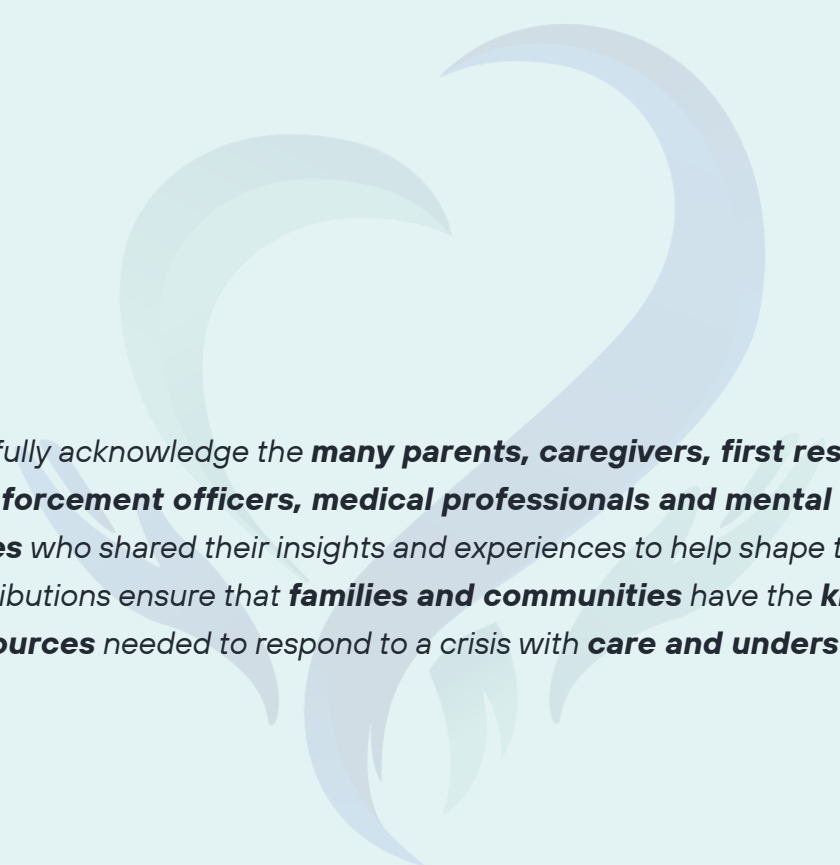




Your Crisis Navigator

*A guide to youth mental health crises for parents and caregivers
with the Crisis Compass Form to guide the way.*



*We gratefully acknowledge the **many parents, caregivers, first responders, law enforcement officers, medical professionals and mental health advocates** who shared their insights and experiences to help shape this guide. Your contributions ensure that **families and communities** have the **knowledge and resources** needed to respond to a crisis with **care and understanding**.*

ACMH

Table of Contents



Welcome to the Crisis Navigator Guide & Compass Form	4
Recognizing a Crisis	5
Youth Mental Health Opportunity Continuum	6
Four Dimensions of Crisis Warning Signs	7
What Might Signal an Emerging Crisis	8
Factors that Contribute to a Crisis	9
Potential Triggers of Crisis Situations	10
Immediate Steps to Take	11
Talking to Youth in Crisis	12
Crisis Compass Forms and Examples	13-16
Quick Help Resources	17
Thank You & Acknowledgments	18

Welcome to the Crisis Navigator & Compass Form

This guide is meant to help ensure that you, your youth and the people around them are **better prepared** to face whatever comes next.

Facing a mental health crisis with your youth can feel overwhelming and unpredictable. The Crisis Navigator and Compass form is here to help you feel **supported, prepared, and confident during these difficult times.**

A crisis is any event that **overwhelms a person's or family's usual coping skills, causing stress or instability.** What constitutes a crisis can vary widely and is best defined by those experiencing it. Every family experiences and responds to crises differently, shaped by their culture, beliefs, and unique dynamics. This guide provides **practical steps to help you navigate a mental health crisis in a way that fits your family's needs.**



Included within this guide is the **Crisis Compass form**, a simple tool that helps first responders, health care professionals, and caregivers **understand your youth's needs in an emergency.** This is more than just a form, it's **a resource to help you prepare, communicate and take action** when your youth needs you most.



