EP 05: Breaking the Silence addressing Suicide, Depression, and Self-Harm Online

Sue: So welcome back to Navigating the Digital Jungle with Sue Atkins and Friends, where we help families find their way in the ever evolving landscape of technology. I'm Sue Atkins, and I'm your guide on this journey. I'm an author and a broadcaster, and I'm here today with Angeline Corvaglia, creator of Data Girl and Friends, empowering young minds with online safety and AI literacy videos, games and educational materials.

So, we're here to guide you today through the topic of the week, which is mental health, online safety and digital wellbeing, especially for our young people. As parents, we often worry about what our children are exposed to online, whether it's social media, cyberbullying or harmful content. But beyond the screens, there's a whole host of mental health challenges that can be exacerbated by the digital world.

So the topic of the week is self harm and suicide prevention. Today we have a very special guest, Ged Flynn from Papyrus, a UK charity dedicated to suicide prevention and mental health awareness, particularly in young people. We're also joined by Ellen Roome, Jools Law advocate and campaigner, and I'll introduce Ellen in a moment.

But let's start with you Ged, if that's okay. Could you tell us a bit more about the charity and share your organisation's mission and how you help people and parents?

Ged: Yes, sure. Firstly, thank you for the opportunity and it's good to be in good company with kindred spirits who want to talk about suicide, which is still relatively unusual.

I started with the charity in 2010, where we had two or three full time staff and a couple of part-time people on a very skeleton staff in terms of our helpline, which was opened in 2005 in response to parents who'd lost children being approached by others who still had their loved ones saying I'm worried about my son, my daughter, my child, and I don't know whether a suicidal, how does one know?

So, the first impulse was to say let's get some professional response to that question. And so since those days we've grown and we supply now 24/ 7 professional advice free, so the user through a service, we now call HOPELINE247. And predominantly the answer to that question when a parent says, how would you know?

Ged: Well, you don't, so you need to talk to the young person. But I'm sure we'll get into the detail as we go through. But we also provide training and education. But firstly, we want to go into a community to understand it, so it might be a community of interest online, or it might be a geographical area of the UK.

We want to understand what its particular needs are, including, you know, there might be things like locations of concern, where there have been a number of suicides over the years, and we can help advise on those and mitigating risk and so on. Or it might simply be to understand the needs of a particular culture, like Gypsy, Roma, traveller people or something like that.

So, rather than go in and say, this is what you need to do, they know their own people best. So we take a community development approach to our work. And the third thing, so we support through the helpline, we equip people in communities by listening to them and sharing knowledge where we can. The third thing is try to influence government, but we're in good company today with the wonderful Ellen on that, but like Ellen we've been in this agenda for quite a while now and oh that we didn't need to do it, but we do, we still need to persuade people that this is the leading cause of death, suicide, and we need to even just talk about the word suicide which is hidden from most people's lexicon really.

Sue: Yes, it isn't it? I used to teach at the Hawthorne School in Bletchingley. I was deputy head down there and I got a message a few months ago to say that the head, who was a friend of mine, his son had committed suicide and we went to his memorial service, which was a huge celebration of his life, but also so moving and so difficult. So, it is difficult, but I want to raise awareness of it and we need to talk about these things so we can prevent them.

Ged: I think from the offset though, I think we need to say the difficult news is we get the language wrong very often. It's very common to say committing suicide and suicide has not been a crime in this country since 61, but we perpetuate that by talking about committing.
So, we tend to use words like die by suicide or taking one's life. I'm very keen, all my career, trying to say suicide, don't, let's call it something else, call it suicide, but committing suicide can be quite harmful and upsetting for people. So there's no, I'm not the thought police when I say that, it's just helpful to share that.

Sue: No, but I think semantics matter, words matter, what we say matters, and often because we don't know what to say, some people say nothing at all.

Ged: Absolutely. I would much prefer you to say committing suicide than to say nothing about suicide.

Angeline: May I ask, what is the reason that people have trouble talking about it? It's a difficult topic, but in your experience, what are the blockers?

Ged: This is my view. Anybody who says they're an expert in suicide prevention, you shouldn't interview them because there aren't any. We're still getting it wrong because the numbers are still too high. So it's just a view. A little potted history, in about the year 950 or thereabouts, or over a thousand and odd years ago, one of the old kings of England, Agar, I think his name was.

Ged: Suddenly he realised that when he lost people to suicide, he'd lose income. So he made it a crime, and over time it where you would be banished, your family would lose all its assets, meagre though they were, you know, and the small holdings would be removed by the king's people, and it was a deterrent.

