



MIDDLE & ELEMENTARY SCHOOL SUICIDE PREVENTION

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WHO WE ARE



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WHAT WE'LL COVER

THE CURRENT STATE OF THE WORLD & HOW IT AFFECTS YOU/ YOUR STUDENTS

SUICIDE RISK IN ELEMENTARY & MIDDLE SCHOOL

HOW SHELTER IN PLACE MAY INCREASE RISK

HOW TO HELP KIDS COPE

WHAT MAKES THE PANDEMIC CHALLENGING?

We've never had an experience like this before

There's no clear end in sight

We've lost identified roles

We are surrounded by stories of loss

WHY LOSS IS HARD TO DEAL WITH

- We want to focus on living, not dying
- There's so much of it - where do you start?
- Our losses don't seem as significant as a lot of others
- Loss & its aftermath create stress in our lives

STRESS HAPPENS WHEN...

we perceive we have to do something beyond our capacity or skill

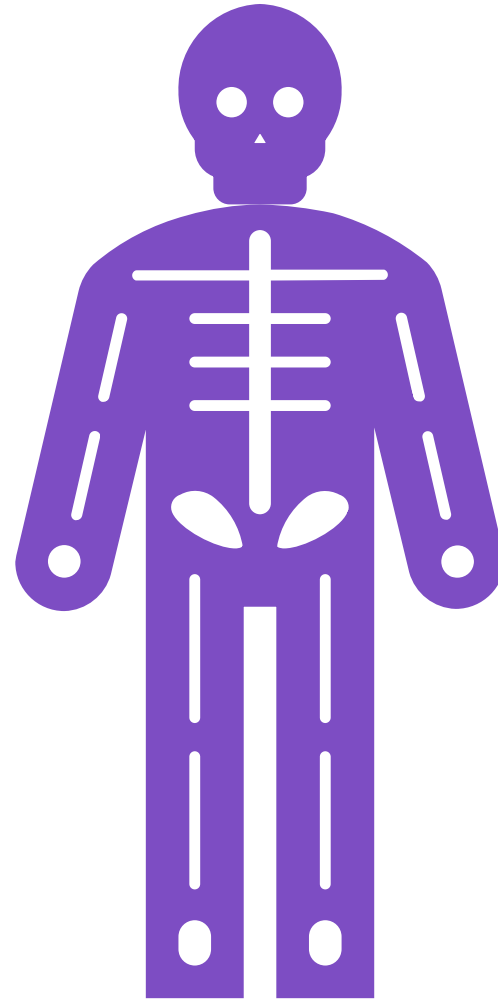
The lizard part of our brain gets activated. So we go into fight/ flight/ flee mode

Our thinking brain gets flooded with stress hormones and it's harder to use logic and good problem solving

We can make decisions based on emotions rather than facts

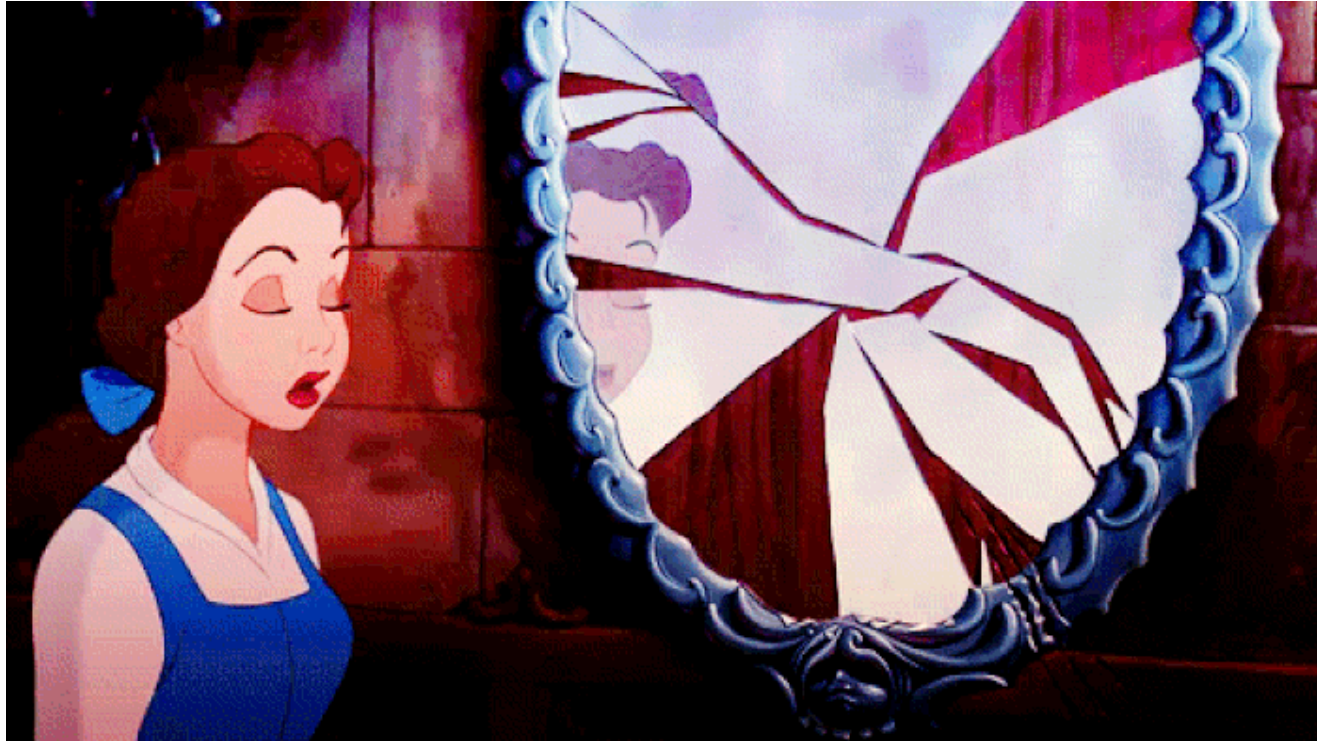
TWO KINDS OF STRESS

- Acute stress. This is short-term stress that goes away quickly.
- Chronic stress. This is stress that lasts for a longer period of time.



