

UPDATE

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Suicide Awareness Post COVID Pandemic: Focus on Suicide Prevention

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Our world has been indelibly changed by the COVID pandemic and for our youth, forever impacted. Children and adolescents have lost important years where they should have had critical opportunities to grow and learn, to foster peer relationships and to learn and practice coping skills within their social world. The loss of school and all the things that center around school life was just that, a loss. This loss is a kind of grief. Milestones like graduation events diminished, extra-curricular activities closed or diminished, loss of belonging to clubs and special groups all created feelings of sorrow, anguish and heartbreak. Youth who were already struggling and vulnerable pre-pandemic reported feeling despondency, despair and hopelessness. Outside of home, school is the second most important place in their lives. The shutdown of schools introduced stressors including remote learning and social isolation. These stressors increased family conflicts and economic burdens, all of which worsened existing mental health challenges and created new ones. These consequences have especially burdened youth, as seen in sharp increases in youth depression, anxiety and other mental health and social challenges. Society is facing a severe public health crisis at this very moment. Our youth need immediate attention to their mental health needs. They need our support and keen awareness to their struggles more than ever before. Sadly, youth and young adults ages 10–24 years account for 14% of all suicides. Suicide is the third leading cause of death for young people and in youth ages 10-14 suicide is the second leading cause of death.

We are all called to action to find a way to prevent this statistic from increasing by working together as parents, guardians, family members, friends, teachers, school administrators, coaches and extracurricular activity leaders, mentors, service providers and many others who play a role in a child's life.

Suicide is rarely caused by a single circumstance or event. Instead, a range of complex factors can increase risk. These risks can be seen at the individual, relationship, community

and societal level. Everyone can help prevent youth suicide by increasing your awareness of risk factors. Here are some examples of risk factors:

Individual Risk Factors: History of depression and other mental illnesses, social isolation or peer rejections, substance misuse, current or prior history of adverse childhood experiences of trauma, loss of a loved one, LGBTQ+ community.

Relationship Risk Factors: Bullying, family/loved one's history of suicide, loss of relationships, high conflict or violent relationships, social isolation and rejections by peer group, high degree of conflict within the family.

Community Risk Factors: Lack of access to healthcare, suicide cluster in the community, stress of acculturation, community violence, discrimination, high pressure, achievement oriented academic settings.

Societal Risk Factors: Stigma associated with seeking help for mental health concerns, easy access to lethal means of suicide, unsafe media portrayals of suicide, unsupervised social media access, especially frequent exposure to negative images and content.

What Can We Do? Early identification and outreach can make all the difference in prevention of suicide. The most important thing we can do is ask direct questions about our concerns. Educating each other is still vitally needed to aid in people's ease of asking hard questions. There are still people who fear they will plant the idea if they bring it up, or don't want to offend or pry. We must challenge these notions when we encounter them and provide others prevention awareness to counter these distorted ideas. Our youth's lives are literally depending on all of us as a society. We all need to be comfortable asking about suicide directly and without judgment. Isolation and a sense of alienation is one of the predictors of suicide. The anecdote to these feelings is to experience connectedness and this sense of connectedness starts on the individual one to one level. Youth who feel

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connected to a caring adult, school, community and other social institutions are significantly less likely to choose suicide as a way to cope with unbearably strong emotions. Compelling research currently exists demonstrating that evidence-based treatment approaches such as DBT and CBT are highly successful at targeting suicidal thinking directly and reducing suicide risk. More access to these lifesaving treatment approaches is needed if we are to reduce the

terrible current statistic of 14 % of youth suicide in our country. Suicide is preventable. We all have a role to play to create healthy and strong individuals, families and communities. Suicide awareness is something you can do.

Content source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control
<https://www.cdc.gov/suicide/facts/index.html>

About Four Winds... *Four Winds Hospitals are located on two campuses in New York State. Four Winds Westchester is 50 minutes north of midtown Manhattan. Four Winds Saratoga is located in Saratoga Springs, 30 minutes north of Albany. Four Winds provides inpatient and outpatient mental health treatment services. We are the leading providers of specialized inpatient psychiatric treatment for children, adolescents and adults in the Northeast.*

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