

Ohio Registry of Effective Practices

LifeAct's Middle School and High School Programs:

Recognizing Teen Depression and Preventing Suicide

School/District/Community Agency: LifeAct

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Available for Program Consultation: Yes

Available for Presentations/Workshops: Yes

General Program Overview:

LifeAct's mission is to prevent youth/teen suicide by educating Northeast Ohio youth to recognize depression and the warning signs of suicide, and to access help for themselves and/or their peers.

Untreated mental illness lies at the root of many barriers to adolescent success and is an underlying cause of suicide. The early detection and treatment of mental illness saves young lives.

LifeAct's evidence-based, in-school programs for middle and high school students, ***Recognizing Teen Depression and Preventing Suicide***, teach adolescents to see themselves as the "first line of defense" in recognizing depression and preventing suicide.

The curricula for both **LifeAct's middle school program** and **LifeAct's high school program** are aligned with the recommendations of the 2012 National Strategy for Suicide Prevention Report by the US Surgeon General and the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention. Trained instructors visit school classrooms to deliver the 2-day, 90-minute programs. Two sessions allow for greater absorption of the programs' lifesaving messages and give students 2 opportunities to interact with a LifeAct instructor.

Both programs use compelling real-life scenarios, role-play, skits, small group activities, video presentations, and interactive Q & A to engage youth in real-time dialogue while learning about the signs of depression, suicide, and strategies for prevention. Students learn that depression, a major risk factor for suicide, is treatable. They also learn how to overcome the stigma of a mental health issue and to ask for help for themselves or others from a caring adult. Students who request additional information or support from a LifeAct instructor during or after the program are immediately connected to either school-based or community professional mental health resources for intervention or treatment.

Last school year (2017-2018), a total of 29,648 students participated either in **LifeAct's middle**

school or high school program at 192 schools. Of those, 2,495 students (8.4% referral rate) asked a LifeAct instructor for additional information or help. These students were immediately connected to professional assistance.

Program metrics include the number of student participants, locations of programs offered and program impact through participant response and referrals.

The quality of **LifeAct's middle school and high school programs** is evaluated by LifeAct's professional staff, its partner University Hospitals' Rainbow Babies & Children's Hospital, the LifeAct Program Review Committee, participating educators, and students who comprise LifeAct's Youth Advisory Board.

Annually, LifeAct reaches over 50,000 Northeast Ohioans through its school programs, events, social messaging and/or online outreach. LifeAct receives minimal public funding and offers its programs without charge.

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Evidence of Effectiveness:

The quality of **LifeAct's middle school and high school programs** is evaluated on an ongoing basis by LifeAct's professional staff, community network partners at University Hospitals and PSI, and the Program Review Committee. Program metrics include the number of student and school participants, locations, and program impact, which is measured by participant response and referrals.

Research shows that engagement in LifeAct programming equips teens to recognize the warning signs of depression and suicide and to seek help when necessary. LifeAct has sponsored two (2) independent research studies which provide evidence-based data demonstrating program efficacy and safety.

1) In 2009, Susan McGrath, Ph.D., a licensed clinical psychologist, performed a scientific evaluation of LifeAct's high school program. Dr. McGrath conducted a paired comparison study of pre- and post-surveys of 1,359 students who participated in the program. The study concluded that students who complete LifeAct's high school program showed statistically significant increases in knowledge regarding the signs and symptoms of depression and suicidal behavior. Additionally, program recipients are statistically more likely to seek professional help for suicidal tendencies for themselves or a friend within three months of program delivery.

2) In 2016, with funding from the Mt. Sinai Health Care Foundation and in partnership with University Hospitals' Department of Child Psychiatry, LifeAct conducted another rigorous examination of its high school program. The study was a blinded, randomized, controlled, scientific evaluation designed to assess the safety and efficacy of the LifeAct program. Luis F. Amunategui, Ph.D. and Irina Bransteter, Ph.D. of University Hospitals' Department of Psychiatry developed testing protocols and methodology.

Eight Northeast Ohio schools were included in the study. A total of 1,247 cases of matched pre- and post-surveys were included in the final analysis, which resulted in three significant outcomes:

- a. No evidence of program harm was detected. There were no adverse events associated with participating in the study or from receiving LifeAct instruction.
- b. Participants' responses to the questionnaire indicated that there were significant gains in knowledge about the signs and symptoms of depression among LifeAct program recipients compared to controls ($p < 0.5$).

- c. There was no increase in reported distress associated with responding to the post-test questionnaire before and after participation in the LifeAct High School program, and there was an unexpected significant decrease in distress associated with responding to the post-test questionnaire ($p < 0.5$).

