

Is there a link between youth suicide and COVID-19? Suicidologist explains

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Julie Cerel is a licensed psychologist, former president of the American Association of Suicidology and professor in the UK College of Social Work. Pete Comparoni. Credit: UK Photo

Suicide is complex, just ask Julie Cerel. As a licensed psychologist and

professor in the College of Social Work at the University of Kentucky, she's dedicated her life's work to helping those at risk.

"It is extremely important to acknowledge, [suicide](#) is never caused by just one thing," Cerel said.

As the COVID-19 pandemic persists, many schools across the country remain closed—instead opting for remote learning in an effort to reduce the spread of the virus. You may be wondering, how does this impact the mental health and well-being of students? While researchers have yet to clearly link recent suicides to the COVID-19 pandemic, there's growing concern.

"As adults, we need to be the ones to look out for our children and figure out how to best help them through this scary time," Cerel said.

In the Q&A session below, she offers insight on how we—as a society—can help students who may be struggling.

UKNow: Are youth suicide rates on the rise? If so, what role does the pandemic play—if any at all?

Cerel: In the U.S., youth suicide has been on the rise for most of the last decade. It is too early to tell if 2020 suicide death rates are up—this data takes more than a year to compile. But we're hearing suicide deaths seem to be down, even if attempts and help-seeking are way up. For years, we have been encouraging people to seek help if they or their children are having suicidal thoughts. Perhaps, people are listening to these messages that help is available and to reach out before it is too late.

UKNow: What does research tell us about the link between school closures and student mental health?

Cerel: There has not been any published large-scale research yet to link [school closures](#) and student mental health. This is a huge need.

However, it is important to acknowledge, suicide is a complicated issue and is never caused by just one thing. Some children are suffering without the lack of structure, while others are thriving. There is so much variability in the type of online learning offered to children and their ability to engage online. Some children have been socializing at pre-pandemic levels, while other families continue to strictly quarantine. Some sports have been able to safely continue, while others have been canceled since last March.

In addition to teaching, schools have been tasked with feeding children and looking out for their physical and mental health. They also provide child care for working parents. We do know—youth cannot thrive when their [basic needs](#) are not being met, and school systems are working hard to fill the gaps.

UKNow: Even if school closures aren't directly linked to an increase in suicide rates, is it still important to acknowledge that children and teens are going through a uniquely challenging time?

Cerel: It is definitely important to acknowledge. Even children who have been going to school in-person have spent their days wearing masks and living with the ever-present fear of exposure and mandated quarantine periods. Their parents and communities are also living through this time—struggling to stay employed, while also helping their children learn remotely.

As adults, we have to acknowledge our own needs, and we have to be advocates for our children. We have to teach them, it's okay to struggle

and to talk about those struggles. Find a therapist who can see your child online. Ask your child directly if they are thinking of suicide or of harming themselves. And if the answer is yes, talk to their school counselor, pediatrician and/or take them to the emergency department.

UKNow: As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, we often hear the phrase, "children are falling behind." Can you put this into perspective? Should parents be concerned?

Cerel: I think people forget; we're living in the middle of a global pandemic. The last major pandemic in 1918 was particularly deadly for young children, which fortunately has not been the case for COVID-19. But with more than 400,000 deaths in the U.S., children have lost parents, grandparents and even teachers. A shift in perspective is needed to remind people that our measures of success need to change. For 2020, COVID-19 will probably be the third leading cause of death—right behind cancer and heart disease. Until we all acknowledge we're living in unprecedented times, our mindset will be one of what is lost. We can shift that to focus on how we have survived to live in times in which we can again thrive.

UKNow: In addition to school, how difficult is it for children to be missing out on sporting events and social activities?

Cerel: Children have missed out across the board. This is not just sporting events, but also simple milestones that occur in each school or community, such as class plays and field trips. But the whole world has missed out. Olympic athletes who have trained their whole lives had to miss an Olympics in 2020, and the future of the delayed games is still a

concern. Some states have carried on as usual, and this makes it even more difficult for those on the outside. This is a place in which a national strategy and science-based decision making might have leveled the playing field. For parents, it is important to help [children](#) put this in perspective. It is awful to miss these long-awaited events, but this is worldwide and not just them.

UKNow: On a positive note, this is a time when any child can access mental health in a way that was unprecedented prior to the pandemic. How will telehealth impact the well-being of our youth for years to come?

Cerel: I see teletherapy as one of the biggest wins to come out of the pandemic. Anyone can see a therapist from the comfort and safety of their home. No mask is required when you are online. There is no need to worry about someone seeing you in the waiting room or taking time off from work or [school](#) to make it to an appointment.

Additionally, the PsyPact legislation being considered in Kentucky means that out-of-state UK students will be able to access Kentucky psychologists even if/when they return to their home states. This kind of expanded thinking is what we need to recover from the effects of the pandemic.

There have been small wins. What we had been doing in terms of youth suicide prevention was not working. Hopefully, this time will bring new and creative thinking to help us figure out how to save lives.

UKNow: Is there anything else you would like to add?

Cerel: If you have a phone or device or your child has one, put these two numbers into each one—National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-8255) and the Crisis Text Line (741-741).

Encourage the use of these as they are available 24/7 if you are struggling personally or worried about someone else. They can save lives. You don't have to be in this alone.

Provided by University of Kentucky

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