

WALTER JOHNSON HIGH SCHOOL

6400 ROCK SPRING DRIVE
BETHESDA, MD 20814-1991
OFFICE OF THE PRINCIPAL
OFFICE 240-740-6900
FAX 301-571-6986



2/3/2021

Dear Parents/Guardians:

The Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) remains committed to sharing information and resources about mental health topics that could potentially impact students. During the 2017–2018 school year MCPS has reviewed programs and activities that support the physical, social, and psychological well-being of students. A variety of initiatives (e.g. mindfulness, individual and group counseling, wellness initiatives, etc.) are available for students at each school.

We know that the teenage years are marked by a roller-coaster ride of emotions—challenging for teens, their parents/guardians, and educators. It is easy to misread depression as normal adolescent turmoil; however, depression (which is one of the most common mental illness) appears to be occurring at a much earlier age than before. The prevalence of depression among adolescents increased from 8 percent in 2007 to 13.3 percent in 2017 (*2017 National Survey on Drug Use and Health*). Suicide also is the second leading cause of death among 11–18 year old youth in the United States (*Centers for Disease Control, 2018*).

To proactively address this issue, MCPS is enhancing its suicide prevention curriculum using the Signs of Suicide® (SOS®) Prevention Program. SOS® is a youth suicide prevention program that has demonstrated an improvement in students' knowledge and adaptive attitudes towards suicide risk and depression, as well as a reduction in actual suicide attempts. Listed on the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices, SOS® showed a reduction in self-reported suicide attempts by 40 to 64 percent in randomized control studies (*Aseltine, et al., 2007; Schilling, et al., 2016*).

Our goals for participating in this program are straightforward:

- To help students understand that depression is a treatable illness,
- To explain that suicide is a preventable tragedy that often occurs as a result of untreated depression,
- To provide students with the education and skills to recognize the signs of serious depression and potential suicidality in a friend, and
- To impress upon teens that they can help themselves or a friend by taking the simple step of talking to a responsible, trusted adult about their concerns.

All students in Grades 6 through 12 will participate in a class lesson, including video clips and discussion, during Homeroom periods. After the lesson, students will fill out a form to let the school's student well-being team know if they would like to talk to someone to get help for themselves or a friend. SOS will be implemented between February 9, 2021 and March 9, 2021. Students also will receive handouts that include a student newsletter and a list of school, local, and national resources that are available to support mental health needs.

Please see the links to recorded presentations regarding youth suicide prevention and parent resources.

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1TMw56liGRrI0fyIzMU-fUBGLg-WjRAYa-AQomsSi9DA/edit?usp=sharing>

Additionally, more resources for parents and students are available on the Walter Johnson website as well as the WJ Counseling Resources Site.

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<https://sites.google.com/mcpsmd.net/WJ-Counseling>

If you have any questions or concerns about this program, please do not hesitate to contact your student's school counselor.

Sincerely,
Jennifer Baker
Principal of Walter Johnson HS