



## Cyberbullying and Suicide

### Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is bullying that occurs through digital technology, such as social media, text messaging, or e-mail. Like other forms of bullying, it is distinguished by three elements:

1. There is intent to harm another person.
2. The hurtful and aggressive behavior is repeated.
3. There is a real or perceived imbalance of power—socially or physically—between the victim and the bully.

Examples of cyberbullying can range from spreading harmful rumors to verbal threats and attacks. Cyberbullying is especially harmful for several reasons:

- It can occur 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- The bully can remain anonymous.
- The hurtful messages or images can be spread quickly and widely.

Cyberbullying is widespread. In 2013, nearly one in seven students (14.8%) ages 13–17 reported being cyberbullied through e-mail, chat rooms, instant messaging, websites, or texting in the past year.<sup>1</sup> Although any adolescent can be a victim of cyberbullying, girls, youth with disabilities, and those perceived as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender are especially vulnerable.<sup>2</sup>

#### Warning Signs That a Teen Is Being Cyberbullied

- Acting withdrawn or depressed
- Showing reluctance to go to school
- Falling behind in schoolwork
- Changing his or her online communication patterns
- Showing nervous or tense behavior when checking an account or receiving a text message



### The Relationship between Bullying and Adolescent Suicide

Although most youth who are involved in bullying—whether verbal, physical, or online—do not engage in suicide-related behavior, studies have shown that youth who are involved in bullying—either as victims or as bullies—are at higher risk of suicide-related behavior.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, some researchers have found that cyberbullying is more closely linked with suicidal behavior than face-to-face bullying.<sup>4,5</sup>

Following are some concrete steps that youth and their parents can take to intervene in acts of cyberbullying—and to prevent it before it starts.

<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2014). Youth risk behavior surveillance—United States, 2013. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/pdf/ss/ss6304.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Promote Prevent. Understand Cyberbullying. Retrieved from <http://preventingbullying.promoteprevent.org/cyberbullying/understand-cyberbullying>

<sup>3</sup> Centers for Disease Control & Prevention. (2014). The relationship between bullying and suicide: What we know and what it means for schools. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/bullying-suicide-translation-final-a.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> van Geel, M., Vedder, P., & Tanilon, J. (2014). Relationship between peer victimization, cyberbullying, and suicide in children and adolescents: A meta-analysis. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 168(5), 435–442.

<sup>5</sup> Kessel Schneider, S., O'Donnell, L., Stavee, A., & Coulter, R. S. W. (2012). Cyberbullying, school bullying, and psychological distress: A regional census of high school



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## Preventing—and Intervening in—Cyberbullying

Bystanders (people who witness bullying) can have an impact on both bullying and cyberbullying. However, because cyberbullying takes place online, a bystander of cyberbullying often witnesses the behavior away from the view of parents and other adults. Therefore, she or he has the potential to intervene when acts of cyberbullying occur. Parents can empower teens by discussing the steps that a bystander of cyberbullying can take:

- Speak up on behalf of the victim. Inform the bully that the unkind behavior is hurtful and will not be tolerated.
- Refuse to give the bully an audience. Do not share, send, or forward negative messages.
- Reach out to support the person being cyberbullied. Be a friend to the victim, send supportive messages online, and encourage the victim to talk with a trusted adult.
- Tell a parent, school official, or other trusted adult.
- Report cyberbullying to the site on which it is occurring.

Parents can also play an active role in cyberbullying prevention. By educating teenagers about the appropriate and responsible use of online technologies, parents can help keep their own children—as well as other youth—safe online. Here are some steps that parents can take:

- Learn more about the types of digital technology that youth are using—including messaging apps and texting acronyms. While it may seem hard to keep up with the ever-changing digital platforms, Internet safety websites can keep parents updated on what's popular among teens.
- Jointly create a family online safety contract with ground rules about safe use of digital technology (e.g., privacy settings, monitoring, and consequences for misusing the Internet).
- Monitor teen Internet use. Know which sites your teen is using and the usernames and passwords so that you can check on them, especially if you suspect your child might be a victim of cyberbullying.
- Monitor teen phone use. Create simple rules for teens to follow at home, such as no phones in the bedroom at night.
- When cyberbullying does occur, report it to the online service provider, your child's school, and/or law enforcement.

