



**DNRonline.com**  
HARRISONBURG, VIRGINIA

*Daily News-Record*

currently  
 **50°F**  
Clear

tomorrow  
 High **67°F**  
Low **40°F**

forecast provided by **wunderground.com**

[HOME](#) | [NEWS](#) | [OPINION](#) | [SPORTS](#) | [FEATURES](#) | [OBITUARIES](#) | [CLASSIFIEDS](#) | [SUBSCRIBE](#) | [SERVICES](#)

Welcome to the DNR Archives!

[Return to Search](#) | [Home](#)



Search...  
Archives

## ARCHIVE NEWS ARTICLE

[Back to Search Results](#) | [Printer Friendly Version](#)

### Daily News-Record (Harrisonburg, VA)

January 28, 2012

Section: News-Local

## Choosing Life

EMILY SHARRER

HARRISONBURG - Over the past several decades, the suicide rate among America's youths has tripled, making it one of the leading causes of death in college-aged students, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

This increase in suicides or suicidal thoughts has brought heightened public awareness to warning signs of stressed, depressed or potentially suicidal students - and the importance of reporting them.

A spring 2011 American College Health Association National College Health Assessment that surveyed nearly 106,000 college students found that in the 12 months prior to the survey, 6.4 percent of students had "seriously considered suicide" and 1.1 percent had attempted suicide.

Almost 13 percent of students responding to the survey said they had considered suicide before the previous year, and 6.5 percent had attempted it.

Additionally, 45 percent of students "felt things were hopeless" and 31 percent "felt so depressed that it was difficult to function."

Over the past five years, four students attending local colleges have committed suicide - three at James Madison University and one from Bridgewater College, according to school officials. No suicides were reported for Eastern Mennonite University during that time frame.

"We're trying to develop support systems," said Jim McConnel, JMU's dean of students and chairman of the university's behavioral assessment team that receives and assesses tips about students.

While colleges and universities have created more programs to deal with troubled students in recent years, one of the wild cards is when, or if, parents should become involved in the treatment process.

Last month, Virginia Tech signed an agreement with the family of a student who committed suicide. The agreement requires the university to notify parents if their child is potentially suicidal, unless the school documents a good reason not to do so.

The agreement goes beyond state law, which says parents will be notified if a child could "cause serious physical harm to himself or others." But the law only applies to underage students in counseling services.

In the Tech case, the student's parents say they were never told their son had threatened suicide. The student's father contends that had he known, he might have been able to prevent his son from taking his life.

At area colleges, administrators say that many times in such situations it is better to err on the side of divulging too much information, rather than not providing enough.

Advertisement

Advertisement

Advertisement

Advertisement

### What's Done Locally?

Governing boards of higher education institutions in Virginia are required to develop policies to advise students, faculty and staff about handling suicidal students.

Randy Hook, director of counseling services at Bridgewater College, said it's important to remember that suicidal students are often not the ones seeking counseling services.

"A lot of times, individuals who complete a suicide, upwards of 70 to 80 percent [of them], are not in treatment at the time," said Hook, who said student reporting is a valuable tool, especially because the ability of counselors to share such information is often limited by confidentiality restrictions.

Representatives of various campus departments, such as counseling, residence life, judicial affairs and the health center, serve on JMU's behavioral team and decide the best way to deal with the report.

Action may include police checkups, counseling recommendations and parental notification.

McConnel said reports to the behavioral team range from serious to odd - everything from threats of suicide to an outburst in a dining hall.

"We've got some good checks and balances of expertise," said McConnel, who said he is unaware of any parental complaints about the assessment team's handling of incidents. "We would err on the side of notifying too many people as opposed to keeping something to ourselves. ... I would much rather get the parent involved [and] run the risk of oversharing, as opposed to worrying about a privacy act."

Hook agreed, saying in most cases parents can help students get the support and services they need. But exceptions to the rule do exist.

"It's one of those issues that it's not cut and dried; it's not black and white, unfortunately," he said.

Hook said Bridgewater College is careful not to involve parents who could be part of the problem.

"To turn around and notify a parent who has been a primary abuser, you can see why that would be contrary [to progress]," Hook said. "We as providers have to say, 'How do we balance what's in the best interest of the student, what's important for the parents to know and, ultimately, the safety of the student and the academic community as a whole?'"

Contact Emily Sharrer at 574-6286 or [esharrer@dnonline.com](mailto:esharrer@dnonline.com)

### Where To Get Help

Students seeking treatment for suicidal thoughts or who would like to report somebody that may be suicidal can call their prospective university's counseling services office.

Bridgewater College:828-5692

Eastern Mennonite University:432-4317

James Madison University:568-6552

Students reported as suicide risks are often referred to counseling services, according to local college administrators. Many administrators say following up on tips about students with suicidal tendencies and deciding when to notify parents are key steps in the process of dealing with the problem. (Photo Illustration by Nikki Fox / DN-R)

IMG><http://www.dnonline.com/img/uploads/thumbnails/4f238229-7410-4c8b-955b-3d9f0a4809bc.jpg>

/IMG>

*Copyright (c) 2012, Byrd Newspapers, All Rights Reserved.*