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# An OT-Led Suicide Prevention Program for Middle School-Aged Youth

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**Doctor of Occupational Therapy Program**



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## Background

- The suicide rate for youth has tripled from 2007 to 2017, making suicide the second leading cause of death for those aged 10-24 (Curtis, 2019)
- Middle school students face challenges due to puberty, environmental transition, bullying, social media usage, mental health diagnoses, and COVID-19 (Choi, 2012; Kim & Leventhal, 2008; Manzar, et al., 2021; Mendle, et al., 2007).
- Previous studies state that key factors in suicide prevention include improving quality of life through education, increased independence, social support, and meaningful hobbies (Cooper & Berwick, 2001; Joe & Bryant, 2007; Pinfold et al., 2003; WHO, 2004 )
- Students are more likely to utilize mental health services offered in schools (National Association of School Psychologists, 2021)
- School OT practitioners focus on improving student success within the classroom under IDEA (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2016) but 1 in 10 children under 18 have a mental health challenge severe enough to impact their achievement in school (Association for Children's Mental Health, 2021) demonstrating a need to address mental health

## Problem

Youth who are experiencing death by suicide continue to increase and the lack of mental health education and prevention work is contributing to this crisis (Malti & Noam, 2009). A review of the current suicide prevention programs in use demonstrates a focus on high school and college students, missing the younger adolescent population. Programs currently utilize awareness tactics, such as education about the current suicide statistics, and having conversations about how to create a safe place to share experiences (Active Minds, 2021; AFSP, 2022).

## Purpose

**The purpose of this project is to create an occupation-based suicide prevention program dedicated to educating middle school-aged children on mental health and equipping them with occupations that enhance connection, coping skills, and living a purposeful life. This project will also work toward solidifying occupational therapy's role in youth suicide prevention.**

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## Needs Assessment

- Informal interviews with various staff members from K-8 school and community prevention program that interact with middle school students
- Observations of students in class and during breaks completed

### Challenges Reported/Observed in the past year

Increased disruptive behavior
Decreased ability to self-regulate
Increased frustration with school
Decreased participation

- Review of Yale School Climate Walkthrough (2022) and Youth Truth (2021) survey data from participating 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade students



### Theoretical frameworks:

- Person-Environment-Occupation-Performance (PEOP) model
- The Recovery Model



PEOP Model. (2010) Research Gate.

## Brighter Days Collective Program

**Vision:** Transform middle school environments to foster emotional wellness through doing.

**Mission:** Utilize evidence-based OT interventions to improve mental wellbeing and decrease adolescent suicide rates

### General Program Goals

- Propose modifications for the school environment to support mental health improvement and suicide prevention
- Increase student confidence in their ability to recognize body cues that could signify distress
- Encourage the school to foster greater connection as well as available resources within the community
- Increase students' reported feelings of connection and participation in meaningful occupations
- Increase student ability to utilize coping tools and implement routines to increase independence
- Decrease negative stigmatizations surrounding suicide and mental health within the middle school environment

### Program Components

- Completed program manual
- Introductory presentation to be delivered to staff
- Proposed 14 one-hour sessions to be completed in seven weeks
- Suggested school-wide environmental modifications to support sessions
- Staff resources including mental health certification sites and reading materials to create a supportive classroom
- Pre-post self-assessment as well as exit survey for program evaluation

## Initial Evaluation

**100%** of professionals who participated in dissemination stated that the Brighter Days Collective program addresses appropriate aspects of youth mental health and suicide prevention.

**100%** of professionals who participated in dissemination stated that the Brighter Days Collective is an appropriate school-wide program.

The most frequently reported perceived barrier was "obtaining buy-in from schools"

## Future Directions

- The program will be piloted within a summer camp
- Plan to be presented at OT and/or other professional conferences

Scan the QR code to access the program manual



Scan the QR code to access references

