

KINDNESS...PASS IT ON!

Sometimes it feels like we could all be a little kinder. According to Psychology Today, kindness is “a behavioral response of compassion and actions that are selfless; or a mindset that places compassion for others before one’s own interests. In performing the selfless act, a person may undercut their own selfish interests.”

Remember that old cliché, “it is better to give than receive”? Turns out, it is more than just a mythical saying as there is plenty of research that supports this proverbial claim.

Research shows that being kind to others can help reduce stress, improve emotional well-being and even improve physical health.

More specifically, scientific research shows that participating in acts of kindness can increase the kind actors:

- Serotonin levels (a key hormone that stabilizes our mood, feelings of well-being)
- Oxytocin levels (a key hormone that has the power to regulate our emotional responses and pro-social behaviors, including trust, empathy)
- Dopamine levels (a key hormone that causes us to feel happy)
- Lifespan

Research has also shown that participating in acts of kindness can decrease:

- Stress
- Pain
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Blood Pressure

Yet, more importantly, we know that when someone is unkind to another person, it can have very harmful and lasting effects. Many adults can recall in detail, as a kid, when another kid or adult was cruel and/or unkind to them and at times re-experience how it made them feel.

We also know kids who do not have a reliable support system in place are at a higher risk for self-destructive behaviors such as substance abuse/use, eating disorders and even suicide. Suicide rates have increased among teens and even pre-teens over the last decade.

Now, more than ever, acts of kindness can help. Knowing all of this, it seems as though we should make more of an effort to actively and intentionally teach kids how to be kind.

Modeling kindness is truly the best way to teach kindness and all you have to do is simply be kind to others. We can take it a step further by actively helping kids come up with different ways/ideas of being kind and putting those ideas into action.

Kids can often times can think of ways to be kind to others beyond saying please and thank you, but sometimes are unsure how to put their ideas into action. For instance, many kids are able to recognize and verbalize that someone they know is in need of food and/or clothing and are able to express concern and compassion about the person in need but they may not be able to know how to turn their concern and compassion into action. Encourage kids/students to come up with ideas on how they can be kind through compassion by discussing needs in your school and/or neighborhood and then brainstorm possible ways to meet those needs.

BE KIND CAMPAIGN

Want to go a step further and put your brainstorming ideas into action? SCIP is kicking off a “BE KIND” Campaign, starting April 12 thru April 23, 2021. We invite any and all schools, teachers, administrators, parents and community members to join our “BE KIND” Campaign. We encourage you to post pictures and/or commentary of and about kids/students being kind to others. Whether that be through simple everyday acts of kindness, such as holding the door open for someone, or more complex acts such as a class raising money or collecting donated items for those in need, we want you to share your stories with others.

Click below to connect to the SCIP Facebook event page to learn more about our “Be Kind” Campaign Event.

[Right click here](#)

www.quietrev.com › [6-science-backed-ways-being-kin...](#)

healthyhumanlife.com

www.psychologytoday.com › [dont-forget-the-basil](#) › [b...](#)

Mental Health Disorders and Teen Substance Abuse

1 in 5 teenagers have a mental health disorder (CDC). Teenagers and people with mental health disorders are more at risk for drug use and addiction than other populations (American Addiction Centers). Teens may turn to drugs or alcohol for a variety of reasons, including curiosity, to relieve boredom, peer pressure or to escape emotional pain. Just like adults, teenagers who are struggling with emotional or mental health problems may turn to alcohol or drug use to help them manage difficult feelings. Because the teenage brain is still developing, the result of “self-medication” can result in more immediate problems. Substance use can spiral from experimentation to a serious disorder more quickly in adolescents compared to adults. This progression is more likely to happen in teenagers with untreated mental health disorders compared to other kids. Studies show that ADHD, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder and depression all increase the risk of drug use and dependence in adolescents. According to the Child Mind Institute, almost half of kids with mental health disorders, if not treated, will end up having a substance use disorder.

