

CT PUBLIC HEALTH ALERT: YOUTH SUICIDE A CALL TO ACTION

THE TRAGEDY OF THE PAST FOUR WEEKS

Tragically, in the past four weeks Connecticut has lost four young teens to suicide. We share this alert so that during these uncertain times youth collectively receive increased support, and so adults understand that right now youth are:

- 1) Struggling with feelings of uncertainty
- 2) Feeling isolated and lonely
- 3) Experiencing losses and grief
- 4) Needing increased mental health support
- 5) Impacted by world events

The COVID pandemic and civil unrest in our country has increased uncertainty for all us, including our youth, and we cannot underestimate the impact. Physical and social distancing, increased isolation as cold weather approaches, school concerns, changes in relationships, and worries for family and friend's health and the future of our country all contribute toward increased anxiety and despair. We must work to mitigate this to prevent further tragedy.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO SUPPORT YOUTH

It is paramount that we specifically consider and address feelings of grief, loss and disruption for youth. While the COVID pandemic disruption may be at the forefront of concern, other events and violence in our country due to racism and the tumultuous election have added to despair and anxiety.

Adults at school and home need to encourage and model open communication and create opportunities for youth to discuss their sense of loss. Work collectively with youth, parents, educators, other trusted adults, and organizations in the community to nurture a compassionate community that provides a sense of safety and belonging for all.

EVERYTHING IS

DIFFERENT FOR YOUTH

- Nothing is the same as it used to be COVID has changed and disrupted the lives of youth.
- They feel the weight and impact of the pandemic in ways we may not fully understand.
- They may not always be able to articulate what they are feeling or why they are feeling a certain way.
- The brain of a youth is still developing up throughout their twenties. Thus, their coping skills and impulsivity are often challenged and limited.
- Their support system has greatly diminished and they are feeling disconnected. Friends may be in school on a different day, some friends may be fully remote learning, and others may have changed schools or towns due to a move.
- They may be grappling with the loss of missed experiences taken for granted in the past such as going to the movies, dating, club/group activities, sports, concerts, attending dances and school events, or simply gathering with friends. It seems hopeless, as there is no real end in sight.
- They may need more intensive intervention to help them process their emotions. It is well documented that grief may show up differently in youth than it does in adults (*Pearlman et. al, 2014*). It's not uncommon for some youth to express grief as anxiety, anger, frustration, or inability to focus.

Establish new routines, healthy habits, and traditions to help alleviate some of the effects of trauma associated with the pandemic. Encouraging youth to focus on these will help them to be happier, less anxious, more resilient, and better equipped to accept life's challenges as they come.

One example to help manage intense emotions is by introducing mindful habits to use daily (Asby, 2020).

- 1) being present
- 2) being calm
- 3) being compassionate
- 4) being grateful
- 5) being reflective

And, trust your gut. If you sense something is wrong, follow through and ask. Don't wait to see if things improve without your intervention, or expect that someone else will reach out. There's no guarantee that will happen. Support youth by telling them and showing them you care, and helping them access the help they need at school, at home or in the community. Utilize the multiple resources available for medical and mental health care.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF CARE

Just as the stress of this prolonged crisis is taking a toll on youth, it is impacting their trusted adults as well, which can impact a trusted adult's ability to connect and identify risk and warning signs in others. It is important to practice self-care and seek help so you can persevere, be a trusted adult role model, and support the youth in your life. Developing a self-care plan that addresses your mental and physical health that you can use daily will help considerably. And, when you feel that you need professional help, it is important to reach out without hesitation to the resources you have available whether through an Employee Assistance Program, your Doctor, or use of a warm line, crisis line or text line.

Self-care is not selfish, it's essential.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

We cannot overstate the impact of the stress, grief, loneliness, trauma, fear, anxiety and hopelessness that most of us have experienced at some time during this pandemic, nor can we say enough about the disproportionate burden that some segments of our society bear throughout this crisis and beyond. Please remember that our youth feel this, too.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PREVENTION

Restrict access to lethal means. Lock up all prescription and over-the-counter medications. Lock up firearms, and store the ammunition separately. Youth almost always know where a firearm is located.

Know the warning signs when youth may need help. These include changes in eating and sleeping, increased self-isolation, impulsivity, agitation, sensitivity, boredom and laziness, and reduced interest in typical activities.

Know what questions to ask. A simple screening tool, such as the C-SSRS (Columbia Suicide Severity Rating Scale), to help determine a youth's risk, and it should especially be used by health and mental health care providers, school systems, and police.

Prevent adverse long-term impact of this moment. Incorporate recommendations from the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACES) into prevention and practice.

RESOURCES

To get more involved, training information and resources:

CT Suicide Advisory Board

www.preventsuicidect.org

www.gizmo4mentalhealth.org

www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pub/youth_suicide.html

www.cssrs.columbia.edu

www.211ct.org or Call 211, or Text "CT" to 741741.

Crisis Call 1 (800) 273-TALK (8255)

Youth and adult mobile crisis services - Call 211 Back to School After COVID-19: Supporting Student and Staff Mental Health (SAMHSA, 2020)

CT Regional Suicide Advisory Boards:

<https://www.preventsuicidect.org/about-us/regional-sab-business/>

We must acknowledge the profound impact this experience has on each of us, be patient with ourselves and others, work to embrace each other, and cultivate our desires and create space for creativity, generativity, and hope.

This is the time for community building with equity and learning, bolstered by effective leadership and collective vision of a brighter, hopeful future.