

Mental Health and Suicide Prevention

How to Talk to Children and Youth

A suicide death is a traumatic and difficult loss, and the impact of suicide can leave grieving individuals and communities with questions. One of the first questions people often ask is: *Why?* Why did this person die by suicide?

Key Terms:

Child: those younger than age 12

Youth: those between ages 13 and 18

Young adults: those between 19 and 24

Young people: all of the above

Suicide is always a complex issue: There is never just one reason why someone will attempt or die by suicide. Learning about a young person's death by suicide often evokes complicated feelings and raises an additional question: How should we talk with children and youth about mental health and suicide prevention?

It is important that adults establish open communication with children and youth to ask about their emotions, their worries, and what gives them hope. Being able to talk about complex and challenging emotions is a way to build and strengthen resilience, coping skills, and connections to caring, trusted adults. Although it can be scary, normalizing these conversations and being empathetic listeners can be the most important first step we can take in preventing suicides among children and youth and in supporting good mental health.

Understanding youth stressors

As parents, caregivers, and trusted adults, we can support youth and children with the stressors they face on a daily basis, and that, in rare circumstances, may contribute to suicidal behaviors and attempts. For a young person, factors that could contribute to a suicidal crisis might include a combination of the following:

- stress.
- feeling socially isolated.
- lack of sleep or irregular sleeping patterns.
- exposure to bullying.
- mental health conditions.
- adverse childhood experiences and traumatic experiences.
- discrimination about one's identity (gender identity and/or sexual orientation).
- periods of transition.
- economic stressors.

How to listen and offer support

In order to have open conversations around mental health with young people, it is important to show that we are listening: Ask questions that show we care, validate emotions, help build problem-solving skills (which is different from solving their problems for them), and make space and time for ongoing conversations.

During these conversations, ask open-ended questions about mental health and listen closely and openly to the responses. Possible questions can be:

- Do you ever get sad or lonely? What do you do to feel better?
- Do you ever feel stressed? What do you do to feel less stressed out?
- Do you or your friends ever talk about hurting yourselves or wanting to die?

Sleep is an often overlooked stressor, and lack of sleep or irregular sleeping patterns can be a risk factor for suicide. Ample sleep can protect young people from many negative health consequences. Adults can support a young person's mental health by creating and maintaining healthy sleeping habits. It is recommended that children between the ages of 7 and 12 get 10-11 hours of sleep each night. Adults can help support a healthy sleeping environment by limiting access to social media at night, or by establishing routines that help ensure that a child or youth is getting the appropriate amount of sleep. Getting enough sleep is important for the mental well-being of people of any age!

Knowing the warning signs and life-saving resources

Although suicide attempts and suicide deaths among youth and children are rare, even one death by suicide is too many. In order to prevent children and youth suicide attempts and deaths, it is important to be aware of the following potential warning signs that can indicate that the young person is severely depressed or having thoughts of suicide:

- Expressing unbearable emotional pain, feeling trapped, or hopelessness.
- Giving away prized possessions.
- Talking or posting on social media about suicide or wanting to die.
- Suddenly becoming calm or cheerful after a long period of depression.
- Looking for a way to kill themselves.
- Telling people "good-bye."
- Saying they wish they could fall asleep and never wake up, or that everyone would be better off without them.
- Change in sleeping patterns (including sleeping too much or too little).

If you are concerned about possible suicide risk *for anyone*, including a young person, please ask that person if they are thinking of hurting themselves or are having thoughts of suicide. Research clearly shows that talking or asking about suicide will not put the idea of suicide in their head. It shows that you are concerned about them and willing to help. Direct questions like, "Are you having thoughts or suicide?" or "Are you thinking of killing yourself?" are straightforward and ask for a clear yes/no answer.

If someone responds "yes," is important to listen to their emotions and for information about a possible plan, including if the individual has identified how, where, and when they may attempt suicide. When an individual has specific plans regarding suicide, this can indicate a higher risk. No matter the level of specificity, it is important to connect an individual who is considering suicide with a mental health provider or mental health resources as soon as possible.

If you are concerned that a loved one is struggling with a mental health crisis, is having thoughts of suicide, or if you just have a gut feeling that something is off, please call Colorado Crisis Services, available 24/7/365 at 1-844-493-8255. A trained crisis counselor will answer your call and help you navigate your situation.

Safer Environments Reduce Suicide Risk

When we consider how to reduce suicide risk, especially when someone is in a mental health crisis, a crucial first step is to reduce access to lethal means. Many suicide attempts occur with little planning during a short-term crisis, and ensuring that an environment is as safe as possible is essential in preventing potential suicide deaths.

Suicide attempts by firearms are particularly lethal. The majority of firearms used in youth suicides belong to a parent. Securing firearms or temporarily storing them away from the home greatly reduces the risk of a child or youth dying by suicide using a firearm. Safely and securely storing medications and substances also reduces risk. It is also important to continue to be aware of the individual and their environment. If an individual has shared that they are thinking about suicide, learning more about this despair and if they have a plan can also provide important information on how to keep an environment as safe as possible for that individual and everyone else.

In It Together

The best suicide prevention is comprehensive and collaborative. The more that people, organizations, and communities work together to support positive mental health, coping skills, resiliency, and openness around discussing suicide and mental health, the better the result for everyone, including young people. Talking about suicide with those we care about can feel scary, but there are resources in Colorado to help support you, your family, and your community.

Helpful Resources:

Colorado Office of Suicide Prevention: www.coosp.org
Colorado Crisis Services: 1-844-493-8255, www.coloradocrisisservices.org. Text TALK to 38255.
The Trevor Project: www.thetrevorproject.org (for LGBTQ+ youth)
Colorado School Safety Resource Center: www.colorado.gov/cssrc
The Second Wind Fund: www.thesecondwindfund.org
National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Colorado: www.namicolorado.org
The Suicide Prevention Coalition of Colorado: www.suicidepreventioncolorado.org
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention-CO Chapter: www.afsp.org/chapter/afsp-colorado
Mental Health Colorado: www.mentalhealthcolorado.org
The Colorado Behavioral Healthcare Council: www.cbhc.org
Youth Mental Health First Aid: www.MHFACO.org

For more information, please contact:

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