

# **THE POWER OF CHOICE**

## **TEACHING GUIDE**

For Use With  
Program 10

# **DEPRESSION AND SUICIDE**

**Discussion Questions**

**Group Activities**

**Writing Assignments**

**Program Background**

**Licensing Agreement  
including  
Public Performance Rights**

**S**uicide is the number two cause of death for Americans in the 15 - 24 age range. One of every seven teenagers acknowledges having considered or attempted suicide, and almost two-thirds admit that it would be difficult for them to get help for a friend who was talking about it.

This program, which was videotaped in two high schools still reverberating from recent suicides, presents a clear minded look at *what to do if you or someone you care about is at risk*. Host Michael Pritchard and teens in Phoenix, Arizona and South Bend, Indiana identify the signs frequently exhibited by people who are at risk for suicide and discuss the recommended procedures for intervening. In addition, they examine ways of coping with the depression and stress that often leads to suicide, and encourage people to ask for help when they feel themselves at risk. As one student emphatically puts it, "Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem."

## EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES

\_ To sensitize young people to some of the warning signs of suicide.

\_ To provide some guidelines for how to respond to a potential suicide victim.

\_ To suggest ways of getting help when they, or someone they care about, is at risk.

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## HOW TO USE THIS VIDEO

*Use in classrooms, libraries, youth service agencies, youth groups, or show it to your kids at home. Ideal for parents, too.*

**THE POWER OF CHOICE**<sup>®</sup> is an entertaining and thought provoking video series designed to help you empower your young people to make good choices in their lives. You can greatly enhance the effectiveness of this video by following it up with group discussions, writing assignments, and learning activities. This guide is intended to help you in your efforts.

We recommend that, before showing the video, you ask a few questions to start the kids thinking about the issues treated in the program. You'll find some useful questions on page 6. Also, you should expect that your students will have a lot to talk about after viewing the video, so it's a good idea to allow ample time.

While this discussion guide may appear to be written for classroom teachers, any group leader or parent will find it a useful tool for getting the most out of this video program.

## PROGRAM CONTENT

COMEDY: The boy who never talked until he got a bad hot dog. The suicidal girl who went on a shopping spree. Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem.

INTRODUCTION: Young people often lack the life experience to know that everything changes, nothing stays the same.

PRITCHARD asks, what do you do to get through hard times? Answers include yelling at a sister and taking the time to cry. How would your friends know if you are hurting, asks Pritchard. One girl says they wouldn't because she always puts on a facade. A boy responds that he is outgoing, and if depressed, people would notice the change in him. Another boy says that he would act all the merrier, and only his best friends would know how he was feeling.

PRITCHARD asks, have you ever been unable to ask for help when you were hurting? A girl says that friends come to her for help all the time, but when she needed support, no one was available. A boy speaks of cheering his sister up when their father had a heart attack, but ignoring his own emotions until finally he broke down and cried. It's good to be there for others, he concludes, but you have to be able to unload your own feelings, too.

A girl whose parents divorced says "that's when you have to be your own best friend." A girl in Phoenix tells of coming back to school after being in a mental hospital for attempting suicide, and deciding to tell people honestly where she had been. She knew who her friends were by the way they reacted.

HYPOTHETICAL QUESTION: If a friend swore you to secrecy and then spoke of wanting to commit suicide, would you keep the secret? One girl reports that when that happened to her she told the friend that she cared too much about her to keep the secret. Instead, she helped her get help. Another girl counters that you should keep the secret because you promised. A boy challenges her by asking, "would you rather break a promise or a

life?" A girl remarks that you need to turn to someone who can help you in this situation.

HYPOTHETICAL QUESTION: What do you do if a suicidal friend calls to say goodbye? Responses include: let them vent their feelings, suggest some options, help them feel better about themselves, and try to restore their perspective. One girl said that she let her friend pour out all her problems and then they went out together that evening. To help people feel better about themselves a girl suggests letting them know you are their friend and saying "I love you." One girl who had been unable to talk to anyone about her problems thought about suicide, but realized she loved herself too much to do that.