WHY THE COVID PANDEMIC IS POTENTIALLY A CHRONIC STRESSOR

- We don't understand what it is or why it happened
- There's uncertainty about what to do to stop it
- It's created a climate of worry for a lot of people
- There have been a lot of practical ramifications
(economical, in health care system, education) that have turned life as we knew it upside down
- People have a wide range of emotions so we may not be on the same page, even in our families
- We don't have our usual outlets for support or coping



**WHERE ARE
YOU IN ALL
THIS??**

STRESSES EDUCATORS LIKE YOU HAVE TOLD US THEY ARE FACING...

- Online teaching
- Handling disappointment, cancelled events
- Worrying about loss of control during “opening-up” phase
- Keeping youth with mental illness safe
- Drinking/ eating/ unhelpful coping
- Burn-out from WFH and Homeschooling
- What will the next school year bring?

POLL #1A

What are your potential stressors for the next school year?

- Personal Safety
- Continued schedule disruption
- How prepared/ unprepared students will be
- What if someone in the school gets COVID
- More students with economic problems
- Other

POLL #1B

What do you think the potential stressors will be for your students?

- Concerns about Personal Safety
- Being unprepared
- Worries: what if someone in the school gets COVID
- Economic problems in family
- Possible deaths from COVID
- Other

SUICIDE RISK: STRESS AT A MORE INTENSE LEVEL



- Suicide is a frequent topic in media
- Attempt rate increased 200% for 10-14 yr old girls (1999-2014)
- Decreasing age of puberty increases risk
- Younger kids use social media
- Students may be impacted by suicide of parent, sibling or peer
- Protective factors can be encouraged early

ELEMENTARY & MIDDLE SCHOOL CONCERNS



THE DATA:

5-11 Years Compared To Early Adolescence 12-14 Years

- Rate = .17/ 100,000
(12-14=5.18/ 100,000)
- Most common diagnosis ADD/ ADHD
(adolescence= depression)
- Less likely to leave a note
- Relationship problems with family & friends
- Exposure less likely as a risk factor
- Less cognitive ability to plan and carry out a fatal suicide plan



EQUALLY AS
LIKELY TO
TELL
SOMEONE
ELSE
(29% V.30%)

WHY PREVENTION IN SCHOOLS IS IMPORTANT

Youth spend most of their time in school

Prevention falls under the mandate to provide a safe learning environment for students

THE SCHOOL'S ROLE IN SUICIDE PREVENTION

Critical

Limited

SUICIDE AWARENESS QUESTIONNAIRE

LOOK AT YOURSELF FIRST:

LET'S TAKE A POLL

POLLS #2 A

Do you have personal or professional experience with suicide?

Yes

NO

POLLS #2 B

What words do you think describes how a suicidal youth feels?

- Confused
- Angry
- Discouraged
- Alone
- Trapped
- Not understood
- Desperate

POLLS #2 C

What would help you understand suicide better?