You are the expert on your youth. With the right support, you can navigate a crisis and find a path forward. You are not alone.

Recognizing a Crisis

Definition of a mental health crisis in youth.

A crisis typically involves a significant event that disrupts normal coping mechanisms, leading to feelings of instability or overwhelm. It may be emotional, psychiatric, or both. A crisis is a state of intense distress where an individual feels unable to cope or lacking control over their situation. It can result from sudden, unexpected events or ongoing stressors that push someone beyond their ability to manage effectively.

Types of Crises

Situational Crises – Triggered by unexpected life events (e.g., loss of a loved one, job loss, natural disasters).

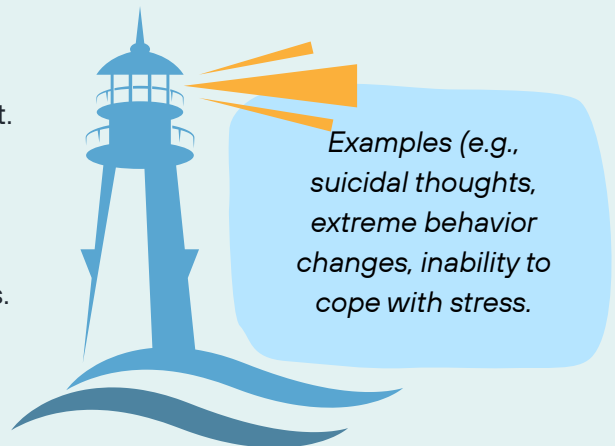
Developmental Crises – Occurs during significant life transitions (e.g., adolescence, parenthood, aging).

Emotional Crises – Overwhelming psychological distress (e.g., panic attacks, PTSD responses).

Community or Societal Crises – Large-scale crises impacting groups (e.g., pandemics, school violence, systemic injustice).

Key Characteristics of a Crisis:

- A sense of urgency or immediate need for support.
- Emotional instability, (fear, anxiety, anger, hopelessness).
- Feeling out of control or unable to make decisions.
- Inability to use typical coping skills.
- Potential risk to self or others.

