

Teens are using TikTok to talk about difficult issues

newsela.com/read/tiktok-mental-health/id/2000004235



The app TikTok logo is displayed on a smartphone. Photo Illustration: Omar Marques/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images

By Philadelphia Inquirer, adapted by Newsela staff

Published:01/15/2020

Word Count:880

Recommended for:High School

Text Level:7

David Geipel scrolls through TikTok, seeing videos of people speaking about their struggles with mental health.

There have been many of these videos on the social media program recently.

Teens Use TikTok To Talk About Mental Health

TikTok is known for videos such as dances, short skits or just kids goofing off. However, the platform also gives teenagers a place to talk about anxiety, sexuality, depression and relationship abuse.

A resolution for 2020, Geipel said, is to share more about his mental-health struggles after concussions stopped him from playing sports. Geipel is 18 years old. A student from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, who is now home-schooled, he mostly posts videos to remind people that they matter. These videos have led strangers to tell him what his message meant to them.

"The most upsetting thing is how broken everyone is," said Geipel, who has 213,000 followers. Yet "the cool thing is everybody is open about it."

TikTok has become a platform where people can express feelings like loneliness.

Teenagers have made TikTok popular. It allows users to share short videos, between three and 60 seconds, often to songs or audio clips created by others.

When users search "depression" or "suicide" on TikTok, a number for a suicide prevention line and tips on how to get help appear. Suicide is when a person ends his or her own life. Experts say that often mental illness is what leads to suicide.

Mental illness refers to mental health conditions that can affect mood, thoughts and behavior. Examples include depression, anxiety and eating disorders. Many people have mental health concerns at some point. What distinguishes a mental illness, such as depression, from normal feelings such as sadness, is that mental illnesses cause ongoing stress and severely interfere with a person's ability to function.

Most mental illnesses can be treated with medication and therapy.

Willingness To Have Conversations

"Young people are willing to have conversations even people a few generations ago have not had," said Jessa Lingel, an assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania. "You have a generation that has completely let go of that. It's kind of like, 'How can we all get through this together?'"

David Geipel's father, who has the same name, saw his son feel frustrated and irritated after his concussions. He soon learned his son was turning to TikTok to find a new passion, making his own videos.

He told his son that his dreams got shattered with injuries. "You had to dig deep down inside to find a new you," he told him.

Experts say people have often turned to online communities to find support. However, they say Gen Z is different. People in Gen Z were born from 1996 to 2010.

"They've always grown up with social support being found online as well as off," Lingel said. "The thing we really see with Gen Z is their sense that their disclosures online could really be a benefit to someone else."

Carving Out An Online Space

In the early 2000s, people started posting about their lives on Facebook. While older people use Facebook to find groups, younger people have turned to TikTok. Lingel said teenagers have carved out an online space, away from parents and grandparents, to open up to people their own age.

Samira Rajabi works in technology at the University of Colorado Boulder. She said that one way people make sense of difficult health experiences is by having a space to communicate things they feel like they can't share anywhere else.

In those spaces, said Rajabi, "humor is crucial." It's a way for someone who has gone through something traumatic to start making sense of the world again, she said.

Jaynay Johnson, a family therapist who works with teens in Pennsylvania, likes TikTok and how it allows teenagers to express themselves. However, she said parents should be aware of what their kids are doing on the program and talk to them about it.

"When you have teenagers talking about real life issues," Johnson said, "they often don't know the answer to getting help."

Gabe Escobar, 17 years old, kept seeing TikTok videos of users recovering from an eating disorder.

Escobar, who now has 1.4 million followers, noticed all those videos were posted by girls.

He had previously struggled with an eating disorder and thought that with his following, opening up could help other guys going through the same thing. His video about his experience sparked the most messages he's ever received about a single post.

"It's something that not a lot of people know about me, and I thought it was a good way I could share my experience," said Escobar. Because he can reach so many people, he said, "I just thought it was something that I should do."

As for Geipel, one of his most popular videos is simple. Viewers see a black-and-white video of Geipel talking about things teenagers have to look forward to in life. He wanted to remind them there is a future worth living for, no matter how tough their world seems.