- More training
- Talking to someone who was suicidal
- I don't know
- Other

YOUR ACTION PLAN STEPS

1

**Why youth
suicide
prevention is
important in
your school**

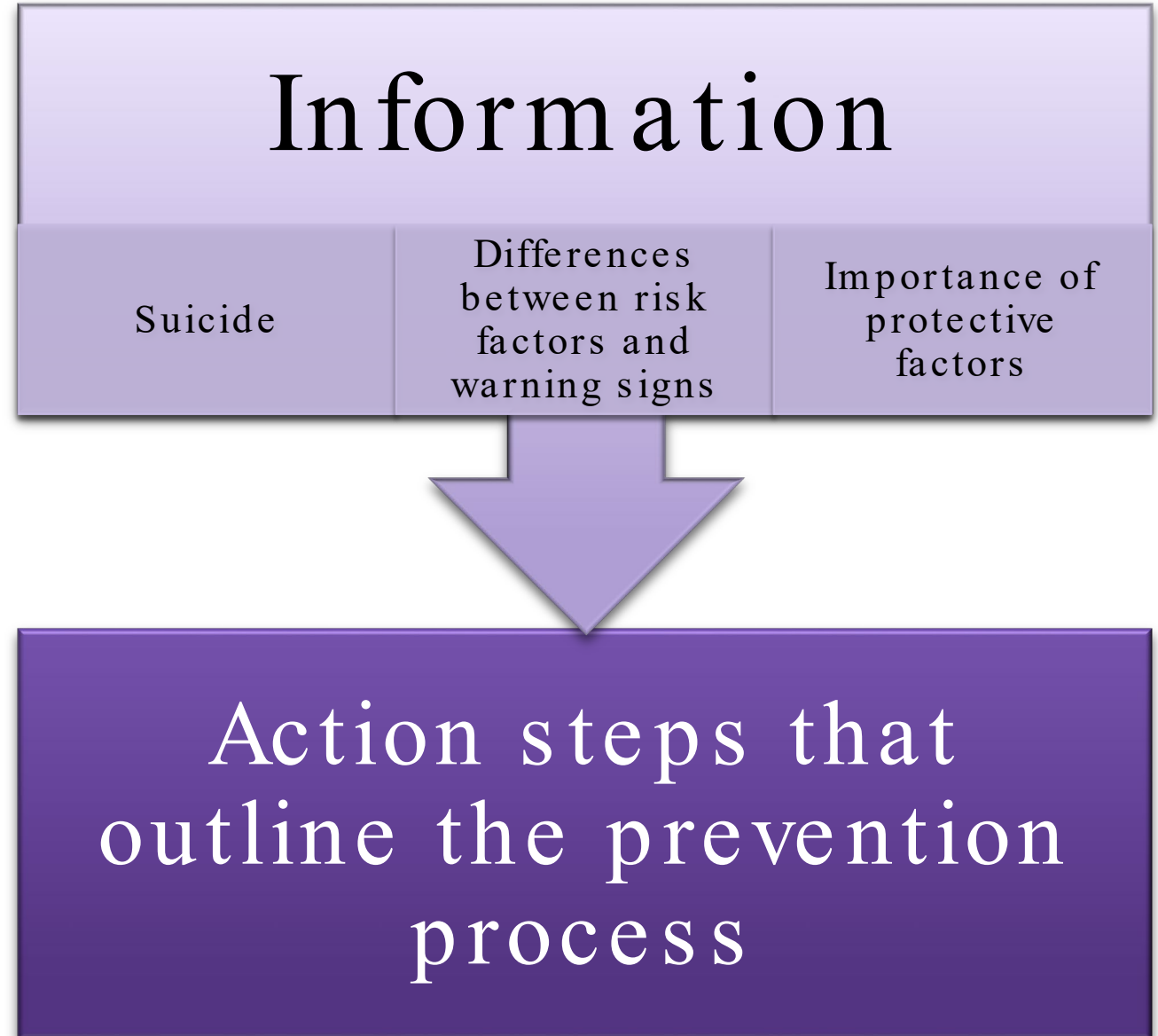
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**What your
school is doing
for youth
suicide
prevention**

3

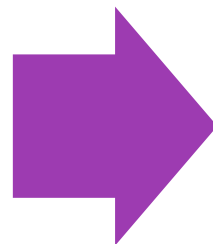
**What your role
is in prevention**

**WHAT DO
YOU NEED
TO KNOW TO
FULFILL
YOUR ROLE**



WHAT ABOUT CONFIDENTIALITY

HIPPA



FERPA

What is confidential...?

Everything
you say is
kept between us
unless you
or
someone else
is not safe.

GUIDING
tomorrow's dreams today

MS

What is confidential...?

All information except:
Drug use including alcohol,
Pregnancy or
Sexual or physical abuse
Or that you may harm
yourself or someone else

GUIDING
tomorrow's dreams today

What is confidential...?

Everything
we discuss is private
except things that are
harmful or
unsafe for you
or another person

GUIDING
tomorrow's dreams today

ES

HS

DISPELLING SUICIDE MYTHS

- **Will talking about suicide plant the idea in someone's mind?**
- **Isn't suicide just a way to get attention?**
- **Don't most suicides happen without warning?**
- **Don't suicidal children need to be in psychiatric hospitals?**



THE LANGUAGE OF SUICIDE

Avoid	Use Instead
Committed suicide	Died by suicide
Suicide victim	Person who died by suicide
Successful attempt	Attempt or completion

UNDERSTANDING SUICIDE BETTER

A behavioral definition puts suicide into words that are easy to understand:

Suicide is an attempt to solve a problem of intense emotional pain with impaired problem-solving skills



WHAT WORDS
WOULD MIDDLE
AND
ELEMENTARY
STUDENTS USE
TO DESCRIBE
INTENSE
EMOTIONAL PAIN

POLLS #3

What words would elementary and middle school students use to describe immense emotional pain?

- Sad
- Upset
- No one listens to me
- Like a loser
- “I hate myself”
- Other



WHAT DOES “INTENSE EMOTIONAL” PAIN FEEL LIKE?

