

Explainer: Violent Actors' Exploitation and Recruitment of Young People with Mental Health Concerns

Beth Daviess

This article series looks beyond ideology to reveal the online dynamics and ecosystems that accelerate youth radicalization by normalizing violence and rewarding cruelty and harm. Through short, practical explainers, this series seeks to equip caregivers, school officials, and other frontline practitioners with essential information on the complex and rapidly evolving online landscape that young people navigate today.

Violent extremism is not caused by mental health concerns. However, young people experiencing mental health issues or participating in online mental health communities, such as those related to eating disorders or self-harm, may be more at risk for victimization or recruitment by violent actors. These young people also may be prime candidates for early-stage interventions intended to provide mental

health services and reduce targeted violence. This explainer examines two overlapping concerns: (1) the exploitation of young people who participate in online mental health communities and (2) violent actors' attempts to recruit young people with mental health diagnoses, neurodivergence, or a history of traumatic experiences.

Key Takeaways

- If you are concerned that someone you know may be in need of support or intervention, reach out to a trusted community organization or leader for help (see the "Resources" section for information). **In the case of an imminent threat of harm, call 911.**
- Young people who have mental health issues or who participate in online mental health communities may be targeted for exploitation or recruitment by violent actors.
- Extremists and other violent actors may contact young people on mainstream social media platforms and on specialized interest or discussion websites or forums related to mental health.
- Caregivers should watch for indicators of victimization or recruitment, including sudden or significant changes in behavior and other key warning signs (see the section "What Caregivers and Practitioners Should Watch For").

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Exploitation of young people in online mental health communities

In late 2025, a 13-year-old girl entered a Discord server for individuals experiencing mental health issues. A young man messaged the teen directly, and over the course of three months, he convinced her to send sexually explicit images and engage in self-harm. After the victim's mother discovered the messages and called the police, the teen ran away from home. The groomer flew from Pennsylvania to California to meet the victim, continue his abuse, and convince the teen to attempt suicide. Police found the pair in a hotel room with the victim showing signs of physical and sexual abuse.¹

This type of activity is part of a broader pattern: violent networks are targeting vulnerable young people via online communities related to mental health concerns. Sextortion networks such as 764 have produced manuals that recommend targeting **online communities that promote eating disorders and self-harm.**² For example, a potential groomer may contact young people who post pro-anorexia (called "pro-ana") content online or lurk in forums that promote extreme fasting or cutting.

In 2025, a 14-year-old British teen visited a chat room in which people were discussing self-harm.³ Within the chat, a sextortion network member began to gain the teen's trust. Over several weeks of grooming, the perpetrator learned her real name and began to persuade her to engage in sexual acts and self-harm under the threat of blackmail.

Eating disorders, self-harm, and suicidal ideation are all linked to social isolation, emotional distress, and low self-esteem.⁴ **Members of extremist networks take advantage of these vulnerabilities, sometimes offering sympathy and reassurance** to victims before preying on their insecurities and pressuring them to engage in harmful behaviors.⁵ Caregivers and practitioners should be aware that online communities that promote harmful behaviors may be targeted by these actors.

Violent networks may also target online communities that focus on prosocial treatment, recovery, and support. One 13-year-old Seattle teen was experiencing isolation and depression, so he posted to a mental health-related Discord server to seek friends. He was quickly brought to a live chat with several others who told him he should kill himself; the violent actors increased their pressure until the teen died by suicide within the same month.⁶

Recruitment of young people with mental health diagnoses, neurodivergence, or traumatic experiences

Extremist and other violent networks may also seek to recruit teens with mental health diagnoses, neurodivergence, or a history of traumatic experiences. In doing so, **extremists and other violent actors incorrectly stereotype young people with these conditions as more willing to commit violent acts or more likely to give in to pressure.**

This targeted recruitment is sometimes made explicit. Some violent networks use the term "weaponized autism" to both glorify and demean people with autism, whom they perceive as "programmable robots" and "ripe for manipulation."⁷ According to a family member of an individual with autism who was radicalized, when the extremist actors met their family member online and attempted to groom him, "it [felt] like he was a loner that they were preying on."⁸

Recruiters in terrorist organizations, extremist networks, and violent online spaces are often **skilled at identifying "those vulnerable due to traumatic or adverse experiences and offering them a means of empowerment" through violence.**⁹ Experts have found that in too many cases, extremist recruiters "are the only ones who offer such support."¹⁰

Young people processing mental health experiences online, even on mainstream platforms, may be targeted, exploited, and victimized. Participation in online communities related to mental health concerns can be prosocial and supportive, but caregivers and practitioners should not assume that these spaces are

always safe. Extremists and other violent actors may seek to recruit young people in these communities—as well as from more generic online spaces—based on a false belief that they can be easily manipulated to engage in violence or to harm themselves.

What caregivers and practitioners should watch for

Certain behaviors can be signs of exploitation. The following are common online and offline warning signs.

Online warning signs:

- Participation in online communities that encourage or support harmful behaviors, such as eating disorders, self-harm, or suicide.
- Changes to online activity, increased time spent online, new friendships with online people or groups that take up a lot of time, or migration to fringe or unmoderated spaces.
- Anonymous gifts, including money, in-game currency, or other items.
- New or increased interest in violence, mass shootings, mass shooters, or other mass casualty events.
- Online use of suspicious slang or acronyms, such as the following:
 - LMIRL/MIRL (“let’s meet in real life”)
 - S2R (“send to receive”), WTTP (“want to trade pictures?”), GNOC (“get naked on cam”), and NP4NP (“naked pic for naked pic”)
 - POS (“parent over shoulder”), PIR (“parent in room”), and P911 (“parent alert”)

Offline warning signs:

- Sudden changes in behavior, appearance, and eating or sleeping habits.
- Development of new radical beliefs or extreme habits.
- Isolation or withdrawal from activities or social and family relationships.

- Fresh cuts, scratches, bruises, burns, or wounds, often appearing in patterns or forming words or symbols.
- Drawings or writing in blood or what appears to be blood.
- Sudden or increasing severity of mental health concerns, including behaviors related to eating disorders, suicidal ideation, or threats of self-harm.

Resources

If you are worried about someone who might harm themselves or others, connect the person with mental health resources. If there is an immediate life-threatening emergency, call 911.

- Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force: <https://www.icactaskforce.org/internetsafety>
- The Center for Internet and Technology Addiction: <https://virtual-addiction.com/>
- National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline: <https://988lifeline.org/>
- The National Substance Abuse and Mental Health Helpline: www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline
- The Victim Connect Resource Center: <https://victimconnect.org>
- FBI Internet Crime Complaint Center: <https://www.ic3.gov/>
- FBI Field Offices: <https://www.fbi.gov/contact-us/field-offices>
- Peril Research resources for caregivers, policy-makers, educators, and mental health providers: <https://perilresearch.com/resources/>
- ISD’s report Spotting the Signs: Recognizing and Responding to Subcultures of Nihilistic Violence: <https://www.isdglobal.org/publication/spotting-the-signs-recognizing-and-responding-to-subcultures-of-nihilistic-violence/>
- Alliance for Eating Disorders Helpline: <https://www.allianceforeatingdisorders.com/>
- National Alliance on Mental Illness Helpline: <https://www.nami.org/nami-helpline/>

- Crisis Text Line’s eating disorder resources: <https://www.crisistextline.org/topics/eating-disorders/>

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