

10 Ways that Schools Can Protect and Support Students' Mental Health



From safe and supportive learning environments to connectedness within the school community



10 Ways that Schools Can Proactively Protect and Support Students' Mental Health

High school students across the country are experiencing a mental health crisis. The most recent CDC report on the health behaviors and experiences of U.S. high school students, the [Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary & Trends Report: 2011-2021](#), found an overall decline in mental health of students. Nearly 30% of high school students experienced poor mental health. More than 40% felt so sad or hopeless they could not engage in regular activities. The percentage of high school students who considered or attempted suicide also rose significantly.

Though much of the news in the CDC report indicated a deepening crisis, the report also measured and detailed factors that can help protect students' mental health and well-being. These findings show that schools can take several steps to support students, including the implementation of programs that ensure safe and supportive learning environments and increase school connectedness among students and educators.

The news about youth mental health may be alarming but tools and resources are available for educators to address the issue and provide support for those students who are struggling.

10 Ways for Schools to Support Students' Mental Health

1. Know the Risk Factors

To help prevent suicide, which is now the second leading cause of death for youth ages 10-24, it is important to be aware of the risk factors, or characteristics that make individuals more likely to consider harming themselves. Depression and other mental illnesses, substance use, and chronic disease or disability are behind most suicide attempts. Bullying and negative experiences with peer relationships put young people more at risk. Self-injury in the form of cutting, burning, or digging at wounds is another sign a young person might be struggling emotionally and need support.



2. Pay Attention to Other Risks

In addition to behaviors that might signal suicide risk, life experiences can also make some students more vulnerable. For example, survivors of trauma and crime, students who have experienced loss or a major life change, members of the LGBTQ community, as well as those who are culturally unique, might also be more likely to experience isolation, depression, or consider suicide. Be sure your teachers and school administrators provide attention to these students who may need additional support.



3. Learn Signs of Depression

Many students who attempt suicide struggle with undiagnosed and untreated depression. But the symptoms are not always obvious. They can include withdrawing from activities and friends; persistent sadness; frequent complaints about stomach aches and headaches; excessive sleeping or insomnia; changes in appetite; and a decline in academic performance. The bottom line is that a significant change in behavior that lasts longer than a few weeks might indicate depression.

4. Be Aware but Not Panicked

Students who have multiple risk factors may not be on the verge of harming themselves. Most teens will likely have a risk factor or two. Educators need not jump to conclusions while also taking the crisis seriously enough to provide support and prevention.

5. Promote Personal Protective Factors

To counteract the risk factors, schools should focus on protective factors, or those characteristics that reduce the risk of suicide. Students who have inner strength and coping skills are better able to weather adversity and less likely to harm themselves when things go wrong. Consider whether the students in your school exhibit good problem-solving, decision-making, and conflict resolution skills. Are they impulsive or lacking in self-esteem? You may not be able to change a student's past but rather pay attention to those protective factors that are within the school's control. Depending on the needs of your student population, a tailored program for younger students, youth development for older grades, or more targeted intervention support for struggling students can help them shore up these protective skills.

6. Explore Outside Expertise

In addition to a program focused on student and educator well-being, you might also consider new courses and [curriculum options](#) that can directly address issues such as self-esteem, anxiety, and anger management. Develop an awareness campaign with slogans and materials like flyers and posters to promote the skills your students need most.

7. Evaluate Your Programming

Through meetings, focus groups, and surveys for students, families, and school staff, gather information about your efforts and ways they can be improved. Once you know what is working and what needs improvement, you can refine your student mental health intervention and prevention programming.



8. Build Connectedness and Community Support

If a young person feels connected to school and community, they are less likely to consider suicide. Are there steps your school can take to reach out to the most vulnerable students? Do these young people have relationships with teachers and staff? Are there opportunities to incorporate programming that helps students build relationships and develop a sense of belonging within the school community? Be sure to provide opportunities for all students to participate in school activities and events. The CDC also recommends professional development for educators on classroom management that promotes connectedness and inclusivity.

9. Increase Access to Mental Health

Many schools have struggled to retain school-based social workers, especially since the pandemic. Schools can consider incentives to attract and keep mental health providers. The CDC suggests increasing access to on-site mental health services and referrals, and making sure staff and students know how to access the services. Partnerships with local community organizations, agencies, and colleges or universities might also be a source of mental health care for students. Quality health education can go a long way toward teaching students how to make wise health decisions.

10. Top Suicide Prevention Resources

Research targeted suicide education and prevention programming that can help students identify and cope with intense feelings. A quality program should also help educators learn how to identify students at risk and refer them to resources for intervention. Compile a list of organizations and share them with students and families. They might include the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

(800-273-8255) and the Trevor Project for LGBTQ youth (866-488-7386). Online resources are the [American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#) and the [Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide](#).



The results of the CDC report are likely not surprising to school administrators or educators, who see many of their students' mental health struggles each day. But what the CDC report confirms—and what educators should know and understand—is that there are tools and resources available to provide support to their students, whether the need is to prevent a crisis from happening or to intervene when a student needs targeted support for their mental health.

About BASE Education

BASE Education, a 7 Mindsets solution, is a comprehensive student mental health platform that offers personalized learning pathways for students needing Tiers 2 and 3 support. Founded in 2014, BASE Education is recognized by CASEL for its high-quality content, innovation, and other implementation supports, including a built-in notification system for crisis intervention. Since its launch, BASE Education has been used by more than 500,000 students nationwide.