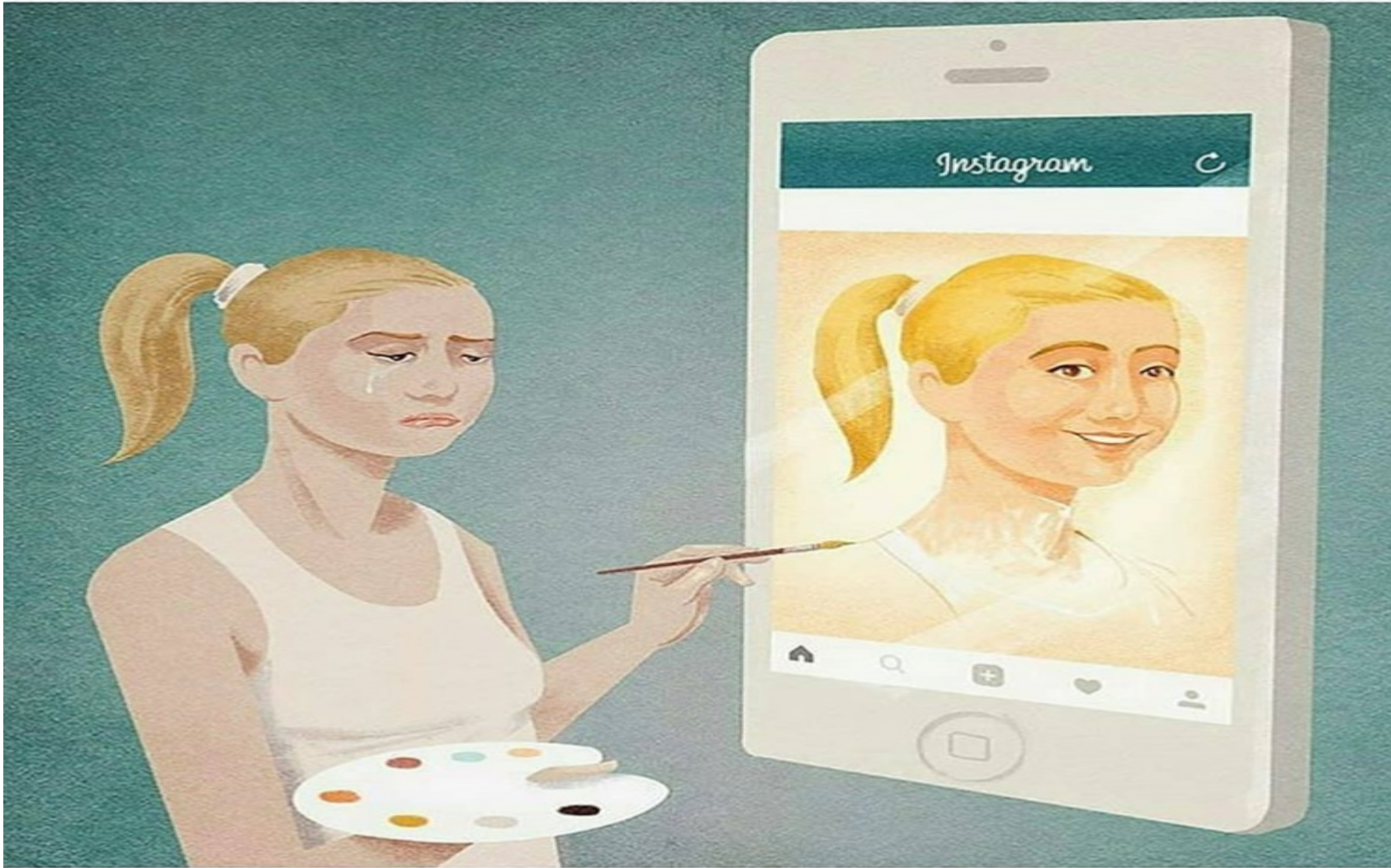
- **Worthlessness**
- **Hopelessness**
- **Helplessness**
- **Like being a loser**
- **Confusion**
- **Emptiness**
- **Desperation**

therapist: you need to open up more
me: i can't
therapist: why not
me: let me visualise it for you



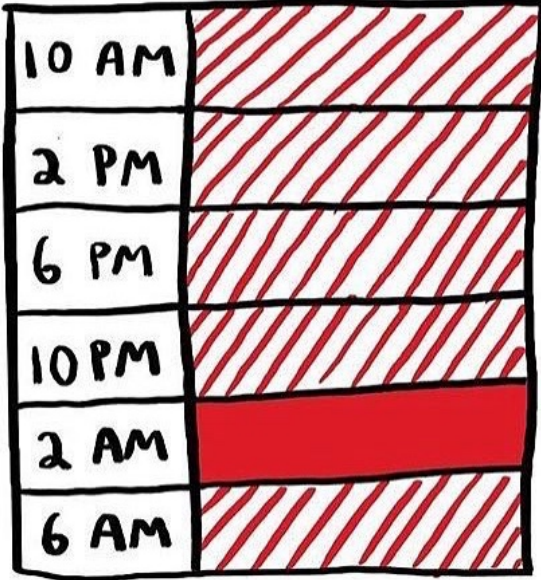
25,397 likes







TODAY'S SCHEDULE



PANIC



SPEND AN HOUR IN BED, IN THE DARK, ON MY PHONE.

♥ ALECWITHPEN



14 883 likes

WHAT WOULD
KIDS DESCRIBE
AS
UNSOLVABLE
PROBLEMS?



POLLS #4

What would elementary and middle school students describe as unsolvable problems?

- No one likes me
- No one listens to me
- I'm so ugly/ fat/
- "I hate myself"
- I failed my test
- I wasn't picked for the A team
- I didn't score in the game
- Other



WHAT PROBLEMS CAN SEEM “UNSOLVABLE?”

- Getting into trouble at home, in school or with the law
- Being humiliated in front of friends, especially for boys
- Loss of a relationship, an opportunity, a dream
- Any transition/ change for which the student feels unprepared

A crisis is any situation in which we feel our skills don't meet environmental demands

Crisis response:
fight, flight or freeze

Crisis thinking-
emotional,
constricted,
sometimes irrational

SUICIDE AS A CRISIS



UNDERSTANDING CRISIS THINKING

HERE'S AN EXAMPLE

- **7th grade student- Jeremy**
- **Bullied in 5th grade**
- **Self-injured in 6th grade**
- **Having problems in math**

- Teacher always busy
- Can't do extra credit assignment
- Fails midterm
- Girlfriend breaks up with him

- Fails math
- Gets cut from team

Helpful

- Tells parents
- Structures study time
- Decides to go to teacher

Unhelpful

- Stops doing homework
- Lies to parents
- Cheats on tests

Thinking about suicide

WHAT TO DO? VENTILATE AND VALIDATE

PRACTICING VENTILATION & VALIDATION

- **Ventilation** gives the victim a chance to “**vent**” or express their feelings without being judged,
- **Validation** is the step that helps the person understand that you have heard their feelings

POLLS #5A

Student says:” My life is over. I counted on getting picked to be on the A team. Everyone’s gonna laugh at me”

What is validating?

