



# Erika's Lighthouse Family Workshop: Adolescent Depression & Suicide

For Parents, Caregivers and Families

## Facilitator's Guide

Erika's Lighthouse is a not-for-profit depression and mental health education organization that educates upper elementary, middle school and high school communities about teen depression, eliminates the stigma associated with mental health issues and empowers teens to take charge of their mental health. For more information and other programs and resources, go to [www.erikaslighthouse.org](http://www.erikaslighthouse.org).

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This program was written for educators, professionals and other adults working with adolescents to educate them regarding the issues surrounding depression. While Erika's Lighthouse consults with clinical, therapeutic, legal, and child development experts, nothing in this program should be construed as specific or general medical or psychological advice. Erika's Lighthouse assumes no responsibility for any actions taken as a result of the material or information contained in the program. Every child's and family's situation is unique, and Erika's Lighthouse urges children, adolescents, parents, and educators to seek and find competent professional advice appropriate for specific individuals and actions.

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### **Video:**

Lindsey's Signs & Symptoms: [Link](#)

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## Part 1: Signs & Symptoms of Adolescent Depression and Suicide

In Part 1, families will learn current statistics about youth mental health and the need for educating and raising awareness around youth mental health. They will learn the signs and symptoms of adolescent depression, as well as suicide. Families will also have an opportunity to hear from a young person and her experiences with depression.

### Slide 1: Introduction Script

“Welcome to our workshop. Before we begin, please scan the QR code on the slide and take the brief pre-test; we appreciate it. (Give participants a few moments to complete the pre-test) Today, we will be discussing the important topic of adolescent depression and suicide. In addition to learning about the signs & symptoms of depression and suicide, we are going to discuss what you can do if you are concerned about your child or a young person in your life. We hope that this information may help you with your child(ren) or someone you know.”

**Icebreaker** (*Optional*): Share your favorite...

For this icebreaker, ask everyone to share their favorite movie, song, or T.V. show, etc. This icebreaker helps parents/caregivers/staff get to know each other even more and build community.

### Slide 2: Content Notice

“This training contains discussions of depression and suicide. We recognize this is a heavy topic. Many people are affected in various ways by the topic of suicide and mental illness and we want you to take what you need during this time”

### Slide 3: Agenda

“This workshop is going to review the current statistics on youth mental health, the signs and symptoms of depression, as well as suicide. What it means to be a trusted adult, barriers that young people might experience when it comes to asking for help and how you can have a supportive conversation with your child. Lastly, we will discuss what you can do if you are concerned and how to foster a supportive environment around mental health at home.”

#### **Slide 4: Have you heard that there is a youth mental health crisis?**

“Raise your hand if you have heard that there is a youth mental health crisis. Let’s take a look at the current statistics about youth mental health, suicide rates, and the rates of depression in our young people.”

#### **Slide 5: What We Know**

“What we know is that young people are experiencing poor mental health and the rates of depression and suicide are troubling. In August 2024, the CDC released the newest Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data. Nearly all indicators of poor mental health and suicidal thoughts and behaviors worsened from 2013 to 2023.

This chart summarizes the findings.

- 4 out of 10 high school students felt persistently sad or hopeless. We saw a small improvement in this area between 2021 and 2023.
- Nearly 1 in 3 high school students experienced poor mental health
- 20% seriously considered suicide
- 16% made a suicide plan
- 9% attempted suicide

#### **Slide 6: Some Additional Statistics**

“Here are some additional statistics about youth mental health. 50% of mental health disorders begin before the age of 14 and 75% occur before 24. This is why it is so important for us to understand the signs & symptoms so that we can intervene sooner rather than later. We also know that young people who identify as Female and LGBTQ+ are more likely than their peers to experience persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, poor mental health, and suicidal thoughts and behaviors. Between 15-20% of young people will experience a depressive episode before the age of 20 -- another way of looking at that is that it’s 5 kids out of a class of 25. Depression is the number one risk factor for suicide and suicide is the second leading cause of death for young people ages 10-14.”

#### **Slide 7: About Adolescent Depression**

“Let’s learn more about the signs and symptoms of adolescent depression.”

#### **Slide 8: Important Things to Know**

“There are some core messages that we want young people, educators and families to know about adolescent depression. Childhood and adolescent mental health struggles are common. In fact, 15-20% of young people will struggle with depression before adulthood. It’s serious and can be hard to see, 90-98% of suicides are a result of a diagnosable mental illness – the vast majority being depression. It’s treatable. Just as important as the signs and symptoms of depression, we teach our young people that everyone deserves good mental

health and we carry the message that you are not alone and that there is always hope.”