According to the Partnership to End Addiction, all behavior serves a purpose, even if it is risky behavior. Substance use is “reinforcing which means that a youth is more likely to keep using a drug if it seems to help with a perceived problem or need. At the root of teenage substance use may be an untreated or undetected mental health condition. While substance use may temporarily diminish unwanted mental health symptoms such as anxiety, hopelessness, irritability and negative thoughts, in the long term, it worsens them and may lead to abuse or dependence. Additionally, substance use also interferes with treatment for mental health disorders and may worsen the long-term prognosis for a teenager who is struggling. Substance use can diminish a teenager’s engagement in therapy, reducing its effectiveness. Likewise, substance use can lower the effectiveness of many prescription medications used to treat mental health disorders.

Research shows that identifying and treating mental health disorders can reduce substance use. Similarly, reducing substance use can improve treatment outcomes for mental health disorders. Helping to identify risk factors and protective strategies early on can help prevent adverse outcomes. Talking with youth about their mental health and giving them permission to share difficult thoughts and feelings with a trusting adult is a positive step in early identification. Recognizing anxiety, depression and other mental health disorders in youth and connecting them early with supports and treatment to help them cope can curb youth substance use (National Institute of Health). The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry also suggests the importance of incorporating substance use prevention into mental health treatment for adolescents.

Recognizing the difference between normal teenage behavior and behavior that may raise a red flag can be challenging for parents and caregivers. Just as it is important to monitor the physical health of teenagers, it is equally important to monitor their mental and behavioral health.

Signs of Mental Health Issues in Teens:

School Community Intervention and Prevention

April 2021

SCIP is funded in part by: Lincoln Public Schools, United Way of Lincoln/Lancaster County, Region V Systems, Nebraska DHHS: Division of Behavioral Health and Region 4 Behavioral Health System

- Feeling very sad or withdrawn for more than two weeks
- Trying to harm or end one's life or making plans to do so
- Severe, out-of-control, risk-taking behavior that causes harm to self or others
- Sudden overwhelming fear for no reason, sometimes with a racing heart or physical discomfort
- Significant weight loss or gain
- Seeing, hearing or believing things that aren't real
- Excessive use of alcohol or drugs
- Drastic changes in mood, behavior, personality or sleeping habits
- Extreme difficulty concentrating or staying still
- Intense worries or fears that get in the way of daily activities

Signs of Substance Abuse in Teens:

- Avoiding eye contact
- Ignoring or breaking curfew
- Acting irresponsibly
- Frequently asking for money
- Stealing
- Locking bedroom doors
- Making secretive calls
- Isolating from others/damaging relationships with family or friends
- Making excuses (or outright lying)
- Withdrawing from classroom participation/slipping in grades
- Resisting discipline or feedback
- Missing school or work
- Losing interest in hobbies or activities
- Abandoning long-time friends

When drug and/or alcohol use is present and overlaps with other mental health problems, it is necessary to seek out supports for both. Effective treatment starts with a detailed evaluation by a trained clinician who can address both substance use and mental health issues. For additional information, the Child Mind Institute and Partnership to End Addiction offers the following guide on addressing co-occurring disorders in teens.

<https://drugfree.org/article/substance-use-mental-health-your-guide-to-addressing-co-occurring-disorders/>

References: American Addiction Centers; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Child Mind Institute; Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry; National Institute of Health; Partnership to End Addiction

Suicidal Ideation: When and How to Act

“I wish I had never been born!” This can mean any number of things but, unfortunately, not everyone realizes this can be a cry for help. There may be a much deeper issue that could lead a teen or child to contemplate taking their own life. Many people want to help those who are experiencing suicidal ideation. However, they may be unsure what to do or how to recognize the severity of the situation, or just think that the person is saying these types of things to gain attention.