Another girl suffered from depression after spending painful months in a hospital recovering from an accident. Depression can grab a person, she explains, and one has to fight to push it away and make progress. She knew she wanted to make a contribution to society and she couldn't do that being dead.

PRITCHARD concludes that as long as you choose life, there's a future.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### *Question to ask before showing the video.*

1. If a friend swore you to secrecy and then told you he or she was thinking about committing suicide, would you keep it a secret or tell someone? Explain. Who might you tell?

**Tip:** Always tell someone. It's never ok to keep this "deadly secret."

### *Questions to ask after showing the video.*

2. What was most meaningful to you in this program? Why?
3. What do you do to get through hard times?
4. Is it better to let friends know when you're depressed, or to keep it to yourself?
5. What emotional risks might you take in opening up to friends about your hard times? What risks do you take when you don't let anyone know?
6. One girl in the program remarks that at such times "you have to be your own best friend." What does that mean and how do you do it?
7. Another girl in the program said that when people tell others that they're thinking about suicide, they're really calling out for help. Do you think that's true?

8. What do you do if a friend calls to say that he or she is about to commit suicide and just wants to say goodbye?
9. If a suicidal friend turned to you for help, would you know what to do? Would you try to get advice? Where would you go for advice?
10. One boy remarks that suicidal people need to have their egos built up. What does he mean by this, and do you agree?
11. What can you do to help a friend feel better about him or herself?
12. One girl describes depression as being like another person you have to fight with. Have any of you experienced a depression of this kind, and how did you deal with it?
13. This same girl speaks about several factors that kept her from attempting suicide: her family's love, her love for herself, her intention to do good things for the world. Which do you think was most important in giving her the will to keep on living?
14. How do you think a suicide affects the family and friends who are left behind?
15. A larger proportion of teenagers attempt or commit suicide than do members of any other age group. Why do you suppose this is so?
16. What suicide prevention services are available in your community?

## WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Interview someone who works for a crisis hotline. Perhaps you can even spend some time listening in on calls. Write a report describing what this person's work is like and what you've learned about crisis intervention.
2. Write a description of the most painful period of your life. Describe the positive things that occurred to give you some perspective on the pain you felt.
3. Write a short dramatic scene about someone who is depressed and under stress at school. Make sure that this character's actions reveal the inner turmoil. Have another character recognize what is happening and make an effort to help the depressed individual.
4. Research the warning signals that people put out when they are depressed and thinking about suicide. Share your findings with the group in the form of an oral report.
5. Think of someone you really care about, and imagine this person is depressed and at risk for suicide. He or she is also a thousand miles away and the only way you can communicate is by letter. Write a letter that will be meaningful and helpful to this person.



## GROUP ACTIVITIES

1. Invite a speaker from your local suicide prevention center to come to your class and conduct a workshop on crisis intervention and suicide prevention.
2. Role-play a telephone conversation in which a suicidal person calls a friend to say goodbye. The friend's job is, of course, to prevent the suicide. End the conversation at the point when the friend feels that the suicide attempt will probably not occur. In planning the dialogue, decide who the two people are, what their relationship is, and the circumstances have made the caller suicidal. Decide, also, whether that person's true objective is to say goodbye to a friend or to call out for help. In critiquing the role-play afterwards, discuss whether the dialogue was realistic, the resolution believable, and the friend's strategy advisable.
3. Sometimes, when a teenager commits suicide, the event triggers more suicides in the same community. If someone in your school killed himself, what action plan could you come up with to respond to this situation and prevent related injuries and deaths?

## ABOUT MICHAEL PRITCHARD

Michael Pritchard is a juvenile probation officer turned comedian/youth counselor/public speaker. After his college graduation in 1973, Mike went to work for the St. Louis Police Department and then relocated to San Francisco's juvenile hall. In his years of working with young offenders, Mike discovered that his penchant for humor served as a powerful counseling tool, enabling him to break down communication barriers and help a lot of troubled kids turn their lives around. As Mike is fond of saying, ***"the shortest distance between any two people is a good laugh."*** Mike's unusual combination of talents gained him recognition as California's "Probation Officer of the Year" the same year that he won the San Francisco International Comedy Competition.

