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Best Practice Paper

'Self-harm behavior'

developed by jugendschutz.net with support from the National Suicide Prevention Program (NaSPro), the Wiener Werkstaette for Suicide Research and the Federal Association 'Eating disorders' (BFE)

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Content that glorifies or trivializes self-harm behavior and serious illnesses like eating disorders, self-injury and suicide is very prevalent on the internet and can encourage children and young people to copycat behavior. Whenever those young people who already suffer from an eating disorder come across such content they often feel understood and encouraged to carry on with their self-harm behavior. Distorted and idealized images can again trigger and fuel pathological behavior.[1]

Operators of major social media platforms used by young users are challenged to create their platforms in a way that protects young people from such content and associated risks. This best practice paper is a practical guideline for operators by providing them with information about the requirements they should fulfill, characteristics for measuring the risks and potential options for taking action. The paper also highlights typical content and criteria for an easy and quick assessment from a youth protection perspective.

1) What can operators do?

1.1 Use the expertise of well-known centers for prevention and counseling

- Training for support team staff by experts
- Joint development/review of internal guidelines, recommendations for action in dealing with content and reports concerning self-injury and suicide as well as eating disorders
- Joint development/review of templates with sensitive words and expressions to address users affected or respond to worried reporters

1.2 Ban pro-self-harm content from the platform and provide information about self-harm behavior

- Prohibit content that trivializes or glorifies self-harm behavior in community standards or terms of service
- Revise internal guidelines/standards if necessary and make them transparent; lay down the conditions for removing content
- Block searches with relevant keywords and hashtags as well as possible variants (different spelling) along with making aware of the problem and providing links to counseling centers
- Provide basic information and FAQs concerning self-injurious, suicidal behavior and eating disorders
- Use sensitive words and expressions when addressing users affected and recommend professional help, ideally link to suitable counseling centers

1.3 Make reporting easy and transparent

- Offer easily accessible and user-friendly reporting mechanisms for all users of the platform, without them needing to be logged in
- Point to reporting mechanisms on the platform
- Create explicit options for reporting self-harm content
- Inform users about the status of their reports

1.4 Prioritize reports on self-harm content

- Give reports on self-harm content priority, process them quickly and in real time and as far as possible, separately from other reports

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[1] It is important to point out here that the internet certainly also offers helpful information proposing ways to handle emergency situations.

- Make sure that reports on imminent danger situations like suicide announcements or searches for suicide partners are directly forwarded to law enforcement with all relevant information[2]

1.5 Take consistent action

Platform operators should remove content assessed as endangering to young people or restrict access to under aged users.

Content that idealizes self-harm behavior can seriously impair the development of children and young people. Operators should ensure that children and young people normally do not come across such content e.g. by restricting access according to age.

If removal of content or protection measures are necessary:

- Use of sensitive words and expressions to address users affected and their followers with educational information and links to counseling centers
- Prevention of re-upload of the content already removed

Basically, all actions shall always target the endangering or harmful content directly. If this kind of content is predominant the measure to take should be directed to the next largest unit (e.g. profile, channel) in order to provide optimum protection for children and young people.

2) Evaluation criteria

All content/posts must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Context, intention and individual form are essential elements for assessing the level of harm or danger. Here, moderating factors like a critical view of the topic or links to practical assistance must be taken into account. Furthermore, it is specifically important to pay attention to the type of the content, the age of the target group and the possibility of interaction. The lines are blurred between the degrees of harm and risk.

An evaluation whether the content is endangering to young people, impairing to their development or not offering cause for complaint can take place according to the following criteria:

2.1 Criteria for endangering content

Endangering content can encourage children and young people affected to carry on with their already existing mental illnesses and self-harm behavior or suicide intentions, keep up with their negative self-image or view of the world and consequently even further the pathological, self-harming behavior.

Promoting self-harm behavior

Content with texts[3], images or videos (also in combination) that

- conveys a negative image of the own physical integrity,
- trivializes self-harm behavior and portrays it as an adequate, natural or logical course of action,
- glorifies self-harm behavior as the only, normal solution without alternative for all problems,
- promotes extreme underweight and eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia in terms of a pro-Ana/pro-Mia lifestyle as the one and only choice,

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[2] Practical guidelines for imminent danger situations developed by jugendschutz.net are available on request. These list all necessary steps to be taken and law enforcement contact details in order to ensure reaction as fast as possible.

[3] Here, text also includes hashtags and spoken words.

- depicts specifically programmatic content in terms of self-harm content, e.g. 'Ana's 10 commandments', 'Ana's letter', 'Ana's psalm',

- suggests that self-injury is an extraordinary experience provoking admiration and affection in others,

- comprises a large amount of content and very explicit content triggering self-harm behavior such as:

  - depictions of severely underweight people, extremely emaciated parts of the body,

  - glamorizing reports of self-injury or suicide attempts,

  - depictions of self-injury (bleeding cuts, many or big scars) or the actual self-injury itself,

  - depictions of suicide attempts, suicides or victims of suicide and the combination with idealizing, romanticizing or destructive statements.

Promoting methods and how-to's

Content with texts (also in combination with images) that

- contains discussions about the best methods of self-injury or suicide: exchange (of how-to's) in terms of

  - preparation and performance,

  - the most effective, painless or fastest way as possible,

  - the choice of the appropriate spot or time,

- describes harmful weight loss methods in detail,

- gives specific tips on where to get the right aids or even offer these directly (e.g. drugs not yet authorized or available only on prescription or weapons).