So, in a way, it was a suicide prevention measure, where actually what happened, we've done to suicide, back for a thousand years, what they tried to do with alcohol, tried to suppress it and abolish the sales of alcohol, and what happened? It went underground. And I think what we've done is we've, people have still died in great numbers over the decades, but we've hidden it and we've called it committing suicide.

So, we've tried to say, don't put your finger in the fire, but made it more attractive by making it something that was kind of, they're serious, almost. So, I think we've got about a thousand years of proactive, systemic stigmatisation of the subject. I think death is taboo, generally. Most people don't like talking about it.

I don't know about you, but if you ever end up talking in a pub or in a cafe about death, somebody will momentarily say, anyway, let's change the subject, because it's too difficult for us intrinsically. And I think if you put death with another taboo area, which is mental illness, which was frowned upon for it.

Even I started here in 2010, and we were still battling around using words like mental health in Parliament then. So I think there's a number of reasons that's I don't know what others think, but that's my view so far. We've systematically stigmatised the whole notion of mental health, mental illness and death.

Sue: Do you think it's cultural?

Ged: It is because we enshrined it in law.

Sue: I just wondered if it's a different thing in a different country or a different culture.

Ged: Well, I can give you the idea that if this is not cultural why would we enshrine it on the statute book and why is it that still according to the International Association of Suicide Prevention who does a lot of campaign work around this that there's several dozens of countries are still criminalised people who are acting on thoughts of suicide.

We think we've got it bad, but at least we've got a legislature that won't condemn you or punish you. If you go to A& E and say, I've tried to take my own life, you may not get the help you deserve yet, and we're still fighting for that one, but at least we're better off than somewhere that would imprison you if you did that.

Sue: Yeah. Listen, let's get to some of the key factors for parents listening to this. You said there's no one size fits all and completely understand that, but what are perhaps some early warning signs that parents and caregivers should, regarding looking out for, if they feel their children might be at risk?

Ged: So again, I'm not an expert, this is a one world view as you like, others may take a more medicalised view, but in my experience of myself, When I feel flat, I don't necessarily exhibit signs. A typical example, when working with children, I say, Could you draw a happy face? And we can all imagine that immediately, can't we?

It looks like this smile. And can you draw a sad face? And everybody turns that frown, becomes the, you know, downward. If you were to imagine the suicidal face, often it's a smiley face. It's a face that covers up or masks those feelings because of that societal pressure to conform to being okay. I think it's crass to say it's okay not to be okay.

It's crass because why should it be off limits not to be okay? But we've learned to conform as human beings in order to fit in with our peers. We teach children to do that. We put them in blue coats of the boys and pink of the girls and we, there's several ways of enshrining conformity. And if you buck the trend, you're odd.

So I've established a premise that we conform as human beings so that we become acceptable to others. And in mental health and suicide, that's also the case. So that if the prevailing norm is shut up and put up, then that's what we do. So, it's very hard for parents or peers or partners or colleagues to know, how do you know if Ged's thinking of suicide?

So we need to ask him. And that's fundamentally the premise. That saves lives. Talking about suicide generally won't do any harm, but asking will actually do very good. Let me labour that for a moment. So, rather than looking at symptoms, signs, like behaviour changes, or whatever, and seeing those as signs of suicidality, it's a bit difficult to articulate, but I'll try.

Imagine that you're going into a pub and you want to find somebody who you like and you want to sit with. I'll overstate this, it's almost like you're signalling who's acceptable to sit near. Who do I fancy? It's a bit like that. A suicidal person, not that they're all the same, will often want to express their distress.

Many people don't want to die, they just don't know how to live. It's a little bit more complex than that, but let me say it like that. If we presume that a person who's not dead yet wants to live, yes, they'll look up on the internet how to die, because that validates those feelings, and it might equip them with how to.

So, we need to moderate that, and that's, I'm sure, Ellen will talk about that. But also, if we ban those access to information about suicide completely, some people will tell us. They're actually, they need that to validate their feelings and they need to juxtapose the opportunity to die with the opportunity to live.

So, let's assume for a moment that person is actually considering suicide. They may have thoughts of suicide, they may not have acted on them. Our opportunity, where it avails itself. is to come between the thinking and the doing. And so we would be looking for what we call invitations. Let's assume the person is emitting signals.

Say, are you acceptable for me to engage in a conversation about suicide with? It may be a verbal conversation or it might somebody just sit and cry with you. And if you exhibit that you're okay with suicide by saying, hey, sometimes people behave like this when they're suicidal. Is that your story? Are you thinking about suicide?

