

Depression and Suicide Among Latine Youth: Addressing Cultural Stressors and Nurturing Cultural Strengths



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Overview

Suicide is the second leading cause of death among Hispanic and Latine youth aged 15 to 19¹. In 2021, 28.7% of Hispanic and Latine high school students reported having serious thoughts of suicide, and 22% seriously considered attempting suicide². Findings also show that Latine LGBTQ+ youth are 3.7 times more likely to attempt suicide and in 2023 an alarming 44% of Latine LGBTQ young people seriously considered suicide in the past year^{3,4}.

While suicide and suicidal behaviors are complex and influenced by multiple factors, depression is a leading risk factor for youth⁵. According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 46% of Hispanic and Latine youth experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness in 2021⁶. Additionally, in 2022, nearly 1 in 5 (19.5%) of youth aged 12 to 17 had a major depressive episode in the previous year⁷. As for Latine LGBTQ+ youth, in 2023 nearly three in five (59%) reported symptoms of depression in the past two weeks⁴.

Culturally Related Stressors

Even though many factors may contribute to depression among Latine youth, it is important to consider cultural and historical variables to gain a deeper understanding of underlying causes and meanings attached to depressive symptoms. Latine youth in the U.S. often face unique cultural stressors not shared by their non-Hispanic white peers. These stressors can significantly affect their mental health, leading to higher rates of depression and suicide risk. If left unaddressed, cultural stressors can create a cycle that reinforces both depression and suicidal behavior.

Additionally, cultural factors play a significant role in how Hispanic and Latine youth, families, and communities discuss—or remain silent about—depression and suicide. This highlights the urgent need for equitable care systems that promote open and supportive conversations around mental health and well-being. Thus, it is crucial to consider culturally related stressors when examining suicide risks in minoritized and vulnerable youth populations including:

- **Acculturation and Acculturative stress:** For Latine youth who migrate or are children of immigrant families, the acculturation process can be stressful. They often have to confront cultural barriers, face social stigma due to their minoritized status, and endure pressures to assimilate and adjust rapidly to a new and different sociocultural context.
- **Identity formation and family conflict:** Latine youth may struggle to balance their cultural heritage with U.S. culture, leading to identity conflicts and feelings of being caught between two worlds. For some, navigating the complexities of identity formation including around values and practices associated with ethnic identification, gender norms, autonomy and sexual orientation—can heighten psychological distress. Among Latine youth, clashing of values and practices with those of parents and caregivers, may lead to feelings of rejection and loss of family support, a challenge often experienced by Latine LGBTQ+ youth⁸.
- **Language barriers:** Difficulty in speaking or understanding English can lead to communication challenges and feelings of isolation, especially in educational or social settings.
- **Poverty:** Latine youth may face economic hardships and limited access to resources, which can be compounded by cultural barriers in accessing attainable mental health services.
- **Discrimination:** Ongoing experiences of discrimination, including but not limited to language use, race, ethnicity, immigration status, socioeconomic background and country of origin can form part of the cumulative stressors that affect Latine youth's mental health and can negatively impact their self-esteem and self-image. For Latine LGBTQ+ youth, the intersection of discrimination related to both their ethnicity and sexual orientation or gender identity presents an increased risk for depression and suicide.
- **Racial and historical trauma:** Experiences of colonization, oppression, forced migration and marginalization have had lasting intergenerational impact on Latine communities, including in the form of poverty, family disruption and cultural dispossession which can exacerbate the mental health challenges faced by Latine youth and their families.
- **Immigration-related trauma:** The migration journey often involves multiples stressors and potentially traumatic events, including experiencing dangerous conditions, exploitation, or witnessing violence which can have a lasting impact on youth's psychological wellbeing. Additionally, the immigration process may involve family separations, with some youth being separated from one or both parents as they immigrate to a new country.



Culturally Related Protective Factors

Recognizing how culture shapes the way adolescents understand, discuss, and experience depression is critical to providing equitable care and effective suicide prevention. For Latine youth, factors like ethnic affiliation and supportive relationships within their family and community may reduce depressive symptoms and increase the likelihood of youth seeking support from trusted others during challenging times including when experiencing suicidal ideation or intentions ⁹. Culturally rooted connections, when strengthened, may serve as important protective factors against suicide including:

- **Familismo** is a central cultural value which places a strong emphasis on close family ties, interconnectedness and support from the immediate and extended family, familismo is considered an important culture related protective factor for youth's mental health.
- **Healthy ethnic identity** has been related positively to measures of psychological well-being such as coping ability, mastery, self-esteem, and optimism, and negatively to measures of loneliness and depression ¹⁰. Young people who have explored their ethnic identity, and developed a positive sense of what their ethnicity means to them, are better equipped to deal with culturally related stressors ¹¹.
- **Cultural involvement** and engagement with cultural practices and traditions can help Latine youth reduce feelings of marginalization, alienation and other acculturation related stressors while providing a sense of continuity and connection to their community.
- **Spirituality**, spiritual practices and religious affiliation can provide an important source of meaning, support and coping when faced with stressors and adversities and associated with increased hopefulness.

The Role of School Connectedness

Culturally informed intervention models in schools are essential for supporting Hispanic and Latine youth through prevention strategies that are responsive to their cultural contexts and strengths. Schools may offer spaces to speak about values, beliefs and experiences while providing education and support to Latine students. Considering the role of stigma and other barriers that may impede Latine youths to seek mental health services, schools have a unique and key role in prevention efforts by providing support and psychoeducation to students. This presents a unique opportunity for schools to play a key role in educating Latine youth and families about mental health, symptoms, and available services ¹².



The Hispanic/Latino Behavioral Health Center of Excellence recognizes the complexities associated with gender and ethnic identification, as well as the right of all individuals to self-identify. HLBH CoE uses the term Latine with the intention of both facilitating fluent reading and pronunciation and supporting an inclusive and respectful language. Latine is a gender-neutral form of the word Latino that uses the letter e at the end, an idea native to the Spanish language.

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REFERENCES