

## Suicide Prevention: Supporting Student Mental Health

Stress is a normal reaction to our current situation and change from what is “normal” combined with uncertainty for the future can wear on the minds and emotional health of both adults and youth. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, teens may have an especially difficult time coping emotionally. Additionally, surveys of students conducted by Common Sense Media and America’s Promise Alliance have found that the pandemic has been hard on teenage mental health. 2020 has been a year of uncertainty. Uncertainty can challenge one’s sense of security, become a cause of stress and adversely affect mental health when the ability to cope is overwhelmed. Some of our students are returning to school, while some are learning remotely and others are doing a combination of both. In each scenario, we should anticipate that some of our youth will thrive, while others will struggle to adapt. Students will return both in-person or remotely with a variety of experiences as a result of changes that occurred in their lives during the past several months. Fear of getting sick or a family member getting sick, grief over missed experiences, financial hardship, worry that normal won’t be the same as before COVID-19, loss of social connections, academic or behavioral regression and loss of security are examples of feelings, emotions and experiences that our students may carry with them.

September is National Suicide Prevention Awareness month. Suicide is currently the 2<sup>nd</sup> leading cause of death among adolescents or youth ages 10-24 in the United States. According to the vice president of research for the American Foundation of Suicide Prevention, it will be two years before we have data on the actual impact of COVID-19 on the nation’s suicide rate. We don’t know if the pandemic will cause suicide rates to increase, but we do know that increased stress, anxiety, fear and feelings of uncertainty can adversely affect one’s mental health and wellbeing and potentially lead to feelings of hopelessness and despair. A key risk factor for suicide in youth is a mental health condition, especially when undetected or untreated. 2 out of 3 teens with depression don’t get treatment (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention). Identification and early intervention play key roles in suicide prevention. But focusing solely on mental health conditions does not give us a full picture of the complexities of suicide risk. According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, suicide risk almost always starts with the underlying layers of multiple factors including biological predispositions to mental illness, psychological traits such as impulsivity, and past history such as abuse, death of a loved one or a previous suicide attempt. Current life issues and events, such as stressors at home, school and with peer relationships, may also play a role.

During a time where a sense of heightened stress is the norm, it is important to educate parents, teachers, and caregivers to recognize which responses are “normal” for kids to have during this everchanging time and which might require further intervention and professional attention. Hopelessness and despair are extremely internal experiences. What gets expressed externally can look different depending on each individual. This is the reason the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention recommends paying attention to even subtle behavioral changes. Concerning behavior might include:

- Patterns of emotional and social withdrawal.
- Changes in mood that are not usual for your child (such as an increased irritability)
- Changes in behavior such as stepping back from personal relationships.
- Changes in eating and/or sleeping habits
- Easily angered

- Thoughts about death or suicide or talking about it
- An increase in risky behavior or reckless behaviors such as using drugs or alcohol
- Problems with memory, thinking or concentration
- Feeling “empty”, worthless or hopeless
- Lack of interest in any of the activities that used to bring pleasure

Just as we take care of our physical health, our mental health also needs to be nurtured. It is normal to experience moments of mental unwellness, especially during a time of change and uncertainty. Experts recommend checking in with teenagers often to discuss how they are feeling and managing. Keep lines of communication open, express authentic care and concern and validate their feelings. Talking about mental health and wellness as a normal and re-occurring topic can help open the doors for meaningful and important conversations. If you are worried that a youth in your life is thinking about suicide, one of the best ways we can prevent a tragedy is to ask them directly. For example, you might say, “have you ever felt so bad that you have had thoughts of suicide?”. This communicates that you are open to speaking about suicide in a non-judgmental and supportive way. Let them talk freely and listen without judgement. Other follow-up questions you might ask to engage in the conversation are, “how do you hurt?” or “how can I help?”. Connecting to a family physician or mental health professional can assist with getting the right supports in place. If you believe a child/teen is in crisis, don’t leave them alone and take them to an emergency room or a mental health center for an evaluation immediately. It is better to overreact than underreact, if your instinct tells you that a youth might be in danger.

You don’t have to wait for a crisis to happen to begin cultivating a supportive and safe environment for youth. The following can help keep kids safe:

- Receiving effective mental health care when needed
- Fostering positive connections to family, peers, school, community and social institutions that promote resiliency
- Creating safe and supportive school and community environments (this includes creating a culture that promotes a safe place for youth to seek help for themselves or their friends)
- Providing education to youth on mental health conditions and suicide prevention
- Helping youth to cultivate problem-solving and coping skills
- Keeping open communication regarding mental health concerns
- Restrict access to lethal means (this includes keeping prescription medications locked up)

For additional information, seek guidance and resources from:

The Center for Parent and Teen Communication- <https://parentandteen.com/>

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention- <https://afsp.org/>

Region V Prevention Coalition: Talk Heart 2 Heart- <https://talkheart2heart.org/>

Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1-800-273-TALK (8255) <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

School Community Intervention and Prevention (SCIP)- <https://scipnebraska.com/>

References: The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention; The Childmind Institute; Education Week; Suicide Prevention Lifeline; Suicide Prevention Resource Center.