

## COVID AND SUICIDE RISK IN TEENS

Much has changed since the onset of COVID-19 restrictions and social distancing measures. The way we complete our daily tasks such as work, school, and even grocery shopping, has completely shifted. Our usual coping skills have changed. We no longer can go to a friend's house or even go to school and engage in the routine activities that often served to reduce stress and anxiety in our lives. Anxiety and feelings of hopelessness have increased



due to current events. Unfortunately, incidents of self-harm and suicidal thoughts have also increased during this time. The following are tips that parents can use to help their children's mental health during COVID-19.

## WARNING SIGNS

Be aware of the following risk factors.

- Feeling like a burden
- Being disconnected or isolated from others
- History of engagement in self-harming behaviors or prior suicide attempts
- Hopelessness

For a detailed review of the warning signs, please see the companion article "Suicide and COVID-19"

## TIPS FOR PARENTS

Social distancing guidelines continue to remain in place; however, there are ways to keep your child socially engaged with their family and peers.

- Schedule virtual hangouts or socially distanced outings.
  - For example, planning a picnic with family at a park where everyone agrees to maintain a safe distance and wear their masks.
- Go for a walk with others, in the neighborhood, on the beach, or take a hike.
- Write letters/sending cards to friends and family members by mail.
- Have themed dinners at home or host family game nights.
- Assign family members to be responsible for dinner one night a week, from meal planning to shopping for ingredients, to cooking and setting the dinner table.
- Support a non-profit or social service agency in the community with a donation drive (socks for the homeless, diaper drive, etc.) and engaging family and friends for help.

### RESOURCES

<https://blog.chocchildrens.org/the-link-between-covid-19-and-suicide-what-parents-should-know/>

### RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Smiling Mind - free mobile app for mindfulness

Breathe 2 Relax - free mobile app for deep breathing to reduce stress

Freeing Your Child from Anxiety and Freeing Yourself from Anxiety by Tamar Chanksy (better option for older teens)

Parenting a Teen Who Has Intense Emotions – Pat Harvey & Britt Rathbone

Helping Teens Who Cut: Understanding and Ending Self-Injury by Michael Hollander

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## SCHEDULE SELF-CARE

- Help your child stay engaged in their usual coping activities, including self-care.
- Establish routines that are as close to pre-COVID habits as possible.
  - This includes waking up, getting dressed, eating meals.
- For any typical activities that are canceled, can you replace them with something similar?
  - For example, no more youth group on Wednesday afternoons; instead youth will go for a walk around the neighborhood and pick up one grocery bag of litter or will walk a neighbor's dog (activities that help your child stay connected to the community).
- Schedule virtual and/or socially distanced celebrations to honor milestones (birthdays, holidays) with friends and family.
- Maintain regular schedules for eating and sleeping. Physical health and well-being can significantly impact mental health.
- Schedule social media “diets” and disconnect from social media and news outlets that can often increase stress and anxiety.
  - This might look like setting a 1 hour unplug timer, no devices at meals, no devices while engaging in family activities, limiting device use at least until 1 hour before bedtime.
  - Help your child find time to disconnect and seek new ways for social connection and stimulation.
- “Old school” activities such as playing outdoors or engaging in drawing or painting, listening to music, can engage the senses and help a child de-escalate.
- Encourage your child to identify physical activities, such as yoga or dancing, that they can engage in from home.
  - YouTube and GoNoodle are excellent sources for finding physical activities that children can do with their parents!

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## HAVE A CONVERSATION

- As disheartening as a conversation about your child having suicidal thoughts may be, having a parent(s) who is willing to listen to understand is, itself, a deterrent from suicide.
- Give your child a safe space to share their thoughts and feelings and show them you are there to help by offering support and validation.
- Avoid saying, “I know what you are going through,” or “Other people have it worse.” Instead, say, “I cannot imagine what you are feeling,” or “It sounds like you feel overwhelmed/anxious/sad; what do you need to feel better?”

### REFERENCES

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