- I know it feels like the end of the world, but you can try again next year.
- Let me know if kids laugh and I’ll talk to them
- Sounds like a tough break

POLLS #5B

- I'D RATHER BE DEAD. WHAT IS THERE ABOUT THAT YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND?" WHAT STATEMENT IS VALIDATING?
- You have so much that's positive in your life- let's talk about that.
- I understand that you always say that when you're angry about something
- I agree, it's hard for me to wrap my head around the fact that you feel so miserable.

POLLS #5C

“My mom is in heaven and I want to be with her. This world is horrible. Heaven is great” What would be a validating response?

- Are you missing your mom?
- When it's your time, you will go to heaven.
- You think your life is bad at 10?
- My mother died when I was your age and I know exactly how you feel.

SUICIDE RISK FACTORS & WARNING SIGNS

Red

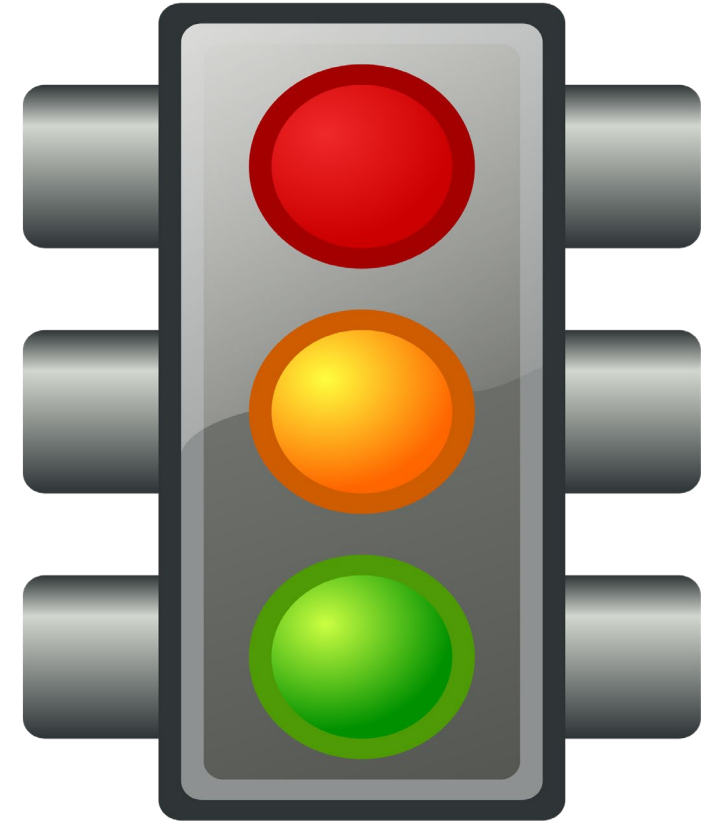
Warning

Amber

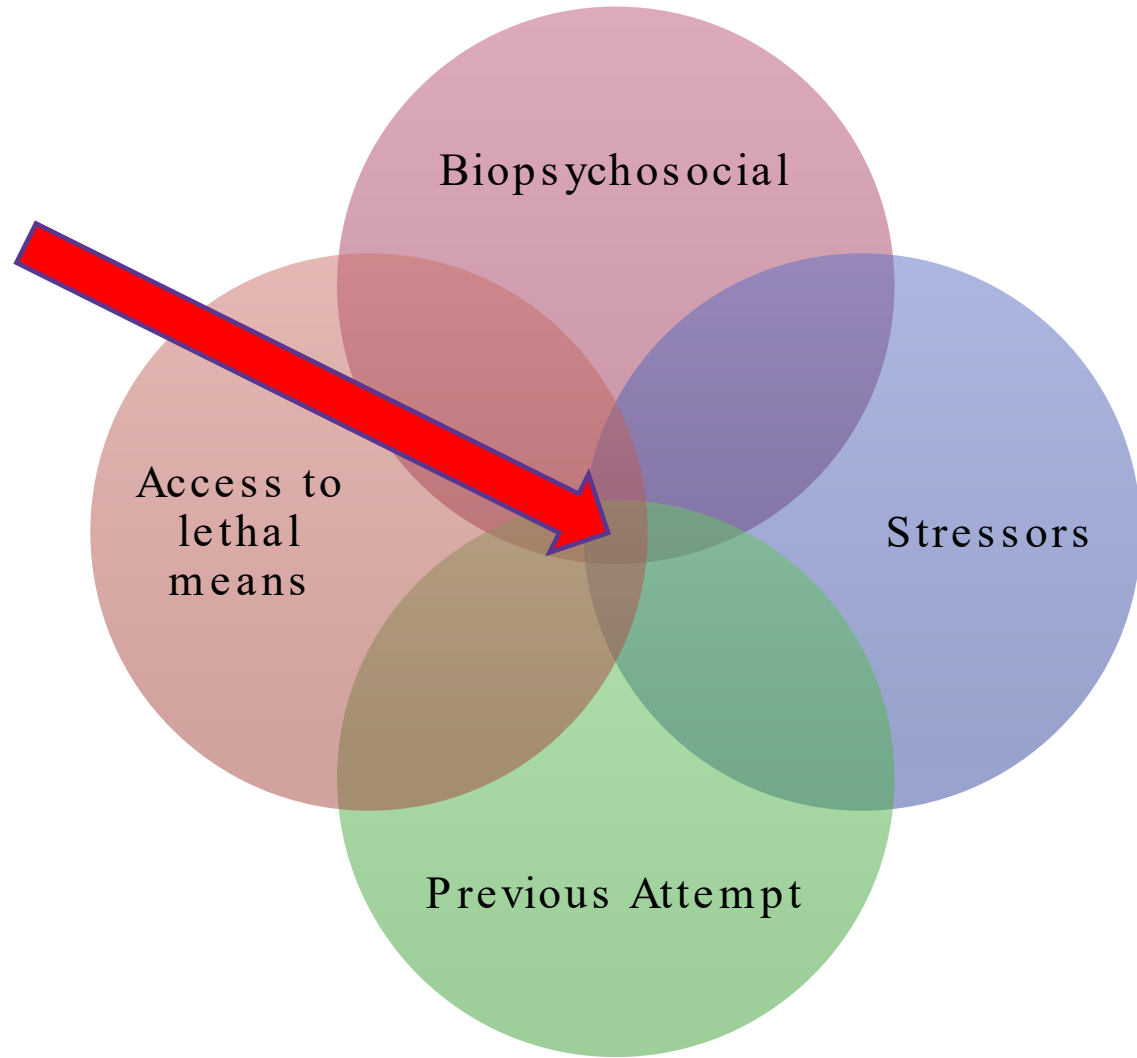
Risk

Green

Protective



DYNAMICS OF RISK FACTORS



WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT RISK FACTORS:

Risk factors are situations or factors that increase the possibility that someone might be suicidal

Most people have risk factors and are never suicidal

There is always more than one risk factor for suicide

You may never know your students' risk factors

RISK FACTORS CAN INCLUDE:

Family history of suicide

Family history of mental illness

Mental health diagnosis

Impulsivity

Physical or sexual abuse

Suicide ideation before age 12

Exposure to family violence, traumatic events (e.g., ACEs Score)

HOW COVID MIGHT INCREASE STUDENT RISK

- Increase student and parent anxiety levels
- Wreck daily schedules
- Destabilize study habits
- Increase school phobias
- Increase economic hurdles
- Delay identification of kids who might need treatment
- Elevate ACE factors

ACES SCORES AS RISK FACTORS

- **Verbal abuse**
- **Physical abuse**
- **Sexual abuse**
- **Physical neglect**
- **Emotional neglect**
