



Wellness Today *For Parents & Families*

Warning Signs of Emotional Struggles

Early recognition is key to overcoming challenges. Signs your child may be struggling emotionally include:

- Loss of interest in usual activities
- Mood or behavior changes including appetite and sleep
- Withdrawing or isolating
- Taking excessive risks or behaving recklessly
- Repeated unexplained body aches and pains
- Anxiety interfering with activities
- Frequent anger, irritability, criticizing, or tantrums
- Change in academic performance
- Preoccupation with death or dying
- Talking about wanting to die or being a burden

How to Get Help

If your child is not responding to support being offered, not improving, or worsening, seek help by consulting with a medical or mental health professional. If having thoughts of suicide or feeling unable to keep self safe call 911 or go to the nearest Emergency Room.

5 Tips For Parents: Talking About Suicide

1. Manage your own emotions. Remaining calm helps keep the door of communication open between you and your child.
2. Invite and allow for your child to speak, being careful not to dominate the conversation.
3. Prioritize time to have these conversations often and when you can maintain a calm listening stance.
4. Ask questions to your child in a direct manner. Ask if they are thinking of harming themselves or thinking of suicide.
5. If your child shares they have thoughts of wanting to die or hurt themselves, listen while remaining calm. Ensure safety, including that they do not have access to knives, firearms, medications, or other means that could be used to hurt themselves. Ask questions in a caring way and express a need to connect them to other supports to help. Call 911, go to the Emergency Room, or call the Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-8255), if needed.

I.S. P.A.T.H. W.A.R.M
Suicide Warning Signs

IDEATION
Threatened or communicated thoughts of wanting to hurt self or die

SUBSTANCE ABUSE
Increased or excessive use of substances such as alcohol, drugs, prescription or over-the-counter medication

PURPOSELESS
Feeling there is no reason for living or sense of purpose in life

ANXIETY
In addition to anxiety, watch for agitation, being unable to sleep or sleeping all of the time

TRAPPED
Feeling as if one has no way out

HOPELESSNESS
The Feeling that nothing will get better

WITHDRAWAL
From friends, family and society

ANGER
Uncontrolled, rage, revenge-seeking

RECKLESSNESS
Engaging in reckless behaviors, or seeming to act without thinking

MOOD CHANGES
Dramatic shifts from positive to negative and from negative to positive

How to Get Help

If you or someone you know is struggling emotionally or behaviorally, support is available. Begin by talking with a medical doctor or a mental health professional.

Below are resources available in the community to help:

- **Hope4Utah** provides resources for parents on talking with children and teens about suicide and mental health, as well as offering practical guidance for accessing help. www.hope4utah.com
- **SafeUT**  app provides real-time crisis intervention through a phone call, chat, or submitting confidential tips to school administrators on bullying, threats, or violence.
- **National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)** offers information regarding mental health conditions and support groups for families. www.nami.org
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** (English and Spanish) 24/7, free, and confidential support for people in distress. 1-800-273-8255
- **Crisis Text Line** is the free, 24/7, confidential text message service for people in crisis. Text HOME to 7417414.

Suicide Prevention Starts Now

Ninety percent of individuals who died by suicide experienced some form of mental illness. Know the signs and risk factors of mental illness and suicide so you can respond proactively. Below is a list, although not exhaustive, of factors that could increase your child's risk.

- Mental illness/psychiatric diagnosis
- Family history of suicide
- Exposure to suicide
- Family history of mental illness
- Physical/sexual abuse
- Losses
- Aggressive behavior
- Impulsivity
- Lack of social support/ social isolation
- Poor coping skills
- Access to ways of harming oneself, like guns, knives, etc.
- Difficulties in dealing with sexual orientation
- Physical illness
- Family disruptions (divorce or problems with the law)
- Traumatic event

Working to prevent suicide includes, watching for warning signs, asking directly “Have you had thoughts of wanting to hurt yourself or die,” expressing care, concern and a desire to help and connecting the individual to qualified help. Many parents are concerned asking about these thoughts will introduce the idea of suicide to their child. Studies indicate this is not the case. Sometimes children and teens withhold sharing they are experiencing thoughts of wanting to hurt themselves or die because of concern of how parents will react. Direct, non-judgmental questions can encourage sharing of thoughts and feelings. If you suspect they are suicidal, get help immediately.

Protective Skills

Regardless of age, there are skills children can develop to help create greater mental wellness and increase protection against suicide.

1. Encourage talking about feelings and teach ways to handle distressing emotions. He or she may need help identifying the emotions they are experiencing. As you and your child talk about their feelings they can better understand what is occurring, regulate their emotions and identify healthy ways to respond to situations.
2. If your child has difficulty talking about emotions encourage writing, drawing or physical activity to express emotions. Children and many teens often express more through actions than words.

Parent-Teen Conversation Starter Idea

Be creative in making the conversation feel easier to have. Begin by watching together the popular YouTube music video “Bend Not Break,” by Alex Boyé. Then discuss ways they can “bend” rather than “break” in handling hopelessness or other life struggles.

3. Teach that everyone will experience all emotions, including sadness, loneliness, disappointments and frustrations, from time to time. Create a plan with your child of who they can speak with if experiencing negative emotions and things they can do to help themselves feel better. Create a feelings first aid kit with items that can help your child feel better when experiencing uncomfortable emotions. Keep in an easily accessible place. This might include a soft blanket, a book they enjoy, a toy or craft, art supplies, textures they find soothing like slime, etc.
4. Teach that harming oneself is not an answer for getting through problems in a helpful healthy way. Talk of options for handling the specific challenges your child is facing.
5. Help your child learn to manage negative thoughts. For many, replacing a negative thought with a positive thought is difficult to accomplish. Other strategies to change negative thoughts and overcome hopelessness can be learned through meeting with a qualified mental health professional, or by reading self-help books. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is particularly helpful for many in learning to change thoughts, feelings and behaviors.

Responding to Suicidal Thoughts and/or Attempts

If you think your child might be at risk for suicide, have them evaluated by a professional. Begin by calling your primary care physician, therapist, psychiatrist, or visit the closest emergency department. In an emergency, call 911.

Always ensure your child does not have access to things that could harm them, such as guns, knives or medications, to name a few.

Create a safety plan with your child by identifying the following:

1. Warning signs (thoughts, images, mood, situation, behavior) that a crisis may be developing.
2. Internal coping strategies – Things your child can do to take their mind off their problems without contacting another person (relaxation technique, physical activity).
3. Healthy people and social settings that provide distraction for your child.
4. People your child can ask for help.
5. What needs to be done to make the environment safe for them.
6. What is one thing they feel is most important and worth living for?

Disclaimer—The information in this newsletter is a starting place and might not be effective for every child or every situation. Mental health conditions are complex, as people differ widely in their conditions and responses, and interactions with other conditions. Interventions and treatments are best evaluated and adapted by a qualified clinician to meet individual needs. This newsletter is produced by Hope4Utah, a nonprofit organization providing trainings, resources and supports to prevent, intervene, and respond to suicides and to improve mental health. Articles contributed by Jessica Williamson, LCSW, who specializes in mental health treatment of children, teens and adults at her a private practice in South Jordan, Utah.