That immediately tells the person that their thoughts are valid and it's okay, you're not going to judge them or condemn them or walk away from them. But this idea that we give out invitations is hard to bear when you've lost a loved one. I want to say that to us who've lost people. But it's still important to share that the assumption that a person will give out invitations. But when you've lost somebody, a parent would often say, but there were no signs.

Ellen: There were no signs with yours, yeah.

Ged: Yeah, but in hindsight, sometimes, even if there were no proactive, I can't obviously, Ellen, a huge respect to you.

Ellen: You're talking a lot of sense, I'm just trying to say that.

Ged: That's, very important and if nothing else, I'm very tuned in to the reality that this is very painful for parents and I've lost someone to suicide and I'm full of evil unleash, you know, about it.

But it's important to prevent the next death that we know the science, which is that if a person is desirous of life, even if it's at 1%, it's still worth us looking out for that desire, and we often find that in expressions of uncertainty. So, it might sound a bit alarmist if I share some stories from my own experience, but I will, for education purposes.

Many years ago, I was on the helpline, and the girl said, I just need to get my affairs in order, and I will die this Friday. So, where is the invitation in that? I need to get my affairs in order for death, so that I can die. So, I said, this sounds a bit cold, but in context it was appropriate, I said, dead people don't have affairs to put in order.

What are the affairs? What are the things you need to I need to get a birthday card for mum. And I could have gone down the guilt trip and said, what about mum? But I didn't, I just waited. And then immediately she started expressing uncertainty. I don't know whether she'll like this, or I don't know whether I should buy this.

And I said, a person who's thinking about suicide, so we validate the feelings of suicide. But to actually hear her say, I'm still wondering, gave me an inclination that something in her is still thinking about living, even if it's just till Friday. Another way you might consider, eliciting whether this person is certain or not is to say, have you thought about the implication?

But rather than go down a guilt trip, you would actually be saying things like, saying very little, but really honing in on anything, any hesitations in their voice. And that's really holding into your own belief that deep down somebody wants to live, they just don't know how to express that. So we often say, it's almost like a person who's got a choice to be or not to be.

As Shakespeare says, to be or not to be, that's the question. And if you can find something in them, not you, but if they're questioning. So rather than looking for a behaviour or a change of mood, which may be your cue to ask the question in the first place, once you're in there, You're waiting for them to express some uncertainty, and when there is uncertainty, there's a potential for life, and that's where we would move the person from uncertainty to staying safe for now.

Sue: I'm very mindful what you're describing there is a parent wouldn't feel confident in that scenario necessarily. And you have the Hope UK line, don't you, which obviously we'll put up.

Ged: HOPELINE247 yeah.

Sue: Yeah, that we will tell people about. I'm very interested in the role that social media plays in this and obviously when we come on to chat to Ellen about this too.

I've just watched Swiped last night with Emma and Matt Willis and, you know, it wasn't sensationalised, I thought it was well done. But I'm very mindful, what role do you think social media plays into this in young people and teenagers lives when they're, it's popping up, they're not searching for it. So can you talk a little bit about that?

Ged: It is popping up and they're searching for it, that's the reality. So, start with the premise that not every suicidal person is the same, every unique story is just that, unique. But we can learn from decades of experience of working with people who talk to us about their lived experience, both after the event and having survived behaviours.

Social media plays a very positive role, as well as the obviously negative factors that we're all truthfully aware of. It connects. It gives people without a voice an opportunity to express and to seek validation and to find it. I'm very tempted to go down the negatives and I will in a moment, so bear with me.

Ellen: I've got loads I can probably add for you.

Ged: Indeed, but I think the first thing is to say this is a tool, it's how it's used and how safely it can be used at educating young people. I would say young people should be part of the redesign of social media and understanding that they are being commodified by social media.

That's the way out of this. I think legislation is a blunt tool. What's happened with homosexuality is legislation has helped us understand and celebrate our LGBT family, friends and colleagues. But what's made the curve change is behavioural norms and that's set through education and acceptance of each other and celebration.

So we, banning sites is very important and I'll wax lyrical about what we've done on that agenda for 25 years, but I think equally we need to educate people about the harms, yes, but also how important their participation in the design is, so I think increasingly young people are aware. If we let them know that they are being brutally commodified and made into products for, you know, conveyor belts for the harm and for Nike trainers in my day. Now it's harm, legal harm, it's drugs and eggs.

