

Toolkit

September 2024

Suicide Awareness Month




Cartwheel

September is Suicide Awareness Month.

A time to focus on getting people to speak more openly about mental health struggles and learn how to recognize the signs that someone might be thinking about suicide.

Suicide rates are on the rise, with young people especially impacted. Here are a few of the alarming statistics:



Suicide is the second-leading cause of death

for teens and young adults ages 10-34.¹



2 in 10 students seriously considered attempting suicide

and almost 1 in 10 students attempted suicide.²



16% of high school students

made a suicide plan during the past year.³

The goal of this toolkit is to provide school counselors, staff, educators, families, and everyday community members the know-how to spot when someone's struggling and give them the confidence to do something about it. Think of it as giving everyone a toolbox to help their loved ones or even strangers who might be going through a tough time.

“It's all about saving lives by making sure people know what to look out for and how to step in when it matters most. By shining a light on this issue, we're hoping to catch problems early and get people the help they need before it's too late,” says Julie Jungman, LICSW, LCSW, and VP of Clinical Care at Cartwheel.

The Importance of Language

When to talk about suicide

If someone mentions suicide, believe them. We want to take all expressions of suicidal thoughts seriously. That being said, people often have the misconception that talking about suicide will only encourage suicide. But that isn't the case. In fact, research suggests that acknowledging and talking about suicide may reduce rather than increase suicidal ideation, and may lead to improvements in mental health in treatment-seeking populations.⁴

1. <https://www.cdc.gov/suicide/facts/index.html>

2. <https://www.cdc.gov/yrbs/dstr/index.html>

3. <https://www.cdc.gov/yrbs/dstr/index.html>

4. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24998511>

“By speaking openly and honestly about suicide, we can help young people understand that feelings of hopelessness are temporary and that there is hope for things to get better,” says Jungman.

This is especially important for young people because it helps break down the stigma and silence that often surrounds mental health issues.

“When we openly discuss suicide as something that can be treated, it encourages young people to reach out for help when they’re struggling. These conversations can also connect them to the right support systems during tough times, reminding them they’re not alone,” says Jungman.

“Youth who contemplate suicide often hold these feelings deep within, hiding them and allowing them to grow and manifest into heavier pain and feelings of isolation, loneliness, and fear. Creating a safe space where dialogue about thoughts of suicide or ending life is normalized can help youth feel heard, cared for, and part of a larger network and community,” says Jess Schpero, LICSW.

In addition to normalizing talking about suicide, it’s also important to normalize talking about feelings and mental health in general.

“Creating spaces, homes, and communities where everything is ‘talkaboutable’ makes talking about potentially scarier topics like suicide easier,” says Juliana Chen, MD, Cartwheel’s Chief Medical Officer. “By making it safe to talk and share, we can catch those who are struggling earlier.”

How to talk about suicide

Everyone thinks about death occasionally, but knowing the difference between passive and active suicidal ideation is important, especially when speaking to young people about suicide, says Leah Challenger, LPC.

Either way, always encourage a person struggling with these thoughts to seek help.

“Talking about these things can prevent an escalation from occurring and the more knowledge one has, the better,” says Challenger.

Passive Suicidal Ideation:

“Sometimes young people will have thoughts about wanting to die but not actually want to die. We call this passive suicidal ideation, where there may be thoughts of dying without a plan or intent to do so,” says Challenger.

Active Suicidal Ideation:

“Active suicidal ideation means there is a plan and intent to end one’s life.”

What language to use and why it matters

Whether it's in the media, online, or in conversation, the choice of words we use to speak about suicide matters.