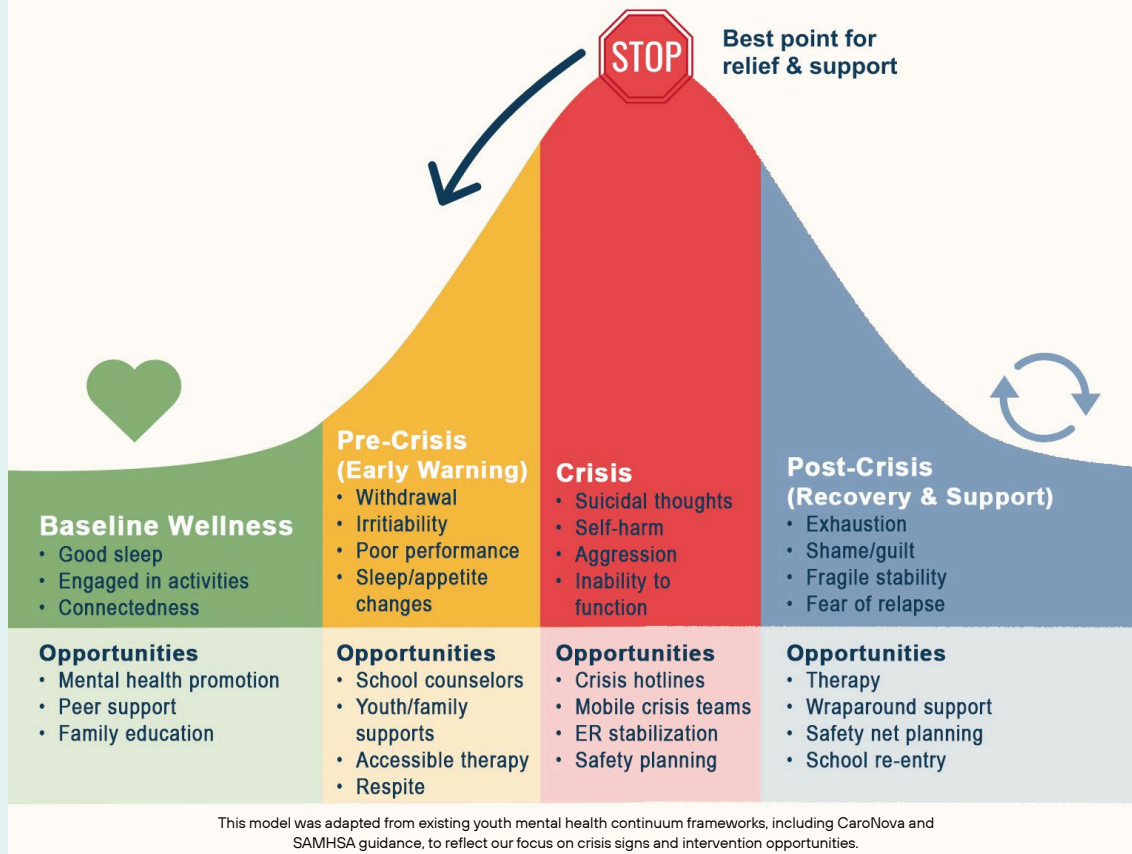


Examples (e.g., suicidal thoughts, extreme behavior changes, inability to cope with stress).



How families interpret and respond to crises can be shaped by their cultural values, religious beliefs, family dynamics, and societal expectations.

Youth Mental Health Opportunity Continuum



The *Youth Mental Health Opportunity Continuum* helps us see how a young person's mental health can change over time. It shows four stages, with important signs to look for and opportunities to step in and support. The best time to act is before a crisis happens, when early warning signs appear.

- **Wellness** – feeling steady and connected; opportunities include mental health promotion, peer support and family education.
- **Pre-Crisis** – early warning signs like withdrawal, irritability or changes in sleep; opportunities include counseling, therapy access and respite supports.
- **Crisis** – urgent safety concerns such as suicidal thoughts, self-harm or aggression; opportunities include hotlines, crisis teams or emergency care.
- **Post-Crisis** – recovery and rebuilding after a crisis; opportunities include therapy, wraparound supports and school or family planning.

Four Dimensions of Crisis Warning Signs

The *Four Dimensions of Crisis Warning Signs* remind us that warning signs can appear in many different areas of a child's life. Paying attention to these changes can help parents and caregivers step in early and offer support.

- **Emotional and Behavioral Changes** – mood swings, irritability, withdrawal or anger outbursts.
- **Verbal or Written Signs** – talking or writing about hopelessness, death or being a burden.
- **Academic and Social Signs** – sudden drop in grades, skipping school, isolation from friends or activities.
- **Physical and Behavioral Signs** – changes in sleep or eating, lack of energy, neglect of personal care or risky behaviors.

Four Dimensions of Crisis Warning Signs

- **Sudden Mood Swings** – Extreme highs and lows, unpredictable emotional reactions.
- **Persistent Sadness or Hopelessness** – Expressions of feeling worthless, helpless or having no future.
- **Increased Irritability or Anger** – Frequent outbursts, frustration over minor issues or aggression.
- **Social Withdrawal** – Avoiding friends, family and previously enjoyed activities.
- **Loss of Interest in Activities** – No longer engaging in hobbies, school or social events.
- **Sudden Changes in Personality** – Acting completely different than usual, becoming unusually quiet or reckless.