There are two different types of suicidal ideation. There is “passive” ideation, which is when an individual has vague ideas or thoughts about suicide or dying because they want some sort of pain to end. Passive suicidal ideation usually does not lead to attempting suicide. Luckily, most cases of passive ideation either resolve themselves or the individual gets help early in this stage, preventing an attempt. The other form of ideation is “active.” Active ideation occurs when an individual has persistent thoughts of death or suicide. They feel hopeless, lost, and cannot get those thoughts about dying or killing themselves out of their head no matter how hard they try. Once someone is in an active suicidal ideation mindset, they are at a higher risk of attempting and/or possibly completing suicide.

There are many risk factors that can lead to suicidal ideation. It can be related to mental health or physical health but can also be related to issues such as social difficulties. Examples of

School Community Intervention and Prevention April 2021

SCIP is funded in part by: Lincoln Public Schools, United Way of Lincoln/Lancaster County, Region V Systems, Nebraska DHHS: Division of Behavioral Health and Region 4 Behavioral Health System

social difficulties are bullying or poor social relationships; lack of family support; abuse of any kind; or substance and alcohol abuse. It can even be a genetic issue. Teens who have had family members die by suicide or who have attempted suicide are more likely to suffer from suicidal ideation and depression.

Warning signs that someone is having suicidal ideation or thoughts can differ from youth to youth. Not everyone is the same, especially when it comes to how they handle stress. Some common signs include agitation, anger, depression, anxiety, changes in personality, self-destructive behavior, risky behaviors, changes in sleep, changes in eating habits, mood swings, talking about death, giving away possessions without reason, isolation, finding the means to attempt suicide (like stockpiling medication or getting a gun), saying goodbye to people more frequently, and expressing hopelessness, or feeling trapped.

If someone exhibits warning signs of suicidal ideation, what are the next steps? As a parent or educator, you can do many things if you notice these changes or signs. You may even have a “gut feeling” that something isn’t right. Being supportive, understanding, and non-judgmental will let them know they can talk to you and trust you to help them. Take steps to remove the means they are planning to use. Talk openly to them and acknowledge that you see them and that they are struggling. It will feel awkward, but if you suspect someone is suicidal, ask them directly, “Do you have thoughts of killing yourself?” Although some people are hesitant to ask this question, it will not put the idea in their head if it is not already there. Instead, it will open up a dialogue for them to talk about their struggle and, if they are suicidal, it will give them a caring ear to talk to. Lastly, watch for signs of substance use. If there are signs, seek help immediately. Substances can increase these thoughts and lower one’s inhibitions, making it more likely they will follow through with attempting suicide.

Teens these days are under a lot of stress. When you add complicating factors, such as COVID-19 stressors like quarantine, changes in school, not seeing friends every day, family members, friends or themselves getting sick or possibly dying, it can affect perspectives. While suicide has always been a concern, especially among teens and young adults, COVID-19 stressors add to those risk factors.

If you suspect someone is suicidal, ask them, and encourage them to seek help. Never ignore the signs or that feeling that someone is suicidal, especially if someone says things like “*I wish I were dead!*”. Who knows, you may save a life.

References

National Vital Statistics Reports (2019 Statistics)

<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr69/nvsr-69-11-508.pdf>

Understanding Suicidal Ideation in Teens

<https://www.verywellmind.com/suicidal-ideation-defined-2611328>

Suicide Ideation in Adolescence

<https://evolvreatment.com/parent-guides/suicide-ideation/>

Suicidal Behavior in Children and Adolescents (Powerpoint by Nadine J Kaslow, Ph.D)

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/teen-suicide/art-20044308?reDate=23032021>

10 Things Parents Can Do to Prevent Suicide

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Ten-Things-Parents-Can-Do-to-Prevent-Suicide.aspx>

Teen Suicides: What are the Risk Factors

<https://childmind.org/article/teen-suicides-risk-factors/>

Suicidal Ideation in Teens: Why Talk to Your Teen About Suicidal Thoughts?

<https://www.viewpointcenter.com/blog/suicidal-ideation-in-teens-why-talk-to-your-teen-about-suicidal-thoughts/>