- **Witness IPV**
- **Substance abuse in the home**
- **Separated/divorced parents**
- **Family member incarcerated**
- **Family member mentally ill or suicidal**

Early Death

Disease,
Disability &
Social Problems

Adoption of Health-risk
Behaviors

Social, Emotional & Cognitive
Impairment

Disrupted Neurodevelopment

ACEs SCORES & RISK



Warning Signs

FACTS

- Feelings
- Actions
- Changes
- Threats/ **T**alk
- Situations

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Recognize

- **RECOGNIZE** possible warning signs

Talk

- **TALK** to the student

Listen

- **LISTEN** to student's responses

Refer to school
resources

- **USE PROTOCOL** for parent notification/referral

WHAT ARE SOME WARNING SIGNS YOU MAY SEE IN SCHOOL?

- **Frequent visits to school nurse**
- **Frequent restroom requests**
- **Actual threats or suicide notes**
- **Talking about suicide**
- **Disturbing themes in school assignments**
- **Unusual pattern of absences or tardiness**
- **Leaving school early**
- **Concerns expressed by other students**

WHAT ARE SOME WARNING SIGNS YOU MAY SEE IN SCHOOL?

- **Changes in student appearance**
- **Changes in mood, for example, no longer cheerful or suddenly cheerful**
- **Changes in eating habits**
- **Student isolated on school bus, in cafeteria**
- **Bullying behavior- even as a bystander**

WHAT NOT TO SAY



- Don't worry, everything will be all right
- By next week, you'll forget all about it
- This is nothing!
- Cheer up!
- You have so much to be thankful for
- Think about how your family would feel if you killed yourself



PRACTICE “TELL ME MORE”

- ❑ Reflects the 3 hardest but most important words to say to a suicidal student**
- ❑ Opens the door to talking about suicide in a conversational way**
- ❑ Addresses questions about suicide risk from a developmental perspective**
- ❑ Explains suicide as the solution to that seemingly unsolvable problem**



IF YOU ARE WORRIED THE
RISK IS SO SERIOUS THAT IT
NEEDS IMMEDIATE
ATTENTION....

SEE SOMETHING
SAY SOMETHING!