Emotional and Behavioral Changes

- **Talking About Death or Suicide** – Saying things like "I can't do this anymore" or "I wish I wasn't here."
- **Giving Away Possessions** – Suddenly parting with favorite items or making statements that suggest they won't need them.
- **Writing or Drawing About Suicide** – Expressing suicidal thoughts through art, journaling or online posts.

Verbal or Written Signs

- **Expressing Feelings of Being a Burden** – Saying things like "Everyone would be better without me."

- **Changes in Sleep Patterns** – Insomnia, frequent nightmares, or sleeping excessively.
- **Significant Changes in Eating Habits** – Loss of appetite or overeating.
- **Self-Harm** – Unexplained cuts, burns, or bruises (on wrists, arms, thighs, etc.).
- **Risk-Taking Behavior** – Reckless driving, substance abuse or engaging in dangerous activities.
- **Increased Physical Complaints** – Frequent headaches, stomachaches or other unexplained pain.

Academic and Social Signs

Physical and Behavioral Signs

- **Declining School Performance** – Sudden drop in grades, skipping school or losing motivation.
- **Conflict with Peers or Authority Figures** – Increased arguments, fights or defiance.
- **Bullying** (As a victim or perpetrator) – Being bullied or bullying others as an outlet for distress.
- **Withdrawal/Loss of Interest** – Pulling away from friends, family or activities.
- **Changes in Daily Functioning** – Noticeable shifts in sleep, appetite or hygiene.

What might signal an emerging crisis?

Perfectionism in Youth

For many young people, perfectionism can feel like a silent burden, one that gradually wears away at their well-being. While striving for excellence isn't inherently harmful, when perfectionism becomes rigid, self-critical, and overwhelming, it can increase the risk of mental health struggles, including suicidal thoughts and crises.

Signs of Perfectionism That May Signal a Crisis in Youth:

- **Extreme Fear of Failure** – A deep anxiety over making mistakes, even minor ones, often leading to intense stress before exams, performances or social interactions.
- **Rigid Thinking Patterns** – Viewing success and failure in all-or-nothing terms, such as, "If I don't get a perfect score, I'm a failure."
- **Self-Criticism & Harsh Inner Dialogue** – Constantly putting themselves down and struggling to accept personal flaws, sometimes saying things like "I'm not good enough" or "I'll never be successful."
- **Overcommitment & Burnout** – Taking on too many academic, extracurricular or social obligations, leading to exhaustion, stress and feelings of hopelessness.
- **Avoidance of Challenges** – Refusing to start projects, turning in work late or procrastinating out of fear that it won't be "perfect."
- **Seeking Constant Validation** – Frequently needing reassurance from teachers, coaches or parents but never feeling satisfied with their achievements.
- **Emotional Suppression** – Hiding stress, anxiety or sadness to maintain a 'put-together' image, making it difficult for adults to recognize their struggles.
- **Loss of Interest in Activities** – Withdrawing from sports, hobbies or friendships due to the fear of not meeting high expectations.
- **Increased Anxiety and Depression** – Experiencing persistent sadness, social withdrawal or low self-worth that seems to stem from academic or social pressures.
- **Suicidal Ideation or Hopelessness** – Expressing thoughts like "I'll never be good enough," "Nothing I do matters," or "I just want to disappear."



Factors that Contribute to a Crisis

- **Unrealistic Expectations** – Setting impossibly high personal standards, leading to chronic disappointment.
- **Fear of Disapproval or Rejection** – Feeling that their value is based entirely on their achievements.
- **Shame and Isolation** – Struggling alone because they believe seeking help is a sign of weakness or failure.
- **Hopelessness** – Believing they will never be "enough," which can lead to withdrawal, self-harm or suicidal thoughts.

What to Watch For in a Youth Crisis:

- Sudden withdrawal from friends, family or activities they once enjoyed.
- Increased frustration or emotional outbursts when they feel they have failed.
- Expressions of hopelessness, worthlessness or self-doubt.
- Engagement in self-harm or risky behaviors.
- Verbal hints about suicide or disappearing, even in a joking manner.

