

# 5 NUMBERS

YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN OTTAWA

## Frontline Reflections

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### Breaking the Code: how seeking help can save lives

Health promotion campaigns often highlight the negative impacts of a harmful behaviour, and then provide information about healthier alternatives. It's an approach that assumes the audience is capable of changing habits and behaviours, and it works best with things that are fairly easy to change, like wearing seat belts. Unfortunately, this approach can also have the opposite effect, with studies showing that youth who feel suicidal are less likely to seek help, and experience greater distress after being exposed to this type of campaign. To support suicide prevention planning, the Province of Manitoba developed [guidelines](#) that outline the harms of focusing on shock and trauma, and discuss how to constructively address suicide among youth. A similar theme of caution about fear-based messaging comes out in the Canadian Association of Suicide Prevention's [guidelines](#) about how to report about suicide in the media.

While there is little evidence that negative messaging promotes behaviour change with regards to suicide, there is consensus that suicide prevention efforts should focus on identifying people who are at-risk, and promoting help-seeking. Local experts agree with these recommendations. In 2015, 13% of high school students seriously considered suicide in Ottawa, and of these, 71% didn't know where to turn. To address this, in 2013 a cross-sectoral group of organizations set-out to identify programs that could be implemented to reach and engage these vulnerable youth. These organizations came together through the Community Suicide Prevention Network (CSPN) that lead the process. The CSPN consulted the [Suicide Prevention Resource Center \(SPRC\)](#) and [SAMHSA's National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices \(NREPP\)](#). Both websites listed a program called Sources of Strength as a promising practice, and in 2014 Ottawa joined cities throughout the United States and Australia in implementing the program. It is currently being offered in 23 local high schools. While more research is required to better understand Sources of Strength, there is promising evidence that it can be a powerful tool to increase help-seeking behaviours.



One of the ways to promote help-seeking is by focusing on relationships. Youth who have suicidal thoughts tend gravitate to people who have had similar life experiences, so they often engage with peers who have also experienced suicidal thoughts and actions. This can lead to a situation where suicide can be seen as a common-place response to crisis. [The Sources of Strength](#) program aims to counteract this normalization of suicide. It is a universal suicide prevention program that brings adult and youth leaders together to plan outreach activities in schools with the aims of changing norms about seeking help; promoting resiliency; building relationships between youth and adults; and shifting the perception that suicide is a normal response to crisis.

The program is based on the theory that youth become less vulnerable to suicide when they are integrated within deep and high quality relationships that promote positive norms, such as help-seeking. This is important for a few reasons: one is that relationships play a vital role in helping us navigate choices- young people's decisions are highly influenced by the norms within their social groups- another is that relationships with positive people foster a sense of well-being, and create opportunities for loved ones to notice vulnerability and make connections to services when needed.

In sharing how positive relationships impacted her wellbeing, [Jessica Critch](#), a student leader in the Sources of Strength program at the Youville Centre, stated "before, I didn't talk to anybody. I was really, really quiet. Since I've joined the [Sources of Strength] group, it's brought me out. It helps me be a better me."

To understand the effectiveness of the program, Wyman et. al., evaluated how Sources of Strength impacted the breadth and quality of youth relationships with trusted adults. They also looked at how willing peer leaders would be, to get adult help when their peers requested secrecy about their suicidal feelings.

For this study, the Sources of Strength peer leaders worked with adult advisors to develop [3 or 4 messaging campaigns](#). These carefully crafted campaigns consisted of class presentations where youth leaders talked about their strengths, and named trusted adults. Adults advisors were present during these sessions to ensure all components were included in the youth's messaging. Since research shows that health promotion activities are enhanced when there are opportunities for audience participation, peer leaders engaged student participants to do the same.

What they found was promising. Sources of Strength peer leaders were more likely to believe that adults were available to help them in the school. They were more likely to connect their peers with suicidal thoughts to adults, they had fewer negative coping mechanisms, and were more engaged within their schools. What's more, youth who were suicidal experienced the biggest benefit, and as for the youth who were already resilient when they came into their peer leader roles: they were more likely to refer peers to adults than before the program.

Petrova et. al also evaluated the impact of Sources of Strength and showed that after three months, it lead to changes within the whole school population. The greatest shift was in students' perception that there were adults in the school that they could turn to for support. Overall, there was greater acceptance that asking for help was a good thing. Within the whole school population, the students who had the most positive changes were those who had suicidal feelings or thoughts.

These results are encouraging considering that currently, most youth only disclose their suicidal thoughts to peers. While more research is needed to build on the studies that only looked at the short term, Sources of Strength offers a promising practice for suicidal youth- known to have fewer deep ties to supportive adults - to learn that it's ok to ask for help, and to be exposed to opportunities to build resilience.

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