**DO NOT
WAIT!!!**

**FOLLOW
YOUR
SCHOOL
PROTOCOL!**



Your
Critical but
Limited
Role
Simplified

OBSERVE

**All students for signs of
risk**

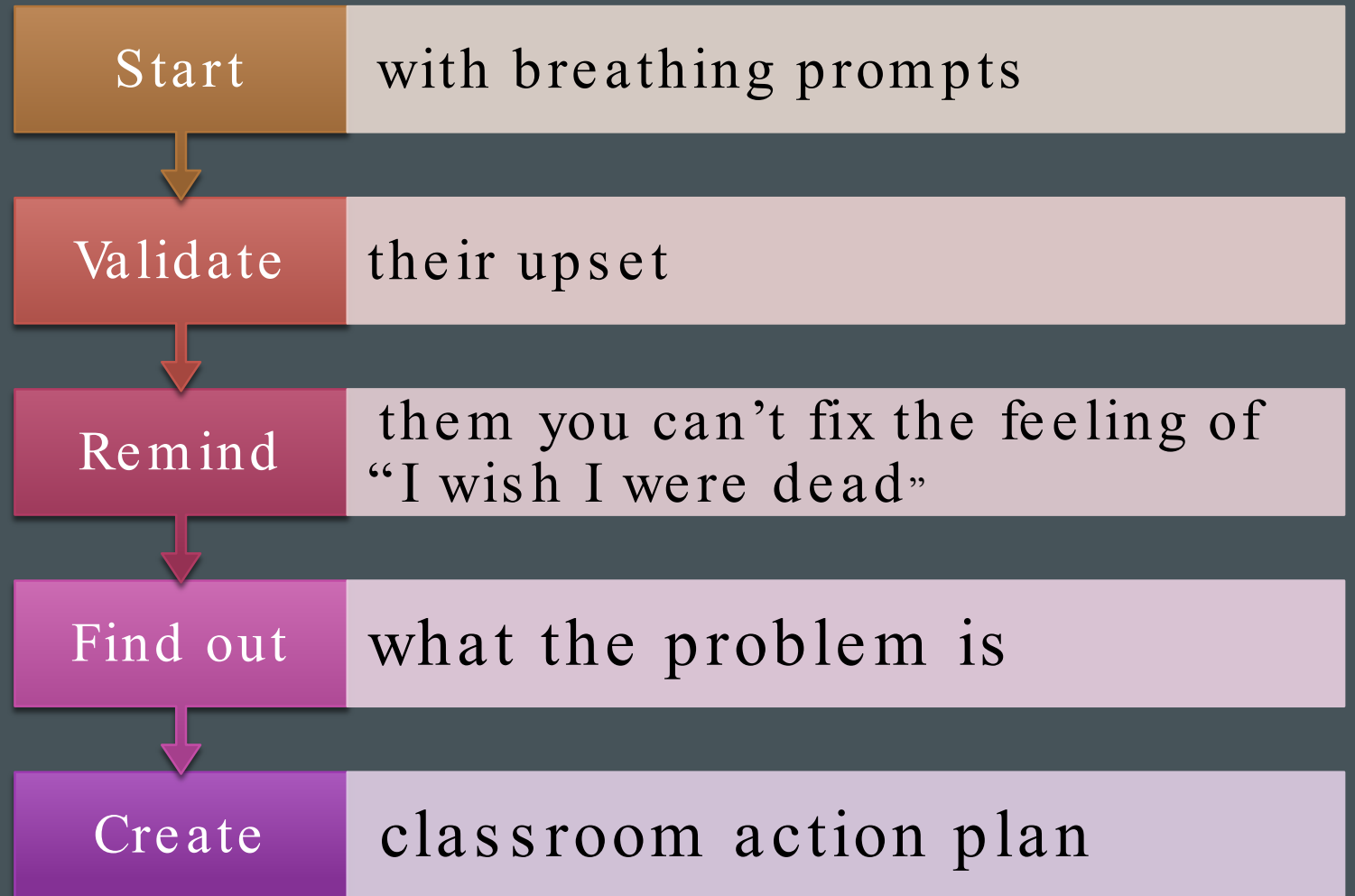
IDENTIFY

**Students potentially at
risk**

REFER

**Student to appropriate
resources**

TIPS FOR TALKING WITH UPSET STUDENTS



HOW TO TALK WITH ELEMENTARY STUDENTS ABOUT SUICIDE

Resist trying
to explain the
finality of
death

Explain that
doing risky
things can have
unintended
consequences

Explain that feeling
like you want to die
often means there
is an upsetting
problem in your
life you can't solve

Reinforce
messages
about
personal
safety

ASK ABOUT PACES (PROTECTIVE & COMPENSATORY EXPERIENCES)

RELATIONSHIPS

- **Does someone love you unconditionally?**
- **Do you have at least 1 friend?**
- **Do you do anything regularly to help others?**
- **Do you have an adult you can trust and count on?**
- **Are you an active member of a non-sport social group?**

ASK ABOUT PACES (PROTECTIVE & COMPENSATORY EXPERIENCES)

RESOURCES

- **Do you have a hobby?**
- **Do you play sports or have regular physical activity?**
- **Is your house clean and do you have enough to eat?**
- **Does your school give you the resources and experiences you need to learn?**
- **Are the rules in your house clear and fair?**

(Morris, Hays-Grudo et al 2015)

**THE ABILITY TO
RECOVER
QUICKLY FROM
DIFFICULTY**


**Encourage
RESILIENCE:**

THE MINDSET OF THE RESILIENT TEACHER


**Fosters
independence**

**Lets students do
their own problem
solving**

**Encourages students
to find additional
resources**



**RESILIENCE THEORY BELIEVES THAT THE
UPS AND DOWNS OF LIFE ARE TO
EMBRACED, NOT AVOIDED...
AND THAT COPING WITH RISK AND BOUNCING BACK
FROM ADVERSITY ARE GOOD FOR US.**



A photograph showing two women. On the left, a woman with voluminous curly brown hair, wearing a light blue denim shirt over a grey top, is leaning towards the right. On the right, a woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing a black top, is sitting on a light-colored couch, covering her face with her hands as if crying. The background consists of white horizontal blinds.

WHAT HELPS STUDENTS
BECOME RESILIENT?

**PROVISION OF
SUPPORT, STRUCTURE,
CONTROL**

PROVIDING SUPPORT

- Be there however you can
- Listen- again and again and again
- Express genuine praise for accomplishments
- Encourage reflection & self-praise
- Validate and name feelings





STRUCTURE

- Safe, structured predictable schedule
- Advance notice of changes
- Organized & neat environment

CONTROL

- Implement enough rules to make the environment safe
- Explain the reasons for the rules
- Teach calming techniques
- Give students some choice in learning techniques



REINFORCE THE “CHALLENGE MINDSET”

Guiding Principle:

Let children experience life in a way where they grow to believe they have the personal strength to overcome any obstacle



If you are dropping off your son's forgotten lunch, books, homework, equipment, etc.,

please TURN AROUND and exit the building.