How to Support a Young Person Struggling with Perfectionism:

- **Normalize mistakes and growth** – Help them see that learning comes from progress, not perfection.
- **Encourage a balance** – Support self-care, fun activities and downtime rather than constant achievement.
- **Praise effort, not just results** – Recognize resilience, creativity and improvement, not just high grades or awards.
- **Be a safe space** – Let them know they are valued for who they are, not what they accomplish.
- **Seek professional help if needed** – If their perfectionism leads to distress, depression or thoughts of self-harm, reach out to a therapist, school counselor or crisis support service.



Potential Triggers of Crisis

Situational and environmental triggers are external circumstances or conditions in a youth's surroundings that can intensify stress, heighten emotional responses or contribute to a mental health crisis. These triggers are often outside of the young person's control and may be linked to their home, school, community or social environment. Understanding these factors is important because recognizing them early allows caregivers, educators and support professionals to anticipate potential challenges, create safer spaces and respond with effective strategies that help prevent escalation.

Situational or Environmental Triggers

Recent Loss or Trauma

Death of a loved one, breakups or exposure to violence.

Family or Relationship Problems

Parental divorce, neglect or abuse.

Financial Stress in the Household

Worrying about money, housing or basic needs.

Identity Struggles

LGBTQ+ youth, neurodivergent youth or those struggling with their identity may feel isolated

History of Mental Health Challenges

Previous struggles with depression, anxiety or trauma.

When to Seek Immediate Help:

- If a youth makes direct threats of self-harm or suicide.
- If they have a specific plan or means to hurt themselves.
- If they suddenly seem very calm after a period of distress (could indicate a decision to end their life).

Self-harm can look different.

If a youth is talking about or showing signs of suicide, or if their self-harm places their life in immediate danger, seek emergency help right away (call 911 or go to the emergency room). If the behavior is concerning but not immediately life-threatening, connect with a mental health professional, crisis line or trusted adult as soon as possible.



Immediate Steps to Take

When a youth is in crisis, your response matters. Staying calm, acting quickly and connecting them to support can help prevent harm.



In crisis, it is easy to feel helpless, but you are not powerless.



Preparedness Tip: Be sure to list emergency contacts, crisis team numbers and the youth's therapist in the Crisis Compass Form (found at the back of this guide) for quick access during a crisis. Additional supports can be found on the Resource Page.

Step 1: Stay Calm and Supportive

- Speak in a steady, calm and reassuring voice.
- Validate their feelings: "I hear you, and I want to help."
- Avoid dismissing their emotions or making them feel ashamed.
- If they express suicidal thoughts or extreme emotional distress, do not leave them alone. Stay present until help arrives or is arranged.

Step 2: Reach out for Help

- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline – Call or text 988 for 24/7 support.
- Crisis Text Line – Text HOME to 741741 for confidential crisis support.
- Trevor Project (LGBTQ+ Youth Support) – Call 1-866-488-7386 or text START to 678678.
- Call 911 – If immediate danger is present, call 911 and request a crisis-trained officer.

Step 3: Ensure Physical Safety

- Remove harmful items (weapons, medications, sharp objects, ligatures).
- Provide a safe, quiet space.
- Seek medical attention, as needed, if self-harm has occurred.

Talking to Youth in Crisis

Your words can offer comfort—or increase distress. Use supportive communication to help de-escalate the situation.

What to Say

Use open-ended questions – “Can you tell me what’s on your mind?”

Validate their feelings – “I see that you’re struggling, and I want to help.”

Listen actively – Show understanding: “It sounds like you feel overwhelmed.”

What NOT to Say

“You’ll get over it.” – Minimizes their pain.

“You’re doing this for attention.” – Invalidates their struggle.

