Does gatekeeper training increase the number of students who seek help for suicidal ideation or are identified as at-risk for suicide?	GKT and control schools. Source 1: Administrative logs of applicable personnel. Source 2: Student help-seeking questionnaire administered at 3 & 9 months.	Chi-square test of independence.
#3	What is the relationship between knowledge about suicide and attitudes towards help-seeking and subsequent help-seeking behavior?	Gatekeeper trainees. Posttest questionnaires and subsequent administrative logs (number of referrals).	Regression analysis.

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