When speaking about suicide in general, the International Association for Suicide Prevention recommends the following guidelines, which aim to increase awareness and understanding of suicide and its complexities while reducing risk of harm.¹

Problematic	Preferred
'Committed suicide' or 'commit suicide'	'Died by suicide' or 'took their own life' or 'suicide death'
'Unsuccessful suicide' or 'failed suicide'	'Suicide attempt' or 'non-fatal suicide attempt'
'Successful suicide attempt'	'A fatal suicide attempt'
'Suicide victim'	'Those who die by suicide'

Risk reduction vs. prevention

You'll often hear people speak about suicide prevention. While the sentiment behind it is positive, the use of the word "prevention" isn't ideal. Unfortunately not all suicides can be prevented, despite best efforts and intentions.

💡 Some suicides occur despite intervention due to the complexity of mental health issues and the many factors that contribute to suicide risk," says Jungman. "Additionally, the term 'suicide prevention' can inadvertently place a burden on families who have lost someone to suicide, making them feel judged or guilty for not having 'prevented' the death."

Instead, we encourage people to say "suicide risk reduction." This shifts the emphasis to decreasing the overall risk of suicide through various strategies, such as understanding warning signs, connecting individuals to treatment and support, and decreasing access to lethal means like firearms during times of suicidal crisis.

💡 By using 'suicide risk reduction,' the language is more compassionate and supportive, recognizing that the loss is not the result of a failure to act, but rather a complex and tragic outcome that everyone is working to minimize. This approach acknowledges the reality that while we cannot prevent every suicide, we can reduce the risk and impact," says Jungman.

1. <https://www.iasp.info/languageguidelines>

Risk Reduction Factors

While every situation and person is different, there are some clinically recommended risk reduction factors that can help improve a person's mental health.

Create an atmosphere where it's OK to talk about difficult feelings

Building rapport and trust is a main stepping stone to helping individuals feel safe and able to openly speak about difficult feelings.

“ This could look like allowing a person to speak about themselves and their history in their own time, ensuring they feel heard without judgment,” says Schpero.

Another way to foster this type of safe space where open conversation is encouraged is by doing a daily check-in.

“ Something as simple as asking each student to rate their state of mind before the start of class can really help you know which students might be a greater risk at some point. It is important to encourage students to seek help from a mental health provider if this is the case,” says Challenger.

Build awareness of risk factors

A person exhibiting warning signs of suicidal ideation might talk or write about suicide, increase substance use, withdraw socially, say goodbye, give away their belongings, or engage in risky behavior. They may express feelings of hopelessness, guilt, or being a burden, and you might notice changes in their mood, sleep, appearance, or eating habits, says Sydney Denmark, LICSW.

Situational triggers like recent losses or past trauma can intensify these feelings.

“ If you observe these signs, it's crucial to take them seriously and seek professional help immediately,” says Denmark.

You can also ask someone directly if they're having thoughts about suicide as a way to identify if they're at risk.

Foster and encourage social connections

Feeling a sense of belonging within your community can be a powerful protective factor against suicide.

- “Having supportive relationships through family connections, religious communities, sports or clubs, provides individuals with reduced feelings of isolation and offers a network of people who can notice warning signs and intervene. Cultivating and maintaining these connections is crucial in suicide prevention,” says Denmark.
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Practice resiliency and coping strategies

Helping people build resiliency and practice coping strategies can be powerful tools when faced with difficult feelings.

- “Individuals who experience thoughts of suicide or suicidal ideation may struggle to establish feelings of self worth. Supporting people in finding and identifying disruptors to the suicidal thoughts can lead to feelings of resilience, strength, and general feelings of a lifted or lighter mood,” says Schpero.
 - “Some effective coping strategies include “reaching out for support, practicing self-care, engaging in healthy distractions, creating a safety plan, and focusing on positive future goals,” says Denmark.
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Seek support with therapy and medication

It's important to acknowledge the effectiveness of therapy and medication for those struggling with their mental health and thoughts of suicide because they offer hope and a path to feeling better.

- “The great news is that depression and suicidal thoughts are highly treatable, and for most people, they are temporary challenges that can be overcome with the right support,” says Jungman.