## Resources

- Promote Prevent: Cyberbullying: <http://preventingbullying.promoteprevent.org/cyberbullying>
- Center for Disease Control and Prevention: The Relationship Between Bullying and Suicide: What We Know and What it Means for Schools: <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/bullying-suicide-translation-final-a.pdf>
- Promote Prevent: Family Media Agreements for Internet Use—Example Contract: <http://www.promoteprevent.org/family-media-agreements-internet-use-sample-contract>
- Family Online Safety Institute: Teens and Online Messaging Apps: <https://www.fosi.org/good-digital-parenting/understanding-messaging-apps>



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## How to Talk with Your Teen about Suicide

Whether at school, in books, on television, or over social media, teenagers will inevitably encounter the topic of suicide. As a parent, it can be challenging to know what to say about suicide—and how exactly to say it. Still, it's far better to acknowledge the subject and address its impact on your teen than to say nothing at all. By communicating openly with your son or daughter in an intentional, informed, and compassionate way, you can help your teen understand how to assist their peers in getting help if they are upset or coping with a death by suicide. This resource offers some concrete tips on how to approach this sensitive topic with your teen.

### Educate Yourself

Take time to prepare for the conversation by educating yourself on risk factors, which are the personal and environmental characteristics that can increase the likelihood of suicide. Examples of risk factors in teens include alcohol and other substance use, access to a firearm, mental illness, and experiencing a sense of hopelessness. Learn about protective factors, those personal and environmental characteristics that can decrease the likelihood of suicide in teens. Examples of protective factors include social connectedness, restricted access to firearms, a positive sense of self-esteem, and the presence of a caring adult. Also, know the warning signs of suicide.

### Empower Your Teen

Many teens who are at risk may not directly talk about suicide. However, they may say something, do something, or write or draw something that comes to the attention of a peer or a friend. They can serve as **"gatekeepers,"** that is individuals who are aware of the warning signs of suicide and how to take action.

Parents can empower their teenagers to be gatekeepers. ***"Don't be afraid to speak up if you feel like a peer is at risk."*** Help your teen identify trusted adults at home and at school to whom they can talk if a friend or other peer seems to be in trouble. Then, provide action steps that your teen can take as a gatekeeper if he or she thinks a friend or other peer may be at risk:

1. Take seriously any warning signs (such as an expression of hopelessness over social media or a suicidal message via text).
2. React immediately by telling a trusted adult. (As a parent, you might add, ***"I hope I am a trusted adult for you."***)

### Talking to Your Teen after a Death by Suicide

In the hours, days, and weeks following a death by suicide of a friend, other peer, or adult in the community, it is an especially important time to talk with your teen about suicide. In such circumstances, there are concrete steps that you can take as a parent to be supportive. Here are some ideas to consider and things you can say to your teen.

#### Safe Messaging

***When talking about suicide with your teen, it's important to keep these messages in mind:***

- Everyone can play a role in prevention efforts.
- Build trust with your son or daughter. Practice compassion and empathy.
- Treatment and support are available.
- Young people are resilient, and they can get better!

#### Warning Signs

***The following signs may indicate a person may be at risk for suicide:***

- Talking about or making plans for suicide, including suicidal notes, texts, social media posts, or threats, such as "I'm going to kill myself."
- Expressing hopelessness about the future, such as "No one will miss me" or "The world will be better without me."
- Displaying severe or overwhelming emotional pain or distress.



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- **Be honest.** *“Talking about suicide is difficult for me, too.”*
- **Replace rumors with facts.** *“Rumors can be very harmful and hurt those who are grieving.”*
- **Allow your teen to express his or her feelings.** Validate a range of your teen’s reactions, whatever those may be. *“Everyone responds to shocking news differently: Some may look numb. Some may get angry. Some may cry, and others may even act silly.”*
- **Express empathy.** *“I am so sorry that this has happened to you.”*
- **Remind your teen of his or her role as a gatekeeper.** Ask about your teen’s peers who may also have been affected by this suicide: *“Is there anyone you may be concerned about?”* Remind your teen of the action steps to take if they think a friend or other peer may be at risk.
- **Brainstorm with your teen ways that they can grieve.** Plan to go to the funeral with your teen or to help reach out to the family of the deceased. *“I will help you get through this. If you want to go to the funeral, I will go with you.”*
- **Remind your teen that suicide is complex.** Your teen may hear or read about simplistic explanations for suicide, such as *“the bullying caused it”* or *“the breakup of a romance caused it.”* Reassure your teen, *“Suicide is a very complex thing, and no one person, no one thing, is ever to blame.”* Some teenagers who were close to the deceased may need more reassurance: *“You are not to blame, and this is not your fault.”*

### Myths about Suicide

Here are some common misconceptions about suicide:

- Talking about suicide puts ideas into a young person’s head.
- Most suicides occur with little to no warning.
- Only experts can prevent suicide.
- If individuals are really intent on killing themselves, there is nothing that we can do to stop them.
- Younger children don’t have the capacity to think about suicide.

