Communication has changed in the 10 years since I started at SPRC, especially in our virtual lives. On my ride to work on the commuter rail these days, most of the passengers are texting, checking news updates on tablets, and working on laptops, when just a few years ago we might have been reading books or newspapers. As social media and smart devices have become dramatically more central in our lives, I’ve heard concerns about how these changes might affect suicide risk, especially among youth. But instead of approaching these changes with fear, I would encourage the suicide prevention field to embrace them as new opportunities for promoting dialogue, fostering supportive connections, and spreading messages of hope.

I’ve seen the unease around youth cyber safety in my own social media feeds and online news platforms, but let’s pause to consider what the research tells us. The fact is, the science is inconclusive on the impact of social media use on mental health and suicide risk. Some research points to potential harm from certain kinds of online interactions for some youth. But other studies show potentially positive benefits, including providing a safe space to seek support for suicide-related feelings. While cyberbullying is a related, rising concern, in-person bullying remains much more common. Moreover, just as positive school climate initiatives have taught students to step in or go to an adult when they see bullying in person, young people can learn to be good “digital citizens” by standing up against inappropriate online behaviors and taking measures to protect their privacy. ConnectSafely has helpful resources to help parents and educators teach kids about technology safety, privacy, and security.

Social media and technology can offer ways to connect authentically with others, especially for young people. Virtual connections can be a lifeline for someone who is feeling isolated in their physical community, allowing individuals to find people online who share similar experiences and can offer empathy and support. Social media is also a great way to reach a lot of people very quickly, and can serve as a powerful vehicle for spreading messages of hope, support, and recovery. It allows parents and other concerned adults to witness conversations we may not otherwise have known about, and to intervene with resources or other supports when we see someone in crisis. Social media platforms themselves have also been thinking about how to leverage technological tools to help those in crisis. For instance, Facebook has been working with suicide prevention experts for several years to help make crisis services and other resources available to users.
While the research is still playing out on the pros and cons of new technology, there are things we can do today to promote potential benefits and minimize possible risks. In our suicide prevention programs and our personal lives, we can encourage kids to connect in healthy ways, and make sure they know how to reach out for support when they're concerned about someone’s online posts. We can offer alternative options to screen time that encourage face-to-face connections and physical activity. If young people are having conversations online that concern us, we can take the opportunity to talk with them about how they are feeling, offer support, and help them reach out to peers who may be struggling. SPRC offers resources that can help, including an information sheet for teens [3] that lists call, text, chat, and email options for finding support, as well as guidance [4] for using technology and social media for prevention efforts.

I hope we won’t let our concerns about potential risks overshadow the opportunities social media and smart devices offer to stay connected, reach out, and support each other. Since technology and social media are here to stay, let’s use them for good, building on the positive opportunities to increase social support and connectedness, while at the same time finding opportunities for in-person connections in our families, communities, and prevention initiatives.

References
