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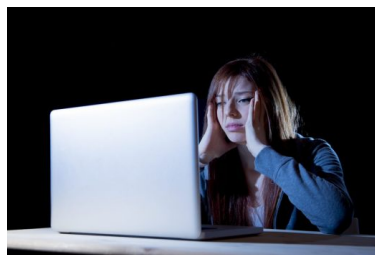


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# Preventing Tragedy by Empowering Teens to React to Troubling Social Media Posts From Peers

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What if a text message could prevent the next violent tragedy, or prevent a despondent teen from dying due to suicide? Two research teams hope that new mobile and web tools could do exactly that.

Distraught young people often turn to social media as an outlet and write posts about having thoughts of self-harm, violence or other concerning issues. The audience for these posts is often a troubled teen's young peers who are left to grapple with the content and what to do about it.

Dr. Megan Moreno, a pediatrician in the Division of Adolescent Medicine at Seattle Children's Hospital and researcher at Seattle Children's Research Institute, studies how young people use social media. A shared interest in adolescent health and social media sparked a collaboration between Moreno and Dr. Stephanie Craig Rushing, a researcher at the Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board's Northwest Tribal Epidemiology Center, that aimed to empower young people to react to troubling social media content.

"Youth who see disturbing social media posts want to help the person, but they often don't know how," said Moreno. "We knew that young people need better tools to intervene when they see concerning social media content, so we decided to start by understanding youth perspectives on their experiences viewing and responding to concerning content on social media."

## Testing out digital interventions with tribal youth

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, homicide is the second leading cause of death for young people ages 15 to 24 years old, and suicide is the third leading cause of death for youth between the ages of

10 and 24. For Native American youth, the statistics are higher across the board, and many live in communities that have inadequate access to mental health and counseling services.

Rushing and Moreno started their research by conducting focus groups with American Indian and Alaska Native youth ages 14-22 about how they respond to worrying content they see posted by their peers.

“We found that when they saw concerning social media content, there was a lot going on behind the scenes,” Tommy Ghost Dog, a researcher with the NPAIHB, said. “They might try to distract the friend or take them out to eat, but they’re just not prepared to deal with this type of situation, and even adults struggle with how to handle it.”

Based in part on the findings from the research, the NPAIHB team delivered tips to Native teens for what to do when concerning content comes up in social media, using their multimedia social media channel: We R Native.



Expanding on this pilot, proactive text messages could be delivered to a young person’s phone that would say, “Friend sharing things on social media that have you worried? It’s important to take action and reach out. For more tips, text MORE.”

If the teen opts to receive tips, a list of possible interventions are delivered, including calling the friend, alerting an adult or healthcare professional, or the opportunity to start a conversation with an expert trained in crisis intervention.

“This type of tool empowers young people to take concrete action when they see concerning posts, instead of feeling worried and helpless,” said Moreno.

The next step in the work is to develop tools that can be used by adults who interact with and support youth, and resources for teens in the general population who experience similar situations.

## Preventing violence and tragic outcomes

Moreno, Rushing and their teams hope this line of research leads to improved interventions that can prevent violence and self-harm activities, including suicide.

Effective interventions could be delivered by various media channels—texts, blog, social media and webinars. The teams also hope that social media companies will take note and continue to improve and refine their systems that flag concerning content to help prevent tragedies, especially in rural communities where mental health resources can be scarce.

“There’s a lot of interest in these interventions, especially in communities that might not have access to sufficient mental health resources,” said Rushing. “We want to identify concerning behavior and interventions for young people at risk before it’s too late.”

## Resources

- [www.weRnative.org](http://www.weRnative.org)
- Dr. Megan Moreno, Seattle Children’s Research Institute
- Gun safety, Seattle Children’s