Sue: But I'm very mindful also of educating the parents because what was very obvious from the programme last night as well is parents don't know the dangers necessarily and starting earlier and earlier. So it's a combination, it's not one blunt thing, we're all watching Australia very keenly.

But it's about everybody being part of the jigsaw in trying to raise. Let me bring in Ellen here. Let me introduce you, Ellen, and then, you know, let's see where we go with it. So, thank you very much for giving up your time. Ellen Roome is a campaigner and advocate for Jools Law, and let me tell you a little bit about that.

When her son Jools died 14, Ellen was left with no answers and none of the social media companies would allow her access to her son's browsing data. And accessing dual social media accounts could provide vital insights into his actions and whether he might have been influenced by an online challenge or other harmful interactions.

Now this has of course prompted you, Ellen, to launch your campaign, Jools Law, which seeks to get access for parents so they can access their deceased children's social media accounts without needing a court order. Thank you so much for joining me today. Would you like to tell us in your own words about what you're doing, why you're doing it, and how people can support, nurture and help you.

I know that now the government, you've been at parliament a few times, so over to you to tell it in your own words.

Ellen: Thank you. Yeah, my son Jools was 14 when he ended his own life. Inside, it's suicide, he took his own life. The coroner didn't rule that it was suicide because he couldn't be certain Jools was in a suicidal mood.

So, actually on his death certificate, it's just a narrative of what he did, but there was nobody else involved, he took his own life. From my point of view, we left it for the police to do their inquest, and we assumed, maybe naively, but you're barely breathing when you lose a child, you are hardly functioning, you know, people will put food in front of my face and say try and eat something, you don't care, you, so, I was in no frame of mind to challenge or fight at all.

And so we went to the inquest, there was no bullying offline, there was no mental health that was anybody's way of, not one of his friends thought there was a problem. There was a usual 14 year old comments that he didn't like his chin and he didn't like his hair. I didn't think he had body issues, but I don't know.

So after the coroner ruled that it wasn't necessarily a suicide, we were just left to cope that our child had taken his life. And I've just got to accept what on earth happened. What on earth happened from me speaking to him and you can see on our ring doorbell, he's saying goodbye to his friend an hour and a half before I get home.

I'd spoken to him, as far as I was aware he was normal and so back in, I think it was March, I had just sold my company and I said until I got rid of the company I couldn't, I didn't have the headspace to deal with, I was dealing with staff and runggning a company and I just had to get out. So I, in March I said right, now let's get Jools on social media and see what's happened because it's the only thing we haven't really looked at.

And I was really surprised when I approached the social media companies that as a parent of a 14 year old we have absolutely no right to see what they do online. And so I started a petition which, back at the beginning in May, I had about 3, 000 signatures and it was actually somebody from one of the other charities, I won't mention their name, but they'd had a response from Parliament when they got to 10, 000 and he sent me the letter, which wasn't written like this, but I took it as, thanks for trying, but you didn't get to 100, 000, so that's not good enough.

It really wasn't written like that, but that's how I interpreted the letter. So I said, we're going to get 100, 000 signatures. We're going to have this debate in Parliament. So that parents have the right to see their children's social media. Anyway, my mum then posted on Facebook or something, Oh, she's only got until the 30th of May, and I said no, mum, you've got it wrong, we've got until the 30th of November.

And then she said, no, really, I haven't. I looked it up, because of the government petition, they said we had 10 days to get 100, 000 signatures. And, I don't know, it just took off, it was amazing. I met a lovely lady through my LinkedIn who said, you need a video. And I basically bared my soul twice on video, saying this is why I want his data and surely I should have the chance.

It may not show that it was social media. My gut feeling is there's something in it. I may never know, but I have to try. And it led me down this road of meeting a lot of other bereaved parents. I'm in a group called the Bereaved Family for Online Safety Group. And there's an awful lot of our other parents in the same position, and I think it's morally wrong.
So anyway, once we achieved 126, 033 signatures, I wasn't sure. Lots of people said, You'll have to do it again after the government petition. I said, well, we've got a chance. Let's try. And they've finally written and said that it will be heard in Parliament on the 13th of January. Now, since I launched that petition, I just said, well, all parents should have the right because we all just either want to protect our children or, you know, if they're like Jools, they're no longer here, we want answers.

I can now see that what if the parents of the perpetrators, should they have the right to see children's social media when children could be crying out for help? And that hadn't actually crossed my mind because I'm not a perpetrator. I didn't, I naively didn't think about that. So I understand there's two angles here.