Further evidence of benefit can also be attributed to the number of students that sought help immediately after program delivery. All 8 schools had youths asking for help from a LifeAct instructor, with a referral rate that ranged from 3.5% to 15.2%. As standard practice, these students were immediately connected to a school-based or community professional mental health resource. Students seeking help after a session is viewed as a positive effect of the program that may mitigate risk for suicide.

Overall, the researchers concluded that the intervention and its outcome evaluation present no more than minimal risk to students and there is significant evidence of a direct benefit. These findings inform educators, practitioners and researchers about the favorable risk-to-benefit ratio of LifeAct's school-based suicide prevention intervention.

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Capacity and Resources:

LifeAct saves teen lives through education. Its core programming, delivered directly to middle school and high school students by professional instructors, has been shown statistically to be effective. Last school year (2017-2018), a total of 29,648 students participated in **LifeAct's middle school or high school program** at 192 schools from 13 counties in Northeast Ohio. Of those, 2,495 students (8.4% referral rate) asked a LifeAct instructor for additional resources or help.

LifeAct's instructors are the programs' most valuable assets and present the biggest challenge to program growth and service expansion. Each instructor has limitations as to the number of schools that he/she can access each day. LifeAct currently employs 5 dedicated instructors and 12 additional part-time instructors through its educational partner PSI, Inc. LifeAct's primary challenge is to develop a program delivery model that retains its effective in-person benefits and is scalable across a greater geographical footprint to reach more students.

In addition to expanding its program service area, LifeAct's long-term plan is to deepen its partnerships with healthcare and academic institutions to ensure that its programs deliver content that is current, accurate and relevant, and that treatment options are available in a timely manner.

Currently, LifeAct offers its programs without charge. LifeAct raises funds for its programs and operating budgets through donations (24%), special events (30%) and foundation/corporation grants (45%). LifeAct receives minimal public funding (< 1%).

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Family and Community Partnerships:

LifeAct partners with PSI, Partners for Success and Innovation, Inc., for additional program delivery. PSI instructors are certified school counselors, psychologists, or other qualified personnel under Ohio School Guidelines. PSI operates throughout the state of Ohio and is expanding LifeAct's geographic footprint.

FrontLine Service is a 24/7 crisis line and professional triage partner for students who identify as needing help. FrontLine's professionals answer calls and texts, practice crisis intervention strategies, and facilitate referral.

University Hospitals' Rainbow Babies & Children's Hospital is LifeAct's partner for research, curriculum review and professional mental health services.

Additional Community partnerships have been established to supplement our curriculum, enhance our service offerings and complete our circle of care. These organizations range from healthcare providers to treatment facilities, local not-for-profits, governmental agencies and other educational providers.

Family and community member engagement is built through outreach efforts and programs designed to complement LifeAct's in-classroom education. Outreach efforts include community education events, school events, and LifeAct's website which features a 24/7 crisis text chat. Family and community engagement is also enhanced through educational and resource content on our website and via social media communications. Additionally, LifeAct retains a Youth Advisory Board. These students provide direct programming feedback and raise awareness of teen depression and suicide among their peers.

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Sustainability Plan:

The in-person model of program delivery has proven to be highly effective and has served LifeAct well for 18 years. In the last four years, the average referral rate reached 8% and program delivery nearly doubled amid expansion to 13 counties. LifeAct's achievements are due in large part to establishing a partnership with another educational service provider – PSI. However, this model has its limitations. Finding, training and funding these dedicated instructors is an increasing challenge. LifeAct needs to leverage every hour of their time, and envisions a blend of “in-person,” electronic, and “leave-behind programming” to offer the benefits of the personal experience and trusting environment with the additional benefit of enabling LifeAct instructors to provide programming in more schools. The potential for more part-time instructors in numerous geographical locations will reduce travel time and expense and facilitate expansion throughout the State.

LifeAct is evaluating multiple platform options for program delivery that will make the programs more relevant to teens, more portable for delivery and training, and interactive – collecting data in real-time while offering teens an opportunity to communicate the way that they are comfortable.

LifeAct has developed significant internal capacity for video production utilizing the Youth Advisory Board and will increase the video content of programming. These videos are not only timely and relevant, but they are preferred by teens, are easily shared, and can be made available 24/7 online.

LifeAct will continue to develop partnerships with healthcare providers in the local communities where programming is delivered (the University Hospitals model).

LifeAct also understands the importance of the family and the community in these complex situations. LifeAct continues to partner with organizations that offer complimentary local services and support, including education for parents, school administrators, teachers, etc.

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