Here are some truths about suicide:

- Studies have shown that talking about suicide does not put ideas in a child’s head—as a matter of fact, it lowers anxiety.
- Most suicidal individuals do give some warning that they are in emotional pain.
- Teens are ambivalent about taking their lives. Any action by a well-caring adult can help prevent a young person from dying by suicide.
- Young people who experience suicidal thoughts and behaviors can go on to lead normal, healthy lives.

## Resources for Parents

The **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** is a network of call centers that offer free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

**Lifeline Crisis Text Line** is a free, 24/7, confidential text service for people in crisis: <https://www.crisistextline.org/>. Text HOME to 741741 anytime, about any kind of crisis.

The **Trevor Project** is a national, 24-hour, toll-free confidential suicide hotline for LGBT teens: <http://www.thetrevorproject.org/>

The **Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide** provides resources for parents on teen suicide and the role of parents in prevention: <http://www.sptsusa.org/>

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## Adolescent Risk and Protective Factors for Suicide

In 2014, suicide was the second leading cause of death among adolescents between the ages of 13 to 19 according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Risk and protective factors are the personal and environmental characteristics that can *increase* (risk factors) and *decrease* (protective factors) the likelihood of suicide in an individual or group. Although some factors cannot be changed, such as an adolescent’s family history of suicide, other factors can be changed, such as getting treatment for substance abuse and reducing access to lethal means. Effective prevention efforts should seek to reduce risk factors and increase protective factors.

The following are a few key points about risk and protective factors:

- Suicide risk is usually greater among people with more than one risk factor.
- Risk and protective factors in an adolescent’s life may change often, even weekly or daily.

Risk Factors for Suicide in Adolescents	
<b>Behavioral Health Issues/Disorders</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Depressive and anxiety disorders and other mental health disorders</li> <li>• Substance abuse or dependence (alcohol and other drugs)</li> <li>• Previous suicide attempt</li> <li>• Self-injury (without intent to die)</li> </ul>
<b>Personal Characteristics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hopelessness</li> <li>• Low self-esteem</li> <li>• Social alienation and isolation, lack of belonging</li> </ul>
<b>Adverse/Stressful Life Circumstances</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interpersonal difficulties or losses (e.g., breaking up with a girlfriend or boyfriend or family problems)</li> <li>• Bullying, either as a victim or a perpetrator</li> <li>• Physical, sexual, and/or psychological abuse</li> <li>• Exposure to suicide of a peer</li> <li>• Family history of suicide</li> <li>• Parent mental health problems</li> <li>• Problems in school (academic and/or discipline)</li> </ul>
<b>Access to Means</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to lethal means, such as guns or pills, <b>especially</b> in the home</li> </ul>

### A Note about the Role of *Impulsivity* in Adolescent Suicide

People often ask about the role that impulsivity plays in adolescent suicide. Experts think about impulsivity’s role in two different ways—first as a behavioral trait (that an individual can possess) and second when the act of suicide itself is (or appears) impulsive in nature. Evidence on the exact role that impulsivity plays in adolescent suicide is inconclusive.



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## Protective Factors for Suicide in Adolescents

<b>Individual Characteristics and Behaviors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong problem-solving and coping skills</li> <li>• Psychological or emotional well-being</li> <li>• Positive self-esteem</li> <li>• Cultural and religious beliefs that affirm life and discourage suicide</li> <li>• Resilience: Ongoing or continuing sense of hope in the face of adversity</li> </ul>
<b>Family and Other Social Support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family support, connectedness to family, closeness to or strong relationship with parents, and parental involvement</li> <li>• Close friends, a caring adult, and social support</li> </ul>
<b>School</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safe school environment (especially for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth)</li> <li>• Adequate or better academic achievement</li> <li>• Sense of connectedness to the school</li> </ul>
<b>Health and Mental Health Care</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Easy access to care and support through ongoing relationships with health and mental health care providers</li> </ul>
<b>Access to Means</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Restricted access to firearms: guns locked or unloaded, ammunition stored or locked, or no guns in the home</li> <li>• Restricted access to pills (such as prescription medications)</li> </ul>

