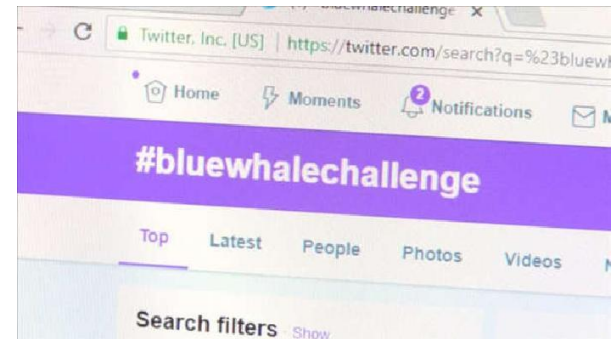


## Let's Talk About Suicide....

There is been growing interest in the influence of social media and the internet on suicide-related behavior. Pro suicide websites, chat rooms and YouTube uploads have the potential to be more influential on already vulnerable youth. With today's digitally savvy kids, parents and educators need to be even more mindful of online behavior as it relates to mental health and the overall wellbeing of our youth. In recent months, "The Blue Whale Challenge" has made its appearance in headlines, on the web and on social media sites. For many the question lingers, "What is the Blue Whale Challenge and is it real or a hoax?"



The Blue Whale Challenge has been reported to have started abroad but is now being more widely talked about in the United States. It is reportedly an online game in which players agree to follow a set of instructions over the course of 50 days. The instructions allegedly come from an anonymous instructor who requires the player to submit photographic evidence that they have completed each task, keeping their communication private. As the 50 days progress, each set of instructions gets more serious than the next, with the final instruction being to complete suicide. The game has been reaching young people via social media. Suicide prevention advocates stress that parents should watch for warning signs that are specific to the Blue Whale "game". Drawings of blue whales or statements such as "I am a blue whale" are examples. Likewise, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention suggests that parents check in with their children and monitor their online and social media activity for signs of the game. Over the past few months, U.S. news stories have pointed to a handful of teens engaging in some facets of the challenge resulting in their suicides, however, nothing has been confirmed outside of possible connections to the game. The best we can do is be aware and stay on top of the online activities of our youth. Experts also suggest that we can improve the social literacy of our youth by guiding them to better understand how to safely manage it. One social media site has taken action to help. When someone searches for words or hashtags related to the Blue Whale Challenge on Instagram, a pop-up box appears saying, "Can we help? Posts with words or tags you're searching for often encourage behavior that can cause harm and even lead to death. If you're going through something difficult, we'd like to help." At the bottom of the pop-up box are links to get support.

According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, in addition to monitoring social media use, it is important to talk to kids about how they are feeling and how they handle distress. Talking to youth about how they might handle challenges can open up doors for important conversations about coping skills. Likewise, being aware of mental health changes in youth can help parents and educators in early intervention efforts to connect vulnerable youth to supportive resources. Research tells us that 90% of people who die by suicide experience mental illness. According to the Nebraska Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 1 in 4 high school students report being depressed and 14.6% have considered suicide. Yet, 60% of kids with diagnosable depression are not getting treatment (Child Mind Institute, Children's Mental Health Report). Connecting youth to help is key. Mental health professionals are trained to help a person understand their feelings and can improve mental wellness and resiliency. Just as we take our kids to medical check-ups to promote their physical health, we also must promote and support the mental and emotional health of youth as well.

If you are concerned about a young person who may be vulnerable, The American Foundation of Suicide Prevention offers the following suggestions:

- Unless there is reason to believe your child already knows of or has played the Blue Whale Challenge, don't bring up the game. By doing so, you increase the chance that your child will investigate it on their own.
- Monitor your children's online and social media activity to ensure they are not engaging with the Blue Whale Challenge or other potentially dangerous activity.
- Check in with your child and ask how things are going. Ask open ended questions without judgement; validate and support their feelings.
- Engage in conversations about coping strategies.
- If you fear your child may be at risk, get professional help right away.

**Resources:**

CenterPointe Crisis Line (Lincoln)- 402-475-6695

Nebraska Family Helpline: 1-888-866-8660

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline- 1-800-273-Talk (8255)

SCIP- [www.scipnebraska.com](http://www.scipnebraska.com) (for referral information call your school office)

Emergency Mental Health Care/Crisis Assessments- Bryan West Campus Emergency Department, Lincoln, NE (outside of Lincoln area, contact your local hospital).

References: National Alliance on Mental Health; Mental Health America; The American Foundation of Suicide Prevention; Nebraska Youth Risk Behavior Survey (2015); National News Resources (CNN, Newsweek, USA Today); Child Mind Institute, Children's Mental Health Report (2015).