

Suicide, Self-Harm, and Digital Media Use

2025

Rates of youth suicide attempts, deaths by suicide, and non-suicidal self-injuries have increased in the last decade. Current research indicates increasing use of digital devices in children's daily lives is related to the rise in youth suicide-related behaviors.



Nearly half of the increases in yearly suicide behavior prevalence between 2009 (17%) and 2017 (21%) can be attributed to increases in digital media use.

(Leventhal et al., 2021)

Non-suicidal self-harm

is associated with...

- High daily use (>2hr/day)
- Heavy social media use
- Problematic internet use
- Cyberbullying victimization and perpetration
- Digital sexual violence victimization (sexual minority adolescents)

Non-suicidal self-injury

is associated with...

- High daily use (>2hr/day)
- Problematic internet use
- Nonconsensual/pressured sexting
- Engaging with suicide, self-harm, or pro-eating disorder content online
- Cyberbullying victimization and perpetration

Suicidal ideation

is associated with...

- High daily use (>2hr/day)
- Sexting
- Suicide portrayals in media
- Media coverage of celebrity suicides
- Exposure to suicide cluster content
- Performative social media use (e.g. posting a status update vs DM'ing friends)
- Cyberbullying victimization and perpetration



Research shows associations between media use (long duration, specific behaviors, content exposure) and self-harm and suicidal behaviors in youth.



Suicidality

is associated with...

- High daily use (>2hr/day)
- Cyberbullying victimization and perpetration
- Digital sexual violence victimization (sexual minority adolescents)

Suicide attempts

are associated with...

- High daily use (>2hr/day)
- Cyberbullying victimization and perpetration
- Suicide portrayals in media content
- Digital sexual violence victimization (sexual minority adolescents)

Increased deaths by suicide

are associated with...

- Suicide portrayals in media content during a suicide cluster
- Reporting on celebrity suicides

(Beauroy-Eustache & Mishara et al., 2021; Biernesser et al., 2020; Kingsbury et al., 2021; Leventhal et al., 2021; Marchant et al., 2017; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2020; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2021; Srivastava et al., 2022; Swedo et al., 2021; Tørmoen et al., 2020; Wachs et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020)

Self-harm/Suicide Behaviors – Definitions

Death by suicide:	Taking one's own life (results in death)	Suicidality:	At risk for suicide
Suicide attempt:	Attempt to take one's own life (does not result in death)	Suicidal ideation:	Feelings or thoughts about wanting to end one's own life; can involve creating a plan (active) or not creating a plan (passive)
Non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI; self-harm):	Self-inflicted pain not intended to cause death (actions to cause pain without death)	Digital self-harm:	Non-suicidal; posting degrading/hateful comments about oneself online; also known as self-cyberbullying

About Digital Self-Harm



Digital self-harm is the anonymous online posting, sending, or otherwise sharing of hurtful content about oneself.

- Producing digital self-harm content increases risk of suicidal thoughts and attempts during adolescence.
- Rates of digital self-harm among adolescents have increased since 2016, particularly in adolescent girls, Hispanic and Black adolescents, non-heterosexual adolescents, and adolescent cyberbully victims.
- Adolescents who are victims of bullying are at increased risk for engaging in digital self-harm.
- Exposure to deliberate self-harm content on social media is associated with increased risk of deliberate self-harm in youth.
- Photos of non-suicidal self-injury with more severe wounds (predominantly cuts) receive more engagement than milder content.

(Biernesser et al., 2020; Gansner et al., 2024; Meldrum et al., 2022; Patchin et al., 2023; Patchin & Hinduja, 2024)

Self-Harm and Suicide Behaviors: Other Individual Risk Factors



- Youth who are sexual minorities, from low SES backgrounds, have unmarried parents, and/or are undergoing psychiatric treatment are at elevated lifetime risk for a suicide attempt.
- Relying on digital media to escape current identity, mood, or offline environment is a risk factor for both sexes.
- Placing importance on digital tech for identity exploration is a risk factor for suicidal ideation in both sexes.
- Neural and behavioral predispositions to negative bias in response to online social feedback in adolescent females is associated with history of non-suicidal self-injury.
- Experiencing online racial discrimination is associated with suicidal ideation for Black adolescents when they experience PTSD as a result of the online interaction.

(Boyd et al., 2024; Burke et al., 2023; Perini et al., 2019; Tynes et al., 2024)

Cyberbullying, Suicide, and Self-Harm

Cyberbullying (both victimization and perpetration) is associated with all self-harm and suicide-related behaviors.



Risk factors

- Severity of cyberbullying
- Psychological distress
- Negative emotions
- Perceived stress
- Loneliness
- Mental health problems
- Obesity
- Asthma
- Sexual minority status

Protective factors

- Connection with adult at school
- Concentrated and authoritative parenting
- Parental support
- Life satisfaction
- Healthy diet
- Family dinners
- Emotional intelligence
- Self-control

Protection and Prevention

- Online communities/online social support** can reduce the risk of deliberate self-harm.
- Strong peer connections, school engagement** weaken relationship between cyber victimization and non-suicidal self-injury.
- Placing importance on **social media for building and bridging connections** between the digital and physical worlds is a protective factor against suicidal ideation for girls, but not boys.
- More frequent positive social media experiences** in a day than usual associated with less next day suicidal ideation.
- Internet can serve as protection against suicide-related behavior through **increasing awareness of suicide, providing at-risk youth with access to community groups, anonymous help/treatment.**

(Biernesser et al., 2020; Boyd et al., 2024; Dickter et al., 2019; Durkee et al., 2011; Hamilton et al., 2024; Robinson et al., 2018; Stallard et al., 2024)

Mindful Posting Guidelines About Suicide

- Before you post anything about suicide online:** think about why you're sharing what you are and how it might impact others.
- Sharing your own thoughts, feelings, or experiences with suicidal behavior online:** include trigger or content warnings; consider how you might respond to someone who is impacted by your post.
- Communicating about someone you know who is affected by suicidal thoughts, feelings, or behavior:** don't post anything involving another person that you wouldn't say to them directly, and respect their privacy (go offline to discuss your concerns with them).
- Responding to someone who may be suicidal:** put yourself first and don't extend help you cannot offer; direct the individual to professional support services or chat lines.
- Monitor comments on memorial websites, pages, and closed groups to honor the deceased.**