One is more relevant, if the child is alive and how do we protect that child. In my case, my child has died. I do not understand who we're trying to protect. I do not get it. Just give me the data and it could give me answers. And it might not, but we'll have to try. Now the online safety bill has brought out the data protection law and that gives the coroners the right to request the information.

So going forward for any newly bereaved parents, the coroner can demand that information from social media. Right there is a massive learning curve, because the police, in my case, didn't think about it particularly, they didn't Jools's phone, they didn't even know he had different accounts, and there's got to be a training curve with the police, first of all, so that they preserve the data, and it's great then that the coroner can request it, and in turn,as a parent, assuming they're not the perpetrators, there'd be a person of interest to get that from the coroner.

I still think we're waiting for children to die until we can get that information. And, somebody once said to me about suicide, all these children end up in hospital that have self harmed and taken their lives. And, they're dealing with it when they get to that stage. We've got to find out why they're doing that in the first place and stop them from doing it in the first place.

And so, I don't know how you protect children if the parents are at fault. I don't know how you do that.

Sue: Because Big Tech, by the sound of it then, are just not helpful at all, are they? No. But the government is listening, I feel. I don't know, I'm not as involved as you are with it. Do you feel that people are listening to what you're saying?

Ellen: Yes, I do. So there's hope, is there? Yeah, I've been out to Parliament several times. We've met the Secretary of State as a group twice now. And yesterday Josh McAllister had his final hearing with his private member's bin. That's right. Yeah, I saw that. I have to be there. I just have to be there.

So alongside me were Meta, TikTok, Snapchat, YouTube. We're all just going Oh my gosh, that's actually in one room, and they came out with an awful lot of Waffle, which I'm just writing a blog on, some great one lines. That's very polite, I would guess that was very polite language there. Waffle. I'm trying to choose the words very carefully.

Snapchat says that their users only use the platform for one hour a day. Which is absolute rubbish. I felt like actually saying to her, you obviously don't have teenagers in your life then do you? And TikTok could create this system which pops up after an hour and says, well you shouldn't be potentially on the platform anymore.

Well, that's working really well, TikTok, because they just go, OK, and carry on. So, I thinkGeded, I like your point. There are some helpful things with social media, and there's certainly a lot that suicide prevention is becoming more and more, I think, to try and help children see the right things. But there's so much harm on social media. There's so much.

Ged: I do feel compelled, Ellen, to say that for most of my 20 odd years in suicide prevention, I've been saying the internet is bad, not the internet is good. So just what I was preferring, I was leaving you to talk about the negative sides of this, but let's give you a pen picture where we were.

So we were founded in, formally in 98 actually, 97, 98. The internet was a baby then, for most of us. I remember getting my first American online account in 99 and I was one of the pioneers, you know, it was new to everybody. And we were still writing letters in 2000, I remember that. And the bad guy then was the protagonist of the illegal stuff, was the person probably sitting offshore writing horrible stuff about method and suicide, so the horrible things that still exist, like recipe sites of how to and where to die and so on, and we spent an awful lot of time in parliament, sad to be cynical, with the then Facebook, it was TalkTalk in those days, you know, prior to social media, and Microsoft and various others, and this is prior to the online safety legislation, and I'm proud to say that we played a significant part in pushing that, when people were talking about the harms online that, around sex and child protection, safeguarding type things, but actually, you know, sex is bad, but suicide is, it kills as well.

I remember telling a story back then, there was a survey done by one of the internet service providers of customers that said, what are you most afraid of your children using the internet, not social media? Thirteenth on the list was sex. First was suicide and self harm. That was people's fear. That was 25 years ago.

So people were still cognizant of the harm, and we brought legislation in. But I go back to the point with social media. There's still an awful lot of toxicity and a lot of harm, but often there are two things I want to say here. One is the protagonist isn't the bad guy writing about method. They're still there, sadly.

We can get rid of them by search engine optimisation more than we can with legislation. But in terms of social media, the bad guy now is our own children. Unwittingly sharing information for their own validation, which can lead to other people's ideation and acting on that. And the other thing I think we just need to look at the whole behaviour around social media and Ian Russell told me that he actually met the person who invented the permanent scroll on your phone and he said it was the best thing I ever did.

And it was the one thing I'll regret forever, it's not very powerful.

Sue: Listen, I'm very mindful, Angie, would you like to jump in and talk about AI and algorithms and your experience of that side of it too?

Angeline: Yeah, I've been very interested in AI, especially in the last year and a half, and the impact it has on children, and as you were talking, I just remembered all the energy I've put into understanding the why and the influence.

