

DECODING YOUTH DISTRESS LANGUAGE

Words • acronyms • emojis • music • digital behaviors | Updated September 2026

IMPORTANT — NOT A “SECRET CODE” DICTIONARY

One term, song, emoji or number does not prove suicidal intent. Meanings change across friend groups and platforms.

Concern rises when language is new/repeated or appears with hopelessness, withdrawal, self-harm, goodbye behavior, or a major change from baseline. Ask the young person what it means to them.

1. WORDS & ACRONYMS

KMS: Usually “kill myself.” Can be dark humor or genuine distress; do not dismiss automatically.

KYS: Usually “kill yourself.” Often harassment/cyberbullying; treat repeated or targeted use seriously.

SH / S-H: Self-harm.

SI: Suicidal ideation; some youth borrow clinical language from therapy or online support spaces.

Unalive: Social-media euphemism for kill/die/suicide; may be serious or joking.

Sewer slide: Filter-avoidance euphemism for suicide in some online spaces.

Clean / relapse: In some self-harm communities: time without self-harm / return to it. Also used for substance use.

Yeet / yeeting: Research has documented this as self-injury slang in some online NSSI communities; meaning is not universal.

PLAIN LANGUAGE MAY MATTER MORE

- “I want to disappear.”
- “I’m done.” / “I can’t do this anymore.”
- “There’s no point.”
- “Everyone would be better without me.”
- “I don’t want to wake up.”
- “You won’t have to worry about me much longer.”
- “Goodbye.”

2. EMOJIS: LOOK FOR CLUSTERS

- 🖤 ❤️ grief, heartbreak, dark mood
- 🥀 💧 sadness, loss, “fading,” low mood
- 😞 😓 🤯 distress, sadness, overwhelm
- 👤 💀 💊 🩸 invisibility, death/dark humor, injury/recovery imagery — meanings vary widely

EMOJI CAUTION

A skull, black heart or sad face may be ordinary humor/style. Concern rises when symbols cluster with hopeless statements, goodbye language, self-harm content, or sudden withdrawal.

3. WHAT ABOUT NUMBER CODES?

- There is no validated, universal numeric codebook for youth suicide or self-harm. Meanings are local and trend-based.
- #SecretSociety123 is a documented historical Instagram marker linked to self-harm communities; it is not a current universal code.
- 988 is a HELP resource, not a distress code. In the U.S., youth can call or text 988 for crisis support.
- If a number/date/countdown appears in a distressing bio or post, ask what it means rather than relying on online decoder lists.

PROVIDER RULE OF THUMB

Do not say: “I know what that code means.”

Say instead: “I saw what you posted. What did you mean by it?”

4. MUSIC & AUDIO CAN BECOME EMOTIONAL SHORTHAND

A song is not a suicide “code.” Repeated posting of a song, lyric screenshot, slowed/reverb clip, or playlist can be meaningful when paired with other warning signs. Ask what the music means to the young person.

Examples providers may hear referenced

Billie Eilish — “everything i wanted”: depression / suicidal-thought themes

Lewis Capaldi — “Before You Go”: suicide loss and survivor guilt

6. PROVIDER RESPONSE: ASK • LISTEN • CONNECT

ASK

“I saw you wrote KMS/unalive. What did you mean by that?”

Em Beihold — “Numb Little Bug”: depression, anxiety, emotional numbness

Logic feat. Alessia Cara & Khalid — “1-800-273-8255”: suicide-prevention and help-seeking

XXXTentacion — “Jocelyn Flores”: grief, depression, suicide loss

Badflower — “Ghost”: suicide and suicide-attempt themes

Watch patterns, not playlists

- Playlists/captions titled “goodbye,” “done,” “don’t look for me,” “vent,” or similar farewell language.
- Repeatedly posting the same death/sadness-themed audio after a breakup, bullying, loss, conflict, or other major stressor.
- A sudden shift from ordinary content to heavy hopelessness, death, self-harm, or farewell themes.

5. OTHER DIGITAL SIGNALS

Private/vent accounts: Close Friends, alt accounts, Discord statuses/servers, disappearing messages.

Goodbye behavior: “Last post,” broad apologies, unusual thank-yous, saying others will be better off.

Digital giving-away: Giving away valued gaming items/accounts or other possessions.

Profile changes: Sudden deletion/archiving, dark farewell bio, date/countdown, memorial-like imagery.

Reposts: Repeated sharing of death, self-harm, hopelessness, burden, or “not being here” content.

If concerned: “Are you thinking about suicide or hurting yourself?”

LISTEN

Stay calm. Do not minimize, shame, argue, or assume it is “just slang.”

Ask what happened, what the post means to them, and what support they need right now.

CONNECT

Do not leave a young person to manage a safety concern alone.

Follow your organization’s protocol, involve the appropriate trusted adult/clinical support, and use 988 when crisis support is needed.

AVOID THESE MISTAKES

- Treating one emoji/song/slang term as proof of intent.
- Dismissing repeated “jokes” without checking context.
- Punishing or embarrassing the young person for the language.
- Spending too long decoding while delaying a direct conversation.

IMMEDIATE SAFETY

If there is immediate danger, a medical emergency, or an imminent threat to life, follow emergency procedures and contact emergency services. For emotional or suicidal crisis support in the U.S., call or text 988.

SELECTED SOURCES / EVIDENCE BASE

- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: Warning Signs; Support on Social Media.
- SAMHSA: Youth Suicide Warning Signs Social Media Series (2025).
- Cambridge Dictionary / Dictionary.com: “unalive” and KMS usage.
- Moreno et al., Journal of Adolescent Health (2016): Secret Society 123 / veiled self-harm hashtags.
- Lind et al., Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior (2025): adolescent online help-seeking for self-harm.
- Research on NSSI e-communities shows slang changes rapidly and is community-specific.