

## Sarah Mallard Wakefield, MD

Why has there been a spike in suicides among younger age groups?

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So when we think about suicide, suicidal behaviors, and death by suicide, are really acts of impulsivity and hopelessness. And it's that idea that you're acting on the information just before you, and not thinking longer term into the future, often, not for everyone. But often that's the case. And children tend to have less developed frontal lobes than adults, you know, our frontal lobes are developing until our mid 20s, maybe late 20s. And that is our executive assistant, our frontal lobe up here is our executive assistant, they say, Wait, is that a good idea? Here are the possible consequences of those things. And if your frontal lobe is developing, you, by definition, have less ability to be your own executive assistant than someone who's older than you. So I think that is one of the number one things why we see a higher rate of suicide of death by suicide in younger children.

What makes a child/teen vulnerable? Are there risk factors?

01:11

When we think about risk factors for teens, and children and young adults, it's often isolation is one of the top risk factors. So it's a normal phenomenon of the human condition to want to be with people and to have fun being with other people, and to have relationships. When we see kiddos who are more isolated, then that's an indication that they're not having that reciprocal relationship with someone else.

How else can isolation occur?

01:42

But it also happens with our youth who don't feel accepted. And that can be because of a minority status, ethnicity, feeling left out, feeling not quite right around your friend group. It's why acceptance is really important. Feeling like you're okay in your own skin.

Is there a way to help with the prevention of anxiety and depression with kids and teens not just during the pandemic?

02:08

I think one of the most important things when we think about prevention of mental health distress, is openness to talk about mental health distress, you know, there is not a person on this planet who doesn't suffer at some point, some sort of mental health distress, does that mean it qualifies for a diagnosis? Not all the time. But you might have a bad day or a sad day. And as a culture, we know, the more we say, I'm sorry, you feel like that? Can I help you, or I'll just sit here with you and be with you. That that really helps people feel connected, and not alone and not isolated. As opposed to the culture that says you're fine. Don't talk to me about that, other people have problems to. But that's really unhelpful to someone who's feeling bad in the moment. And so I think when we think about prevention, the most important thing is to teach adult caregivers, teachers, parents, grandparents about how important comfort is we all want to be comforted.

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What should someone do if they feel prevention is not working?

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However, there are people that no amount of comfort changes their neurotransmitters, and the cards they've been dealt genetically means that they will have or can have anxiety or depression, or maybe something terrible happens to them, and they end up having a trauma related illness. What's important there is early intervention, when we intervene early when we say oh, you feel like that and doing these things me comforting you or us going to get an ice cream or us going for a run or working out together didn't help. Well, okay, we need to investigate this more. We need to talk with your pediatrician or talk with your family medicine doctor, talk with someone who can help us see what are the next steps here. So really moving away from the idea that feeling bad or having mental health distress is a taboo. It's a given, we're all going to have mental health distress, and working towards comforting each other through that, and then picking up on if that comfort isn't enough. What are the next steps?

How do I protect my teen or tween from suicide risk?

04:19

One of the most important things we can do as a society to protect our teens from really negative things in their lives, drugs, alcohol, unprotected sex, suicide, is improving our communication, really being there to listen, really being there to allow them to talk with us, giving them information that they can use and not hiding information. So I think the number one thing is improved communication and talking to parents and adults about how important it is to be the one who's giving the facts to your children. That you want them to come to you for information and not to go to their friends, if at all possible, but that requires the adults in their lives to sometimes be uncomfortable to talk about things that make them say, Well, I'm not exactly sure the right way to talk about this.

How can I help someone already experiencing suicidal behaviors?

05:14

When we have a child or a youth, adolescent, or an adult, who is already experiencing depression, anxiety, are already experiencing suicidal ideation, and maybe suicidal behaviors, harming themselves in different ways. There are two things that we know are really helpful. One is a suicide safety plan, really getting clear on what are the risk factors here? What are your individualized risk factors? What are your triggers? What who can you call when you're feeling like that? If you can't call somebody, what are some other behaviors you can do to help yourself feel better. So that's called safety planning. And it's important for everyone in that child's life or that youth's life to have access to that safety plan, that the counselor at school knows what to do, the mom also knows what to do. And that's posted up and everybody supporting that youth through that safety plan. It's really talking about changing how you're coping with those negative feelings. The other is limiting access to lethal means. And we have seen how important that is, it's the idea of the more lethal means you have to harm yourself, the quicker you could harm yourself at home, the more likely it is that you'll die by suicide.

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How do I as a parent know when behaviors are normal teen moods vs something wrong? Are there warning signs?

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The first thing that I'll say is that if you are communicating with your child, you know, you know the differences, you know, when their mood turns dark, they're not having an outburst. They're not reacting just to you telling them they can't go somewhere or do something they want to do. But they feel darker, they feel withdrawn, they feel isolated, maybe their grades are dropping at school, they're not going out with their friends as much or don't want to, they want to withdraw from sports that they're doing or other activities that used to bring them joy, those are pretty clear signs that something is going wrong. It's not just 30 minutes of having a tantrum.

How can parents prevent a very upset child from falling into a darker state?