### **Slide 9: Signs and Symptoms of Depression**

“Depression looks different for everyone, but in order for there to be a diagnosis of depression, there are particular symptoms. The symptoms must include at least either feeling sad or having a depressed mood OR loss of interest or pleasure in activities that someone used to enjoy, along with at least 4 of the others on the list. The signs/symptoms are going to be a change from what’s “normal” for that particular individual and will have lasted for at least 2 weeks.”

### **Slide 10: What Depression Might Look Like In Young People**

“Depression in adolescents looks different from adult depression - more irritable and often a self-defeating attitude. For some, it might look like a more aggressive reaction to things or acting out. Again, these are going to be different for each individual, but if there is a noticeable change in that child, you’ll want to make a note and consider that something might be going on. The key is to understand what is normal at different developmental stages and what is normal for your child, as well as their personality and temperament.

- **Irritability** – Teens are good at making people not want to be around them.
- **Self-defeating attitude** – Hearing them say things like “I’m not good enough, smart enough, good looking enough” etc.
- **Bizarre sleep patterns** - More time in bed, less time sleeping (isolating).
- **Substance use** – Widely available at this age.
- **Aggression** – This looks like getting into fights.
- **Acting out** – This takes the form of running away, disrespect, etc.
- **Risk-taking** – Doing anything that could knowingly cause harm, i.e. trying to beat a train and racing over train tracks.
- **Problems in school** – Cognition problems are the first signs, even if grades are fine, work takes longer.”

### **Slide 11: Meet Lindsey**

“We are going to meet Lindsey. In this video segment, you will meet a real teen who will describe the signs & symptoms she experienced when experiencing depression”.  
Play [video](#)

### **Slide 12: Warning Signs of Suicide**

“Lindsey just shared that she didn’t understand what she was experiencing and neither did her family. The signs and symptoms she was experiencing were confusing to them, as it can

be. As the trusted adults, it's really important to be aware of the signs and symptoms of depression because depression is the number one risk factor for suicide. There are many overlaps between the symptoms of depression and suicide and suicide is now the #2 cause of death for young people ages 10-24. Even though the actual incidents of suicide are relatively rare, it is still important to understand what to look for. Suicide is tied to intense psychological pain, hopelessness and feeling as if there is no other way to relieve the psychological pain. Most people give verbal or behavioral clues within the week or so leading up to their death. Things to look out for include:

- Observable signs of depression - loss of interest in activities, depressed mood, irritability, intense frustration
- Talking or writing about not being around anymore or having no reason to live – “I want it to be over, I won't be here next year, you won't see me again, This is the last time I'll...”
- Withdrawing from friends
- No longer interested in participating in things they once enjoyed
- Feeling unbearable pain, hopelessness or feeling like you are trapped – “I feel so desperate, I can't bear it anymore, There is no way to pull myself out of this..
- Displaying extreme mood swings, eating or sleeping more or less than usual, risk-taking behaviors

In general, if you hear them say something puzzling or cryptic regarding life and death, ask what that means. Asking if someone is thinking of suicide will not “plant an idea in their head.” It's important to remember that suicidal thoughts or actions are a sign of extreme distress and should not be ignored.”

### **Slide 13: Keep an Eye Out**

“So, now we've learned about the signs and symptoms of depression, but how do we know when our children are experiencing emotions and exhibiting behaviors that are actually causing a problem for them? It's important to remember that adolescents are going through rapid and quick changes during this period of their lives. So, having an understanding of typical stages of development and what you might be able to expect is important. Some things to keep an eye out for are rapidly growing bodies, hormones and mood changes, spending more time with peers and less time with family. What you want to watch out for are changes in behaviors, thoughts and emotions that interfere with everyday living and functioning.”

### **Slide 14: What's Typical Anyway?**

“So, what is typical behavior and how do you know when something concerning is going on? Let's go through a few examples...”

**Your child prefers to be by himself/herself.** For the child who prefers to hang out by themselves sometimes, this just may be an individual who is more introverted and needs to

recharge by being alone. This could also be a sign that your child is pulling away from others and is isolating, a concerning behavior for a teen.

**Your child wants to drop an activity that they have participated in for years.** A teen who wants to drop an activity because they have less time due to new interests is normal, but this could also indicate loss of pleasure in life's activities, which is concerning.

