

Youth mental health: Recognizing the signs and seeking help

Mind Springs Health has created a program to help children and teens with mental health and other challenges

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For the Post Independent

Know the risks for suicide If any you're worried about a friend or family member exhibiting the following behaviors, use the resources below to get help.

- Depressed, angry, impulsive
- Going through a relationship breakup, legal trouble or other setback
- Using drugs or alcohol more often
- Withdrawing from things they used to enjoy
- Talking about being better off dead
- Losing hope
- Acting reckless
- Feeling trapped

CRISIS HOTLINES AND OTHER RESOURCES:

- Local: 888-207-4004
- Statewide: 844-493-8255 (TALK)
- Text "TALK" to 38255
- Mind Springs Health: Visit mindspringshealth.org for locations, services, appointments and more.
- More online resources: SuicidePreventionColorado.org; MeansMatter.org; AFSP.org (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention); SPRC.org (Suicide Prevention Resource Center).
- Visit mindspringshealth.org/resources-for-todays-world for helpful learning tools about youth mental health issues.

Editor's Note: This sponsored contest is brought to you by Mind Springs Health.



While emotional distress is a natural part of life as kids grow up, sometimes this distress can lead to more serious mental health concerns. As parents, it's important to check in with your children often and ask them questions about how they're doing.

Bullying, social media use, trauma, peer pressure, substance use, family violence, poverty — these are all factors that can influence the mental health of children and adolescents.

While emotional distress is a natural part of life as kids develop and mature, sometimes this distress can lead to more serious concerns.

Mental health isn't just the absence of disease or a diagnosable disorder

— it includes emotional well-being, psychological well-being, social well-being and factors relating to quality of life, according to Youth.gov, a U.S. government website that promotes positive, healthy outcomes for American youth.

While research shows that youth or teen suicide often happens after a stressful life event, there are many other factors to consider when thinking about youth suicide risk.

Mind Springs' Resiliency Program

Mind Springs Health has developed an entire curriculum called the Resiliency Program to promote positive mental well-being within local middle schools. The 30-week program includes activities and education on a variety of topics — such as optimism, building healthy relationships, positive emotions and more — that teach behavioral skills and help youth build resiliency.

“One of the things we know about building resiliency is practicing gratitude,” said Dr. Amy Gallagher, a licensed psychologist and vice president at Whole Health, a subsidiary of Mind Springs Health.

“The program is designed to help schools and other groups change culture, so everyone is speaking the same language to enhance mental well-being and to build strong and healthy relationships.”

The curriculum is designed for the classroom, after-school or recreation programs, but Gallagher said Mind Springs hopes to expand the program to provide educational opportunities for parents and communities, as well. She said the Roaring Fork School District intends to implement it during this school year.

What are kids struggling with?

The Healthy Kids Colorado Survey, conducted every two years in schools across the state, provides a lot of answers about what kids are struggling with these days. Gallagher said the survey shows youth are reporting varying levels of depression and anxiety, experimenting with substances, and some are coping with thoughts about suicide.

Depression is the number one risk factor for suicide by teens, the

third leading cause of death in people between the ages of 10 and 24, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In ages 15 to 24, suicide is the second-leading cause of death, [surpassed only by accidents](#). [↗](#)

One of the most effective ways to understand whether your child is experiencing mental health issues is to check in and ask them questions such as, “How are you feeling today? What’s going well? What’s not going well?”

“Make sure, as parents, you’re keeping communication lines open and really checking in with your children,” Gallagher said.

Addressing trauma

Every child or teenager is going to react differently to traumatic situations, which can include anything from abuse to neglect to grief or other stressors. Some children might have a significant response while others might not appear to be affected at all, said said Michelle Doll, licensed professional counselor (LPC) and program coordinator for Mind Springs Health outpatient services.

“When something traumatic occurs, we don’t want to minimize it,” Doll said. “It’s very important we don’t just assume that a kid is tough and therefore will be OK. Take the time to make sure they are in fact managing the trauma and we’re not seeing any signs of post-traumatic stress.”

Children will exhibit different symptoms of post-traumatic stress depending on their development level and age, but some signs might include social withdrawal, sleep problems, increased aggression, impulsivity, poor problem-solving, sadness and emotional regulation challenges.


Because a lot of these symptoms can be common among developing children and teens, it’s important to look at what else might be going on.

“When a child begins manifesting certain behaviors or symptoms, we look into whether there’s any history of trauma or trauma-related circumstances,” Doll said.

A thorough assessment with the youth and his or her parents or primary caregivers could determine the proper diagnosis and treatment plan. Treatment for a kid suffering from post-traumatic stress is going to look a bit different than treating a kid with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), for example.

“Is it post-traumatic stress, struggles with adjustment as a child transitions into different stages of development or changing life circumstances, or are we looking at another mental health concern such as an anxiety disorder emerging,” Doll said, “or is it an age-appropriate response and maybe the youth could benefit from support in a different capacity, for instance support with social skills?”

Removing digital stressors

Screentime is an everyday activity that might seem like no big deal, but it could be having serious effects on children and teens’ emotional well-being. Teens that spend 5 or more hours online per day are at significantly higher risk for suicide and depression than those spending less than 1 hour, [according to research](#) .

From video games to YouTube videos to social media, the effects of the Internet are far-reaching. One example is bullying, which isn’t a new problem facing youth, but it has been exacerbated due to social media. Kids can no longer leave school for the day and get a break from the teasing or harsh comments— bullying can now continue on in the digital space outside of school hours.

“Having an electronic diet can be helpful — what can families do to have electronics-free time,” Gallagher said. “Parents need to model this for their children.”

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