07:17

When your child blows up and yells at you, because you're not allowing them to go somewhere. Follow that up a few minutes later, say I'm sorry, you feel like that, you know, a really important thing is not to escalate in the fight with a child and to remember that their frontal lobes are much less developed than yours. And so when they're angry, to say, to remove yourself and say, I'm sorry, you feel like this, you know, but this is the rule. And really come at the rules from this place of love and logic, this love and logic parent, where I created these rules, because I love you not just to have rules. And this is why they exist. I laugh one of the most important things I think I was ever told as a child as a youth as an adolescent was you didn't come with a manual. I wish I knew what the right decision was. But I'm making this decision out of love. And that message is really important to kids so that they don't feel isolated and alone, even if they don't agree, even if they're mad about the decision that you've made.

How do you talk to younger children about suicidal thoughts?

08:25

The younger a child is the less they understand the true concept of death, that they may think, oh, something falls asleep. And then they wake back up. And I think it's really important to talk with a child about how they're feeling. So you're feeling so bad that you want to leave our house, you're feeling it really ask them these questions about, well, why do you want to leave? Where do you want to go? How can we help you feel better?

How can parents help their children move away from suicidal thoughts?

08:56

And then helping that child with that safety planning we were talking about. You know, when I feel bad, these are things that helped me feel better. When you feel bad? What are some things that we that you think would help you feel better? So really changing the narrative instead of dwelling on how badly you feel right now? How can we help you feel better, what are some things and then helping guide them through those things? You know, when I feel bad, I'd like to take a walk or I like to watch a movie, or I like to call a friend. And then that helps me not feel as bad anymore. And it helps give the child some other things that they can do besides react right now in a very negative way.

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### Does media play a role?

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I also think that it's important to limit what children are exposed to, especially when they're really young. They often don't see the full context of different behaviors, whether that's on a movie, or in a meme, or something. The way that kids typically interpret things is different it's out of context than the way older youth, adolescents and adults interpret them. So having those open lines of communication, answering their questions as straightforward as possible, but really helping them navigate through the negative feelings on what we can do to help ourselves feel better. And then if those things aren't effective, talking with their pediatrician as soon as possible.

### What issues can arise involving young children and cellphone access?

10:24

Often what we see is kids get access to a cell phone, without any associated rules. And now they are clicking and clicking and clicking, and getting to places of information that they're not ready to handle. Or they're staying up all night long on these phones, that's disrupting their sleep and then predisposing them to anxiety or depression related illness later. It's really important to decide as a family and every child is different. At what point is my child? Or is it important to our family, for my child to have access to the cell phone? And what will the rules be around that?

### What happens when you don't plan ahead for cellphone access?

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What happens when we don't set those ahead of time, is that kids, the phone becomes a lifeline for kids, they can text their friends, they can chat, they enter these worlds of social media that can make them feel bad, they can also make them feel great. And if they're throwing a tantrum, and immediately, the parent takes away the phone, it can be another blow to the child, I've lost access to my coping strategies to my friends.

### What is self-harm and how can you help your children if this is happening?

11:36

Self harm tends to make the person feeling terrible, feel better, at least in the immediate moment that it's happening. It distracts them with pain, it distracts them from how they're feeling inside the pain inside. So at the very basic level, it is a coping strategy, but it's not a positive coping strategy. Alcohol can do the same thing, but it's not a positive coping strategy. So we want to talk to children and youth and people engaging in self harm and say, Hey, because you're doing that, it makes me think you're probably feeling pretty bad. How can I help you? What do you need? What can I do to help distract you? What are some other things we can do as coping strategies besides harm yourself. So sometimes you need to limit access to the things that they most commonly harm themselves with. So that it's just that much harder to do that. And then when we were talking about that safety plan, put those up, type them up, write them out, put them close to the place where they most likely did, or most commonly engaged in those self harming behaviors, because it helps their brain move from that emotional brain, that emotional brain where it makes sense, to harm the outside of your body to take away the pain from the inside of your body, it moves you from that brain, back into your thinking brain, where you think, maybe I could take a walk, maybe I could call my mom, maybe I could watch a movie, maybe I could

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utilize some of these techniques I learned in therapy, maybe I could remember to take my medicine, you know, whatever it is, it can remind them to do the coping strategies that can be healthy for them.

Why is the pandemic crisis a good opportunity to discuss mental health with your child/teen?

13:22

You know, I spoke with some colleagues of mine who are a pediatric emergency physicians. And at the beginning of the pandemic, they actually saw a huge decrease in kids presenting to the emergency room with suicidal ideation for three or four months. And then it was like the dam broke. And they're seeing more kids exactly like what you're saying here, more children more youth in worse distress than they've ever seen. And, you know, part of that may be that there's been a build up, that there was a time period where people weren't seeking care, there is part that they've been additionally distressed from the pandemic. And then because of the pandemic, maybe not seeking the care that was helpful for them in the past. I think that it's always a good opportunity. It's always a good time to talk about mental health, and how we can support our mental health. But the pandemic has truly highlighted that highlighted the crisis that we've been in, in our nation for quite some time.

Anything else to add?

14:35

My hope is that this pandemic, in its spotlight on mental health distress, will help us move this needle and really make a difference.