**Your child has trouble sleeping one night, which results in difficulty getting up for school the following day.** A certain level of anxiety is normal, your child may have a big math test the next day or be in a fight with a friend. But, if this is happening routinely, it could be a larger issue.

**Your child bursts into tears for what seems to be no reason at all.** Anyone who has raised a teenage girl will tell you, this is normal! And, given hormone changes, it may be. But if it's interrupting their daily functioning, it could be a serious emotional issue worth a look.

The bottom line is there is a wide range of what is considered "normal" during the teen years. And, any of these situations really depends on a lot of factors. What it really boils down to is knowing your child. For some kids, any one of these behaviors could be outside of the realm of what is considered normal, and for others, it could be part of their temperament or growth.

If you are concerned, **ask yourself these three questions:**

- Have they always been like this or is this a change?
- If so, could it be caused by something in the environment? School, friends and family?
- And finally, is this behavior interrupting daily functioning? School, activities, friends, family, etc.

During these teen years it's about being observant, asking questions and trusting your gut. If you are noticing something of concern or marked changes in your child's behavior, it's important to have a conversation and let them know that you are here to help. We are going to give you suggestions on what to do if you are concerned and how to start a conversation."

## **Part 2: Being a Trusted Adult**

### **Slide 15: Being a Trusted Adult**

"Erika's Lighthouse classroom programs emphasize and encourage students to identify who is their trusted adult and how to engage a trusted adult if they are worried about themselves or a friend. Let's learn about what it means to be a trusted adult, some of the barriers that prevent young people from reaching out for help and how to have a conversation with your child if you are concerned about them."

### **Slide 16: What is a Trusted Adult?**

"When young people are asked to think about a trusted adult and what comes to mind - some of their responses include being a good listener, offering advice, showing empathy,

or not making you feel silly for coming to them - someone they feel a connection with. A trusted adult is reliable and dependable. A young person might identify a trusted adult at home: a parent or caregiver, a grandparent or a family member. Maybe it is someone at school- a teacher, coach, school counselor or school social worker. A trusted adult could also be someone in the community- a mental health provider, religious leader, or instructor. The important piece is that a young person feels as though they have at least one trusted adult and that this person can listen non-judgementally, is trustworthy and caring, and if necessary, get the young person to a professional who can help them."

### **Slide 17: Young People's Barriers to Reaching Out for Help**

"As important as it is to be a trusted adult, we also need to be aware that it can be difficult for young people to ask for help. Young people have a difficult time asking for help with something as benign as math homework, so expressing that they are concerned about their mental health is a rather daunting task. Over the years, Erika's Lighthouse has spoken with many young people. Below are some of the barriers they feel about asking for help. They say things like, 'I feel like a burden, I don't want to disappoint anyone, I feel ashamed or embarrassed, my problems aren't as bad as other people's, I should be able to handle it on my own.' This is why it's so important to understand the signs and symptoms, watch for behavior changes, and let young people know that you are available to listen and here to help."

### **Slide 18: What am I Noticing?**

"As we have mentioned, adolescence is a time of rapid growth and change. So, how do you know when it's sadness or stress or something as serious as depression? Sadness is often connected to a specific cause like disappointment or a setback; it is temporary and symptoms usually pass after using coping strategies. Stress is a normal part of life and can help motivate us to get things done. However, too much stress can cause problems in our body and our minds. Adolescents experience real stress, often caused by academic, social and family pressure. If this stress goes untreated or unmanaged, it can lead to significant problems, like depression. Depression does not always have a direct cause and it affects the overall quality and well-being of life. It is a diagnosable mood disorder and has specific signs and symptoms. "

### **Slide 19: What to Say**

"If you observe some changes in your child's mood, thoughts or behaviors that are causing you to be concerned, you might want to find a quiet, private and protected time to speak with them. These conversations may be hard and emotional. It is helpful if you follow a simple language to guide your conversation.

#### **I notice.**

*"Is everything okay? I've noticed you have been...."*



**I care.**

*"I'm concerned because I know this isn't normal for you."*

**How can I help?**

*"What can I do to help? Let's come up with a plan together."*

We want to end with an action - even if your child says everything is fine, you are leaving the door open for future conversations. It's also helpful to remind your child that it is OKAY if they want to talk to someone other than you. While that could be hard to hear, you are opening a door for your child to be open and get any help they might need."