Ninety percent of young people who died by suicide had a mental health condition at the time of their deaths, although often these conditions were untreated, under-treated, or undiagnosed. In fact, over half (54%) of people who died by suicide had not been identified as having had a mental health condition despite the co-occurrence of mental health conditions and suicide.¹

- “Skills based solutions are effective methods for reducing suicide risk. A person may be feeling overwhelmed with pain when contemplating suicide or experiencing thoughts of suicidal ideation. Providing skills based interventions, including the four DBT domains: emotion regulation, interpersonal effectiveness, mindfulness, and distress tolerance, can increase skills for intervention designed to stop suicidal urges,” says Schpero.
- “Medication can aid in mood stabilization, helping to alleviate the negative symptoms of anxiety and depression. This allows people to more effectively engage in therapy, which can be a life saving tool,” says Denmark.

1. <https://www.datocms-assets.com/12810/1686164392-afsp-k-12-schools-issue-brief.pdf>



Reducing access to dangerous objects

Reducing access to means in the home can be one of the greatest protective factors to prevent death by suicide, according to Schpero.

“This includes locking away sharp objects such as knives and razors. Safely storing weapons in a lock box or out of the home helps reduce risk and keeps environments safer for people experiencing thoughts of suicide. Locking away medications, pills, and other substances reduces access to means and may stop a suicidal urge from becoming action,” says Schpero.



Make a safety plan

A safety plan is a personalized, practical tool that outlines steps for an individual to take during a crisis.

“Safety plans are highly supported by evidence as one of the most effective suicide prevention strategies and used by healthcare workers in most settings,” says Denmark.

A safety plan can include identification of warning signs that escalate feelings of distress and suicidal ideation, coping skills that help reduce or disrupt these feelings, social supports or people they can go to for help, and local emergency numbers like mobile crisis or the suicide hotline.

“Ensuring individuals create a safety plan and encouraging them to carry it with them can be a helpful tool to build strength and confidence for people who are experiencing thoughts of suicide. The safety plan helps people articulate triggers, identify disruptors to the distress, and name safe and trusted social supports, all of which they may have not otherwise realized,” says Schpero.

Caring for yourself after supporting someone with suicidal ideation

Helping people through a crisis and having conversations around suicidal ideation can be draining both mentally and emotionally. We encourage anyone in these situations to practice self-care in the aftermath of an event.

“Going on a walk, doing something you enjoy, or talking to a friend can be helpful ways to reduce the stress and anxiety that may present after helping young people deal with death and other heavy topics,” says Challenger.

See next page for suicide resources to share with your community.

Need help or know someone who's struggling with thoughts of suicide?

Here's what to do.



If you or someone you know is experiencing suicidal thoughts:

- Don't wait for someone to reach out.
- Seek mental health treatment, or tell your clinician about your suicidal thinking.
- Treat yourself like you would treat someone else who needs your help.
- Call or text 988 to reach the free and confidential Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, available 24/7
- If this is a medical emergency or there is immediate danger of harm, call 911 and explain that you need support for a mental health crisis.

If a person says they are considering suicide:

- Take the person seriously.
- Stay with them.
- Help them remove lethal means.
- Call or text 988 to reach the free and confidential Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, available 24/7
- Escort them to mental health services or an emergency room.

If you think someone is thinking about suicide, assume you are the only one who will reach out.

Here's how to talk to someone who may be struggling with their mental health:

- Have an honest conversation.
- Talk to them in private.
- Listen to their story.
- Tell them you care about them.
- Ask directly if they are thinking about suicide.
- Encourage them to seek treatment or contact their doctor or therapist.
- Avoid debating the value of life, minimizing their problems, or giving advice.

If you're concerned about someone:

- Talk in private.
- Listen to their story and let them know you care.
- Ask directly about suicide, calmly and without judgment.
- Show understanding and take their concerns seriously.
- Let them know their life matters to you. That one conversation could save a life.