And what maybe people don't understand is exactly how much information these companies have on how people think and what people want. And they've been collecting this for a lot longer than most people even thought this is a thing. For the last 15 years, every US election, there's been some social scientists that were tweaking the algorithm just to see what would happen how people would be influenced.

And when Ellen was saying, you know, the social media companies, they put the pop up and say, Oh, it's been one hour. They know exactly what is going to work and what is not going to work because they have so much behavioural Data on people and they have so much information about how to influence people, thoughts that it's just a complete power imbalance.

The AI chatbots, they are, you know, after this soul the boy just recently lost his life soul. Seltzer, I was looking at, they've got principles of neurology, you know, built in, and people are powerless against it. And that's what we need to really understand, that people, especially youth, are just powerless against this.

Yeah, and blaming, any kind of blaming that people like to throw around, especially, oh, where were the parents? Well, there's no way that any parent has a chance against this. And that's what we need to understand. Blaming is completely useless. Yeah, that's just, I wanted to say, because AI is too powerful and they just know too much.

And it's all on a level that. Most people can't really fathom, to be honest.

Ellen: Did you hear about this new AI one where the chatbox suggested that he went and killed his parents? Yeah, I cannot believe we've got an, I just, what the hell? Why is that trading? I just get rid of it.

Ged: But I think, I mean, it's really important to reiterate an earlier point for me.

Baroness Kidron sat on the press conference after Molly Russell's inquest and said something really powerful, which I mentioned earlier, which is this. These companies are feeding the machine, rather than just say, ban the bomb, we need to educate our young people that they are being productised, and they will rise up against it, so I'm not hopeless, I'm quite hopeful that if I know that somebody's, like a class example, looking outside of my car, if somebody's doing something illegal to force a product on me, a car on me, that I don't want, I will balk at that naturally.

If we can educate children and young people, the next generations, that these people are trying to kill you, they will rise up against it.

Sue: I'm mindful of time, and so what I want to get from each of you is, what do you want to see? Ellen, what is it you want to see

Ellen: happen? Well, there's twofold.

Obviously, from my main point of view is I want parents to see their deceased children's data and companies to hand it over, like in Molly Russell's case. The social media kind of just delayed and delayed. And actually, they turned up with a physical truck of paperwork with it redacted, not even on digital formatised.

And that is just them delaying, which annoys me. Secondly, Social media companies came up with a whole load of rubbish statements about how long their users are using it, whether it's bad for them, what age it should be, and they, you know, they're abiding by the law and they haven't broken the law yet.

Well, they don't have to start waiting for the Online Safety Act to start enforcing it. They could actually start making changes right now that would safeguard children a bit more. And that's what frustrates me. They could make changes today that would safeguard our children a bit more. And they're choosing to wait until they're enforced to change it, or Oh, 13's okay, we think 13's okay.

And that was raised yesterday in the debate. Why? Because it stems over from some archaic thing about thirteens and they could actually admit and go, it's not safe, you know, we should make this 16 or 18 as a debate over both of those ages.

Sue: We ban alcohol and we ban cigarettes and this is having a massive impact on families, children and parents. So I just throw that into the mix.

Ellen: What other industry do we have things happening without testing it first? Medical science. We wouldn't just give a whole load of kids a whole load of pills and go, let's hope for the best that, you know, you're not harmful. It doesn't happen anywhere else. Cars get tested with seatbelts and all the other things.

Social media, well, go for it. Good luck and let's see what happens. It's like throwing in a hand grenade.

Sue: Yes, absolutely. So what would you like to see, Ged, happen and change perhaps?

Ged: On that particular one, I think Belt and Braid is, I think, education as well as legislation to, to restrict access. The biggest thing that we know works and is not low hanging fruit, the fruit's already on the ground, is if we restrict the access to the means of suicide, we'll have fewer deaths.

The evidence for that is sky high. So if we translate that into suicide prevention on, online, We have to restrict access. We also have to educate people about the harm. The bigger, more macro thing that I want is, again, it's very painful, but I'll say it. I don't want to be dealing with bereaved parents. I want to be dealing with parents.

Don't take that the wrong way if you're a bereaved parent. What I mean is, success for me is when parents are engaging in these conversations before even suicide is on their radar. It's so desperately sad. Every day, probably, I speak to at least one person who, Suicide has not just tapped on their door, it's ripped their house and their whole community apart.

And they had absolutely no idea it was going to be that. So that my big macro, I don't know how we get there, been trying for a long time, Is to say to people, this could be you. Have this conversation now. Don't wait for the signs and symptoms. So if you're listening to me now, I'll appeal to you right now.