Creating pressure

Content with texts (also in combination with images) that

- conveys suicide announcements, searches for suicide partners or suicide pacts,

- puts pressure on young people to engage in behavior damaging to their health, e.g. by:

  - calling on them to post content confirming and supporting self-injurious behavior, suicide or eating disorders

  - other users seriously calling on them to drastically reduce their weight, injure themselves or commit suicide and giving them instructions on how to do it,

  - encouraging copy-cat behavior by allowing users to upload images/videos of (their own) bodies or (their) self-injuries (other users may post comments),

  - offering the possibility to search for suicide partners or arrange for matchmaking,

  - urging them to submit themselves to an anorexic/bulimic ideal of beauty and behavior

  - organizing and participating in starvation competitions (challenges),

  - matchmaking with competitors/partners (twins) to lose weight to directly compare and challenge each other,

  - threatening to be excluded from the community in case of too little weight loss

Declining help and counseling

Content with texts (also in combination with images) that

- denies negative psychological and physical effects of self-harm behavior and eating disorders or symptoms of a mental disorder,

- expressly rejects counter arguments, reference to counseling centers, assistance to cope with problems and times of life crisis as an alternative,

- plays down or even rejects supportive words from other users, notice underlining the need for seeking help or critical contributions concerning this topic,

- keeps those affected from seeking help,

- provides specific tips on how to hide self-injuries or signs of anorexia/bulimia in order to cut off any kind of help.

This does not include expressing negative experiences with medical or psychological/psychotherapeutic treatments.

2.2 Criteria for content impairing the development of children and young people

Content suited to impair the development of children or young people into self-responsible and socially competent personalities can convey a negative self-image, a negative image of their body and the world that can lead to a distorted and endangering perception of the value of health and life.

Content with texts, images or videos (also in combination) that

- teaches young people that it is normal to solve problems with self-harming behavior,

- associates young people with false, unrealistic ideas of the sense and the value of health and their own physical integrity or even encourages them,

- gives a one-sided positive picture of self-harm behavior, without any graphic, glorifying or trivializing content,

- presents anorexia/bulimia (and its side effects) as an ideal of beauty and behavior as well as a means of improving one's self-esteem and social acceptance,

- downgrades or excludes normal weight and overweight people,

- depicts significant weight loss/underweight in a positive light,

- can trigger self-harm behavior, e.g.

  - euphemistic or glorifying description of self-injury and suicide attempts, specifically involving the suicide spot and/or method,

  - images/videos of self-harm scars and deep cuts, also with destructive statements,

  - images/videos of suicide acts or of suicide victims in neutral or euphemistic context,

  - images/videos depicting emaciated persons in an affirmative context.

2.3 No violation of youth protection laws

There is no need for action where content discusses psychological disorders such as depression or eating disorders as well as negative thoughts and feelings, seeing this as a problem and recommending help without promoting self-harm behavior.

3) Counseling services

Links to counseling services should differentiate between the types of risk as far as possible and be tailored to the users' specific needs in terms of language and country. Here, online content performs best; it offers low-threshold access to information without switching between different media.

Recommendations for counseling services in German language in crisis situations:

- http://www.telefonseelsorge.de
- http://www.kinderundjugendtelefon.de
- https://www.nummergegenkummer.de
- http://www.youth-life-line.de
- Search for local help: http://www.neuhland.net/bundesländer.html
- http://www.telefonseelsorge.at (Austria)
- http://www.rataufdraht.at (Austria)
- https://www.143.ch (Switzerland)
- https://www.147.ch (Switzerland)
- http://www.seelsorge.ch (Switzerland)

Recommendations for counseling services in German language specifically in cases of suicidal behavior:

- http://www.u25-deutschland.de
- http://junoma.de
- https://neuhland.beranet.info
- https://suizid-praevention.gv.at (Austria)
- http://www.kriseninterventionszentrum.at (Austria)
- https://www.u25-schweiz.ch (Switzerland)

Recommendations for counseling services in German language specifically in cases of eating disorders:

- http://www.essstoerungen-frankfurt.de
- http://www.hungrig-online.de
- http://cinderella-beratung.beranet.info
- http://www.anad.de
- http://www.essstoerungen-onlineberatung.de
- www.bundesfachverbandessstoerungen.de
- Local help: http://www.bzga-essstoerungen.de
- http://www.netzwerk-essstoerungen.at/deutsch/beratung.html (Austria)
- http://www.essstoerungshotline.at (Austria)
- http://www.aes.ch (Switzerland)

Authors

jugendschutz.net	As the German center at federal and state level concerning the protection of minors on the internet, jugendschutz.net looks closely at risks in internet services specifically attracting young people, takes action against illegal and harmful content and urges providers and platform operators to design their content in a way that allows children and young people to use the internet free of troubles.
Nationales Suizid Präventions Programm	Given that suicide is a growing society-wide problem and health-related policy issue, more than 90 institutions, organizations and associations have joined efforts to develop and implement a National Suicide Prevention Program (NaSPro).
WIENER·WERKSTÄTTE FÜR·SUIZIDFORSCHUNG	The Wiener Werkstaette for Suicide Research is an open inter-university and inter-disciplinary consortium of researchers devoted to networking at local and international level and to exchanging expertise in the field of suicide research and suicide prevention.
BFE Bundes Fachverband Essstörungen e.V. Der Verband der Einrichtungen im Essstörungsbereich	The Federal Association 'Eating disorders' is a nationwide association of counseling/treatment services, psychosomatic clinics, therapeutic groups and psychotherapeutic centers. It provides those affected, their families and experts with information and advice on how to treat eating disorders.