## **Slide 20: Helpful vs Unhelpful Responses**

"This slide gives some examples of unhelpful and helpful responses. Remember, we want to validate and encourage the conversation, not shut down the conversation."

## **Slide 21: Listen to Them and Trust Your Gut**

"Starting a conversation and hearing the response can evoke a lot of emotions, as you don't know what your child might tell you. Here are some helpful tips to taking a brave step:

- Ask questions and LISTEN – kids want your attention, not your advice
- Be prepared for the truth and remain calm, it's okay not to know what to do
- Validate your child's feelings – It can be hurtful when your feelings are minimized or not taken seriously
- Listen to your gut – it's the best tool you already have
- Take action - if you need help, your first step should always be to see a doctor to rule out anything physical, followed by a proper assessment. The correct diagnosis is key, as this illness can look like a learning disability, a thyroid condition or even mono.
- Let your kid drive the ship – let them come up with what they would like to do (within reason), give them options. This is important developmentally and teaching advocacy skills. If you have to tell someone, let them be involved or lead the conversation.

No shame, no blame. Parents tend to feel guilty. Guilt and shame will prevent you from being the kind of parent you need to be to help your child. An illness is no one's fault."

## **Part 3: What can I do to help my child?**

### **Slide 22: What Can I Do To Help My Child?**

"We've learned the signs and symptoms, what it means to be a trusted adult and how to have a supportive conversation. Now, we will talk about some of the ways a parent or caregiver can be there to help a child who may be in need of our attention and loving support."

### **Slide 23: What can I do if I'm Concerned About My Child?**

"If you are concerned about your child, the first step is to talk with them. Let me know that you care about them and want to hear about what they are going through. Next, you want to connect them with care; often, this is a mental health professional. It can be difficult to find a mental health professional, however there are many places that can offer a referral. You can call your pediatrician or primary care provider, your child's school may offer referrals or, if available, your health insurance company may have a list of providers. The next step is to schedule an appointment with a mental health provider and see what they recommend."

### **Slide 24: Talk to a Mental Health Professional**

"It can be challenging to know what to say when you first call to make an appointment with a mental health provider. You may want to make some notes about behaviors you have noticed or things that your child has stated to you, and then you can share them with the mental health professional.

Some ideas are:

- I think there is a problem because
- I heard my child say
- I saw my child do
- My child is feeling
- This is not my child's usual behavior
- I've seen this change in my child's behavior over the past

### **Slide 25: Foster a Supportive Environment**

"It's important for kids to access treatment but it's also important to make sure as adults that we foster a supportive environment at home. Here are some easy things to do: Focus on creating healthy meals and snacks. Good nutrition plays a big role in mental health. Encourage opportunities to exercise and be sure to get sleep. Young people need at least 8 hours of sleep. Practice Coping Strategies: try listening to music, mindfulness activities- there are tons of apps for this- journaling, playing with a pet or talking with a friend. Remember, we all need to practice coping strategies, you can't be available to help your child if you don't take time for yourself."

### **Slide 26: Practice Good Mental Health at Home**

"Erika's Lighthouse offers some great family activities that promote good mental health and conversations around feelings at home. For example, the feeling thermometer is a tool that helps us measure the intensity of our emotions. As we climb in temperature, from green to yellow to red, our feelings become more uncomfortable. When that occurs, maybe we need to try some breathing exercises to help regulate ourselves back to "green". The

inhale/exhale worksheet is a great way to practice breathing. Alternatively, you can use the conversation starters worksheet to start normalizing conversations around mental health in your home. As you start feeling more comfortable asking questions and checking in, so will your child.”

### **Slide 27: Looking for More Resources?**

“For even more resources and information, scan the QR code on the screen or visit [erikaslighthouse.org](http://erikaslighthouse.org). Erika’s Lighthouse offers a 3-part family workbook series where you can learn more about mental health, adolescent depression, getting help and more. All of the resources are available at no cost and in English and Spanish.

Good mental health also means experiencing negative emotions. It is not always about being happy. Remember that there are many ways to care for our mental health and often very small changes in nutrition, sleep and exercise can help set our mental health back into balance. As an adult, what you need to care for your mental wellbeing is often similar to what your children need.

STOP and THINK - what do you need to maintain good mental health? As adults, we have a chance to be role models for good mental health for young people”

### **Slide 28: Thank You**

“Thank you for joining us today. Please take a moment to scan the QR code and complete the post-test. Be sure to reach out to Erika’s Lighthouse if you have any questions.”