Your son will learn to problem-solve in your absence.

JUST IMAGINE...



ENCOURAGE PROTECTIVE FACTORS

PERSONAL,
BEHAVIORAL OR
SITUATIONAL
CHARACTERISTICS
THAT CONTRIBUTE
TO RESILIENCY
AND SERVE AS A
BUFFER AGAINST
RISK

ELEMENTARY & MIDDLE SCHOOL PROTECTIVE FACTORS

-
- Sense of connection to home, school or community
 - Sense of safety
 - Access to care for physical, emotional problems
 - Supportive family environment and social networks.
 - Concrete support for basic needs.
 - Contact with one caring adult



FOSTERING PROTECTIVE FACTORS

- **Teach students it is okay to ask for help**
- **Help students identify trusted adults**
- **Encourage participation in school & community activities**
- **Acknowledge student efforts**
- **Be a good listener, as often as you can**

POLL #6

HOW DOES A SCHOOL REINFORCE PROTECTIVE FACTORS DURING COVID?

- Make it clear to students that it's ok to talk about feelings
- Ask the students for ideas
- Proceed as close to normal as possible
- Give homework about COVID safety
- Discuss strategies for online learning, 'just in case'

WHAT ARE PROTECTIVE FACTORS FOR YOU?



BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

01

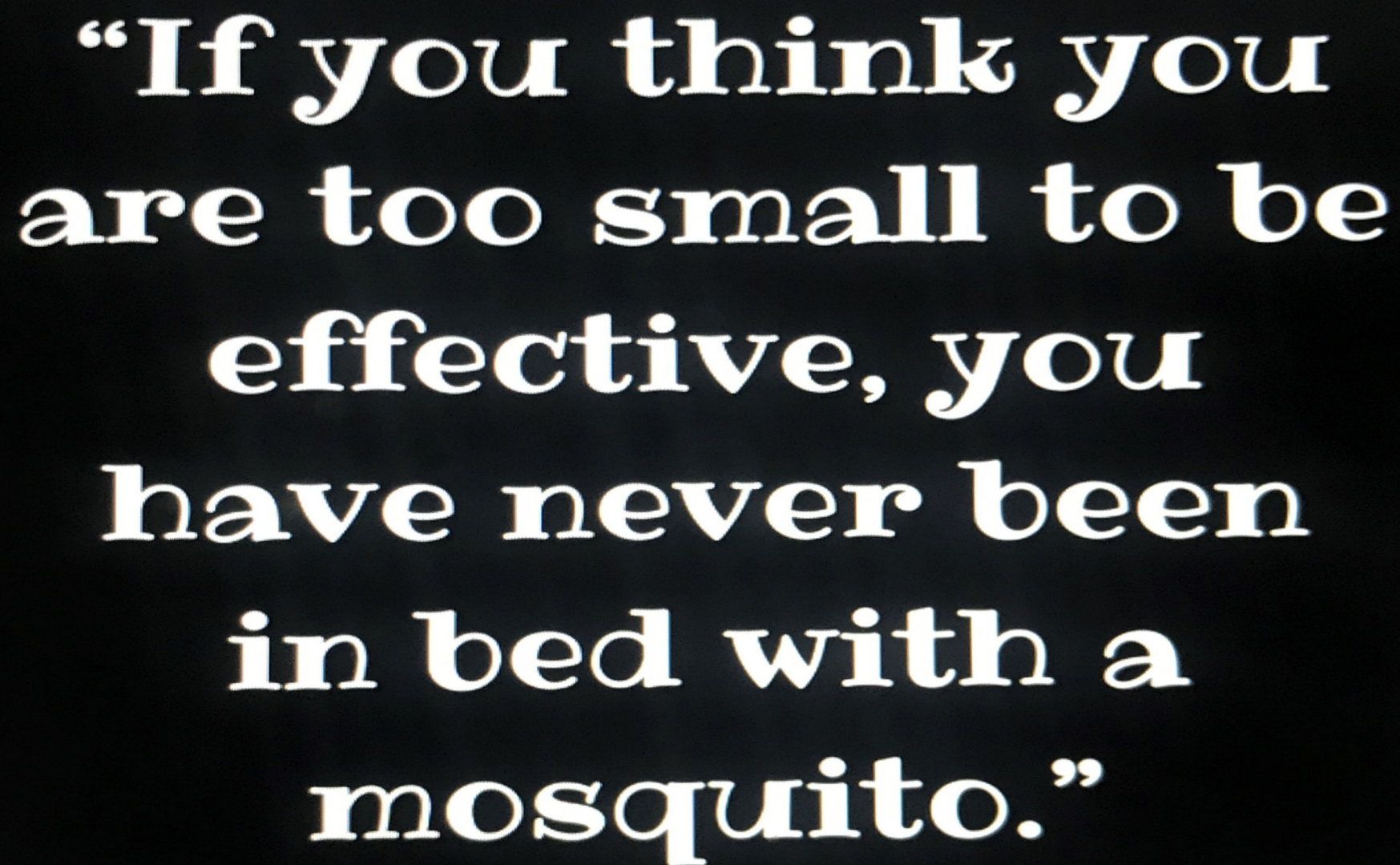
Recognize your role in helping your students learn to help themselves

02

If a student does need your help, remember the first step is to listen- not immediately fix the problem

03

If you're worried about yourself or a student, reach out for help



**“If you think you
are too small to be
effective, you
have never been
in bed with a
mosquito.”**

Betty Reese



**THANK YOU FOR TAKING CARE
OF OUR KIDS!**