Have a conversation with somebody before the night falls about suicide. It may save their life.

Sue: Well, that's why I've started writing what I call my scripts. I'm currently writing a book at the moment full of scripts around how to talk about AI, chatbots, Everything. The actual things you say, because parents go, well, you know, I don't want, I don't know how to say it.

So I give you scripts. Of course, they're not ideal, but they will start your conversation.

Ged: Here's my script for you if you're listening to me right now. I've just been listening to this podcast talking about suicide. Do you ever think about suicide? And you know who to ask if you did. And what that is, even if a person isn't suicidal today, You've created a suicide safety net for them.

They'll come to you. They will come to you because you've had that conversation.

Ellen: I spoke to some parents, friends of mine the other day, who had rung the helpline, desperate. And I have to say, Ged, they were so pleased with the response they got.

Ged: Oh, brilliant. That's lovely to hear. I'll pass that on.

Ellen: Well,

Sue: let's read out, let's read out the number.
It's 0800 068 4141 or text 88247 or email pat@papyrus.

Ged: That's the new kid. org.

Sue: Yeah, you say it. That's right.

Ged: Let me do that again. So having said how wonderful search engines are, I'm going to continue. Google, Bing, or whatever your preference is, the word Papyrus, P A P Y R U S, and sick suicide in there as well, and you'll find us.

I want to say one thing, most of the people we know about seeking help, are through the helpline or text and email, but there are dozens of people come to our website and Minds and Calm and Samaritans, and you'll never hear from them. For a number of reasons, their choice not to ask us for help, but the website itself is helpful.

There's loads of information on there.

Sue: We'll put all of that in the show notes. Well, thank you both so much for giving up your time today to join me. Difficult subject. Keep on keeping on in all the ways that you're working so hard to make this happen. those changes and make that difference. And I think the takeaway for me, for parents listening to this today, is start those conversations before you have to.

Open up the conversations, open up the ability for children to come and talk with you and don't talk to them. at your kids about it. So, thank you both very much. Thank you.

Angeline: It was an honour to meet both of you, really. Thank you. Likewise.

Ellen: Thank you.

Sue: Okay, so this leads us on to family change. It's time for our family change segment where we will challenge you or ask you to make a small change that will make a big difference. So, grab your digital machetes and let's tackle this together. A small but impactful change families can make to prevent suicide in teenagers is creating regular opportunities for open, judgement free conversations.

By checking in daily, perhaps with your teen, not in a fussy way, but listening to their feelings, checking in on their experiences and their struggles. I often say just sitting and eating with a teen regularly, because you're not talking about the mundane. You're there, you're involved in their lives, you don't feel that they are so isolated, and you can reinforce that turns into, you know, being there when you notice perhaps something, or you just want to start those helpful conversations.

So, limit social media and encourage in-person connections. That is my advice for today and think about social media apps and especially around bedtimes. Encouraging more face to face interactions because I think that definitely can impact on mental well being.

Intro: Listener questions.

Angeline: Okay, we have a question from Rob Greenwood.

He's asking, how can workplaces and schools create environments that promote mental well being and help prevent suicide, especially among vulnerable populations? I feel like we've covered that quite well during the episode. I would just summarise what we've already said, that being able to talk about things openly can make a big difference, not being afraid to ask those questions.

And making people feel a part of it. And one thing that Ged said, I want to point out, he started out speaking positively about social media. And this is something that I actually heard a Gen Z give advice just yesterday, that if you want to open a conversation, some difficult conversation, you can start out with the positive, you know, what do you like about it?

A social media, for example, and this will likely get you to the more difficult parts more openly and build trust. I just wanted to share that because this was something that I thought was very useful from someone who is a young person trying to speak to older adults. So just don't be afraid to start with the positive to get to the negative. Just like Ged did earlier.

Sue: Yes. And I think for me, whether you're at work, whether you're at school or in the workplace, it's about regular mental health check ins. There's so many adverts around footballers as well, sort of getting people to talk, particularly men in that way. So normalising, I think, mental health check ins, that's just important too.

So you don't always have to have the deep and meaningful, but you're checking in so that you are aware and it's regular, so that you can keep an eye on things. And I think that makes it a priority in the workplace. The community and takes away the taboo from it really.

Intro: Now for some top tips.

Sue: So this leads us on now to our weekly quick tips.

This is where we share bite-sized nuggets of wisdom, hopefully to help you navigate the digital jungle more effectively. If you see signs that your child's mental health is under threat, tune in to them regularly. That's my advice. Maybe your child is just having a bad day. Okay, that's fine. But when signs of mental health troubles last for weeks though, don't assume that it's just a passing mood.