“Everything happens for a reason.” – May feel dismissive.

Support, knowledge, and action can save lives.

If they say:

- “I don’t want to be here anymore.”
- “I’ve been thinking about hurting myself.”
- “No one would care if I was gone.”
- “I have a plan to end my life.”



**Seek
Professional
Help**



Preparedness Tip: Document warning signs, past crisis responses, and what helps de-escalate distress in the Crisis Compass Form to guide future conversations.

More support resources are listed in the Resource Page.

Crisis Compass Form – Page One: Youth Information

The Crisis Compass Form helps ensure your youth gets the right support in a crisis. The next pages show sample layouts, with instructional text boxes in **blue on light gray** to guide you and offer examples.

MY CRISIS COMPASS



Youth's First & Last Name:		Nickname (if applicable):	
Date of Birth:		Sex and Preferred Pronouns:	
Safety plan?		Yes or No	
<p>If you don't have a safety plan, we recommend creating one with your clinician and attaching it, along with any other relevant documents.</p>			
Safety Concerns:	<p><i>NO FIREARMS IN THIS HOME.</i></p> <p><i>Escalates quickly, becomes aggressive and violent. May strike with a fist.</i></p>		
	<p>List risks (self-harm, weapons, aggression). Ex: Escalates quickly; no firearms.</p>		
Known Triggers:	<p><i>Perceiving that other people are talking behind their back.</i></p> <p><i>Close proximity of others when escalated.</i></p>		
	<p>Situations that cause distress. Ex: Loud noises, people too close.</p>		
Known Comforts:	<p><i>Biscuit, our family dog. Talking about Biscuit may help during de-escalation and building rapport.</i></p>		
	<p>What helps calm your youth. Ex: Talking about the family dog.</p>		
Relevant Behavioral/ Developmental/ Medical Needs:	<p><i>Autism Spectrum Disorder, which can make understanding things harder.</i></p>		
	<p>List diagnoses or conditions. Ex: Autism Spectrum Disorder</p>		
Caregiver Support Needs:	<p><i>Mom works two jobs and is very stressed. Any help to remain calm is appreciated. Follow-up after crisis would be helpful.</i></p>		
	<p>How responders can support you. Ex: Mom stressed; follow-up appreciated.</p>		

Best Practice Tips

Keep copies (home, wallet, school, providers). Update often (every six months or after changes). Share widely (teachers, counselors, therapists, caregivers). Plan ahead (ensures quick access in crisis).

Page Two: Caregiver & Medical Information

Page two captures key information: caregivers, providers, medications and past crises. This helps first responders quickly see the youth's care team and important history.

MY CRISIS COMPASS

acmh-mi.org | HELP@ACMH-MI.ORG | (888) ACMH-KID

Primary Caregiver Name and Relation:	Back-up Person(s) Name and Relation:
Phone Number(s):	Phone Number(s):
Address:	Address:
Email(s):	Email(s):

Mental Health Provider Name:	Insurance Provider:	Phone:
Phone Number(s):	Subscriber Name:	
Address:	Policy/Group Number:	
Email(s):	Subscriber ID/Member ID:	

Current Medication	Dose	Frequency	Duration
Risperidone	0.5 mg	Once Daily	4 months
Aripiprazole	2 mg	Once Daily	2 weeks

Previous Crisis Interventions and Additional Information:

Psychotic episode at school about 8 months ago and brief hospitalization.

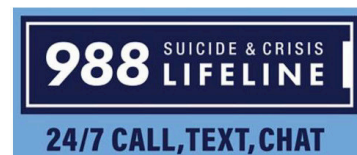
Parents are divorced. Father is not involved and lives in another state.

**Past crisis,
hospitalizations, or notes.
Ex. Episode at school, brief
hospitalization.**

Completed By:

Date:

Page 2 of 2



Best Practice Tips - Page Two

Caregiver and provider contacts. Medications (as prescribed). Past interventions. Additional info (allergies, triggers, supports). Keep updated.