## Preventing Adolescent Suicide

People who work with adolescents—such as mental health providers, coaches, and teachers—can promote protective factors in the following ways:

- Enhance life skills and resilience
  - » Offer skill-building workshops that address common stressors (e.g., relationship issues) and teach mindfulness and stress reduction
  - » Create a school environment that promotes and encourages qualities such as empathy and optimism
  - » Provide resources and information that help adolescents cope with life transitions
- Promote social connectedness and support
  - » Support development of relationships between youth and positive adults (e.g., teachers and coaches)
  - » Implement activities in schools that help students increase and strengthen their social networks
  - » Provide professional development and support for teachers and other school staff to enable them to meet the diverse cognitive, emotional, and social needs of adolescents

**Concerned about an adolescent? Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255).**

Sources:

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## Resources for Military Members, Veterans, and their Families

The following websites, online tools, and apps are examples of some of the good resources available to support the mental health of military service members, veterans, and their families.

### Military Service Members and Veterans

#### Veteran Crisis Line (also known as the Military Crisis Line)

<http://www.veteranscrisisline.net/>

Veterans in crisis, and their family members or friends, can use this confidential toll-free hotline, online chat, or text to connect with qualified, caring Department of Veterans Affairs responders.

#### Real Warriors

<http://realwarriors.net>

Real Warriors website provides resource links on a range of topics, 24/7 help through live chat, and a toll-free crisis line, podcasts, videos, and message boards.

#### Mobile App: PTSD Coach

<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/pages/PTSDCoach.asp>

The PTSD Coach application allows phone users to manage their symptoms, links them with local sources of support, and provides information on posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Computer users can go to [PTSD Coach ONLINE](#) for self-help tools to manage stress.

#### After Deployment

<http://afterdeployment.dcoe.mil>

This website contains information and wellness resources for the military community on a variety of topics, including suicide prevention, physical injury, depression, anger, alcohol and drugs, and stigma.

#### Vets4Warriors

<http://www.vets4warriors.com>

This is a confidential 24/7 peer-support service staffed by veterans and sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Army National Guard, Air National Guard, and Air Force Reserve and offers referrals, ongoing support, and resources to service members and their families.

#### Wounded Warrior Project

<http://www.woundedwarriorproject.org/>

This project supports severely injured service members and their families during recovery and transition to civilian life with programs and services.

#### About Face

<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/apps/AboutFace/Index.html>

Veterans and family members can learn about PTSD, explore treatment options, hear real stories, and get advice from clinicians who have treated thousands of cases of PTSD.

#### Make the Connection

<http://maketheconnection.net/>

Launched by the Department of Veterans Affairs, this website focuses on connecting veterans and their friends and family members with information, resources, and solutions to issues affecting their lives.



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## Family Members

### NAMI Homefront

<https://www.nami.org/Find-Support/NAMI-Programs/NAMI-Homefront>

A free, six-session educational program for families, caregivers, and friends of military service members and veterans with mental health conditions.

### Military Kids Connect

<http://militarykidsconnect.t2.health.mil/>

This is an online community for kids 6–17 years old that includes age-specific coping strategies, games, and peer support. It also includes guidance for parents and teachers to help children cope with tough issues, such as grief, physical injury, and PTSD.

### Sesame Street Talk, Listen, Connect

<http://www.sesamestreet.org/parents/topicsandactivities/toolkits/tlc>

Talk, Listen, Connect offers strategies and resources to help [preschool age] children through difficult periods of transition and separation that can come with military service. Sesame Street [mobile apps](#) are also available on the website [Military Families Near and Far](#).

### Babies on the Homefront

<http://babiesonthehomefront.org>

This website provides military and veteran parents with ideas for enhancing everyday moments with their baby or toddler. A free app is also available for download.

### Military Kids on the Move

<http://apps.militaryonesource.mil/MOS/f?p=MYOM:HOME2:0>

For children ages 6–17, this website has information and advice on moving, social life, school, and more.

### Blue Star Families

<http://www.bluestarfam.org/>

Blue Star provides support to military families with chapters on military bases and National Guard sites across the country. They connect members to resources, programs, and special opportunities that address issues facing military families.

### Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS)

<http://www.taps.org/about/>

TAPS supports family members and caregivers of military service members who have died through a 24/7 peer-support network, grief resources, a grief camp, and a toll-free help and information line.



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