There's this fine balance between overdoing something, where you create more of a problem that isn't really there, but on the other hand, it is about the child. Discussing and talking. So, don't dismiss when you think your teen is just having a drama. You know, check in with that. Feel as if you know, want to talk with them, not at them.

Never assume that your child is exaggerating or playing games if they say something like, I don't care anymore, nothing matters. Everyone would be better off without me. Words like that, phrases like that are red flags for you to perhaps think about. And I think gently asking open ended questions like, I've noticed that you seem a bit quieter than usual.

Would you like to talk about it? And again, with young people, sometimes it's when you're doing something else. Driving often was a good place when I used to take my son to football training. I'm driving, looking ahead, but we could have these kind of deep conversations if we needed to or wanted to. So you create the space and you do it regularly.

So, there's a very good website called Suicide Prevention, 12 Things Parents Can Do, and we'll put that into the show notes, so you'll be able to access this. It's healthychildren. org. So, watch for major changes, I think, in your child's sleep patterns, their appetite or their social activities. And if they start to isolate themselves more and more, if they usually hang out with friends and they start to sort of keep away, just as we say, I think the whole point, none of us are experts in this and I'm certainly not, but I'm just mindful of trying to keep the conversation open so you are involved in your child's daily activities.

Create a safe space. Let your child know that they can talk to you about anything without fear or judgement. And practise just active listening. Don't just jump in with the suggestions to rescue them. Often just validating and listening is such an important skill that so many parents and teachers overlook, even if you don't fully understand them, don't poohoo them, just hold the space for them, I think is important, and just observe and reflect if you notice some changes, and try and look at reducing pressure and stress around school activities or household responsibilities, or if they're seeming overwhelmed.

And then obviously you modelling healthy coping strategies for stress, As well, so I won't go on too much, but also just think about setting some boundaries around technology and monitoring their screen time and put in what we call parental controls or safety settings because they're so important and talk about all these situations.

There's loads of resources on the resource hub of navigatingthedigitaljungle.com. So, that leads me now into script of the week. Quick scripts to start those important conversations. I'm writing a book around all of these things too, but pick your moment carefully. If you're doing this, create a calm environment, use natural openings.

After hearing or seeing related news, that's an opportunity perhaps to open up the conversation. Bedtimes or quiet moments, like I said in the car when we were driving was quite a good space to sort of check in regularly. And so you could say something like, I want to have a really important conversation with you.

You know, sometimes life can be overwhelming and we all have those tough days and it's really important to me that you know that you can talk to me whenever you're feeling really sad or you feel like you're struggling or you feel overwhelmed. And then you could say in a Have the conversation, have you ever heard about self harm or suicide?

Because I know everyone finds this hard to talk about and people feel confused about it, but I want you to come and talk with me if you want to know more about it. I'm here to listen, no judgment, just love and respect. Or you could actually just say, have you been feeling lately? And off you go from there.

I hope you find that helpful. That's a tough one today, Angie. So what have you been working on at the moment as well?

Angeline: I've been working on the Shield Global Online Safety Conference. And these are definitely topics that we want to cover there. So you can find the webpage shieldthefuture.com. We're obviously looking for sponsors because we want to get as many people as possible involved. We don't want to charge them, so we need sponsors for that. But these are global problems. These are global companies. No one country, no one legislator or one parent group will be able to solve it. We have to do it together. And that's what we're trying to achieve.

Sue: Yeah, really noble and really great to bring people together. So, do head over to YoungMinds, which is youngminds.org.uk. NoMoreSuicide, that's a very useful website. Grassroots, which is called preventsuicide.org.uk.

Intro: Navigating the digital jungle with Sue Atkins and friends.

Sue: Thank you for tuning in. Remember, it's okay to ask for help. It's okay to talk about mental health. Together we can, and we have to, create a safer, healthier digital world for our children. Remember to subscribe, leave us a review. Tune in next week and tell your schools, tell your friends, tell your family about the podcast and all the resources that are on the website, because we are all in this together.

No one size fits all, but I hope you have found this episode helpful. Until next time, stay safe and keep exploring.

Outro: It's a jungle out there.
Time for a word from our sponsor.

Sue: I'd like to tell you a bit about this episode's sponsor ICT in Education Teacher Academy. Are you an early chartered educator looking to confidently integrate technology into your teaching? Join the ICT in Education Teacher Academy, where they support educators like you with step by step guidance, hands on examples, and a community of peers to help you succeed.

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