MY CRISIS COMPASS



Youth's First & Last Name:		Nickname (if applicable):	
Date of Birth:		Sex and Preferred Pronouns:	
Safety plan?		Yes or No	(If you don't have a safety plan, we recommend creating one with your clinician and attaching it, along with any other relevant documents.)
Safety Concerns:			
Known Triggers:			
Known Comforts:			
Relevant Behavioral/ Developmental/ Medical Needs:			
Caregiver Support Needs:			



MY CRISIS COMPASS

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Primary Caregiver Name and Relation:	Back-up Person(s) Name and Relation:
Phone Number(s):	Phone Number(s):
Address:	Address:
Email(s):	Email(s):

Mental Health Provider Name:	Insurance Provider:	Phone:
Phone Number(s):	Subscriber Name:	
Address:	Policy/Group Number:	
Email(s):	Subscriber ID/Member ID:	

Current Medication	Dose	Frequency	Duration

Previous Crisis Interventions and Additional Information:

Completed By:
Date:



Quick Help Resources

Category / Service Area	Entity / Resource Name	Support Provided	Contact Information
National 24/7 Crisis Services	988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline	Available for youth, caregivers, and professionals needing immediate crisis support.	Call/Text 988 (1-800-273-TALK) or visit 988lifeline.org
	Crisis Text Line	24/7 text-based support from trained counselors for any type of crisis.	Text HOME to 741741
	The Trevor Project	For LGBTQ+ young people facing crisis, suicidal thoughts, or emotional distress.	Call 1-866-488-7386, text START to 678678, or visit thetrevorproject.org
Michigan-Specific Crisis Support	Crisis and Access Line (MiCAL)	Connects Michigan residents to 988 support and local resources by call, chat, or text.	Visit: mical.michigan.gov/s/who-we-are
	Psychiatric Care Improvement Project (MPCIP) Crisis Resource Directory	Visit the website to search for information including central crisis line, mobile crisis, and crisis stabilization units.	Visit: mpcip.org/crisis-directory/mpcip.org/mpcip/crisis-directory/
Additional Mental Health & Family Support for Youth & Caregivers	Association for Children's Mental Health (ACMH)	Contact for resources, advocacy, and parent support.	Email: help@acmh-mi.org Parent Line: (888) ACMH-KID (226-4543) Web: acmh-mi.org
	Michigan Department of Health & Human Services (MDHHS)	Provides access to mental health programs, youth services, and family support.	Visit michigan.gov/mdhhs
	Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)	Provides referrals for youth and young adults seeking treatment for mental health and substance use.	Helpline: 1-800-662-HELP (4357) or visit samhsa.gov
	National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)	Offers guidance for youth and families navigating mental health challenges.	Helpline: 1-800-950-NAMI (6264) or visit nami.org/help
	American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP)	Suicide prevention resources for youth and families.	Visit: afsp.org
	Michigan Alliance for Families (MAF)	Specialized support for families of youth with disabilities.	Visit: michiganallianceforfamilies.org
	National Federation of Families (NFF)	For caregivers of youth with mental health needs.	Visit: ffcmh.org



Emergency Preparedness Tip:

Save these crisis numbers in your phone and keep a copy of this page with your Crisis Compass Form so you can access help quickly when needed.

Thank You & Acknowledgments

The **Crisis Navigator Guide and Compass Form** was created to support **parents, caregivers, youth, first responders, educators, medical professionals and communities** in navigating mental health crises with **confidence and compassion**.

This initiative was made possible through funding from the **Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS)** and the **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)**.



For additional **mental health support, resources and advocacy**, visit our website or contact our team.

You Are Not Alone. Help Is Available.

For More Information and Support:

Association for Children's Mental Health (ACMH)

acmh-mi.org

Email: help@acmh-mi.org

Phone: (517) 372-4016

Parent Line: (888) **ACMH-KID** (226-4543)