Whether he's being funny or serious, Mike's big love is talking with kids about the choices they make in their lives. He teaches young people that they have the power of choice, that they are responsible for the choices they make, and that they owe it to themselves to choose the best.



"The shortest distance between two people is a good laugh."

## HOW THIS PROGRAM WAS PRODUCED

***THE POWER OF CHOICE*** began as a one-hour TV special for PBS. Our aim was to create a show for teenagers that would be both entertaining and educationally useful. With this goal in mind, we took San Francisco comedian/ youth counselor Michael Pritchard and a TV production crew to four high schools across the U.S. to talk with kids about how they make choices in life.

At each school Mike entertained a student assembly with comedy about growing up. Then, he led small groups of students in highly productive problem-solving sessions. These groups were selected by the schools before we arrived (we asked for a representative mix of students). The kids we got were amazingly candid. They revealed deeply personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences, and shared useful solutions and insights. We captured all this on videotape using three cameras, and edited the material down to a one-hour show.

When the program aired on PBS, educators and broadcasters expressed enthusiasm for having it made into a series. So, we immediately began work on eleven new half-hour programs exploring a whole range of issues important to teens. To develop the content, we spent one full semester at schools around the San Francisco Bay Area meeting with students and teachers. Following that, we took Mike and our production crew on a nine-week, 21 state tour of high schools throughout the U.S. (see list).

We returned with more than 100 hours of material, and spent five months editing the eleven new programs. The series was televised on PBS and is used in classrooms, libraries, and youth groups throughout the U.S. and other countries.

## LOCATIONS

*THE POWER OF CHOICE* was shot at the following high schools:

**San Francisco, Calif.**

Lowell H.S.

**Denver, Colorado**

West H.S.

**Biloxi, Mississippi**

Biloxi H.S.

**New York City**

Murry Bergtraum H.S.  
for Business Careers

**San Rafael, Calif.**

San Rafael H.S.

**Los Angeles, Calif.**

Venice H.S.

**Phoenix, Arizona**

Washington H.S.

**Albuquerque, N.M.**

West Mesa H.S.

**Dallas, Texas**

Woodrow Wilson H.S.

**Wichita, Kansas**

Southeast H.S.

**St. Louis, Missouri**

St. Thomas Aquinas/ Mercy  
H.S.

**Nashville, Tennessee**

McGavock H.S.

**Atlanta, Georgia**

Northside H.S.

**Gainesville, Florida**

Buchholz H.S.

**Columbia, S.C**

Dreher H.S.

**Washington, D.C.**

School Without Walls

**Philadelphia, Penn.**

George Washington Carver  
H.S. for Engineering &  
Science

**Wayne, New Jersey**

Wayne Hills Senior H.S.

**Brooklyn, New York**

Edward. R. Murrow H.S.

**Boston, Mass.**

Newton North H.S.

**Cleveland, Ohio**

Glenville H.S.

**Detroit, Michigan**

Cass Technical H.S.

**South Bend, Indiana**

La Salle H.S.

**Chicago, Illinois**

Senn Metro Academy

**Madison, Wisconsin**

West H.S.

**Bloomington, Minn.**

Thomas Jefferson H.S.

**Fremont, Calif.**

Irvington H.S.

## LICENSE AGREEMENT

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# THE POWER OF CHOICE

## Program Titles

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- 1: THE POWER OF CHOICE
- 2: ACTING ON YOUR VALUES
- 3: SELF-ESTEEM
- 4: COPING WITH PRESSURES
- 5: DRUGS & ALCOHOL - Part 1
- 6: DRUGS & ALCOHOL - Part 2
- 7: DRINKING & DRIVING
- 8: SEX
- 9: FRIENDSHIP & DATING
- 10: DEPRESSION & SUICIDE
- 11: COMMUNICATING with PARENTS
- 12: RAISING YOUR PARENTS