



CSTS podcast series *Let's Talk About Your Guns*

episode 204: TEENS AND TRIGGERS: SURVIVING THE IMPULSE

AMBER MOLLE: Carson really wanted to do and be his best at everything.

All his life he had this intensity. He was so absolutely determined to appear perfect.

The MO had always been, you raise the bar, he meets it, you raise the bar, he meets it, you raise the bar, he jumps over it, he flies over it.

CARSON MOLLE: I think the best way to describe myself would be driven and high achieving.

I'm a very competitive person.

Even when I was 10 years old I felt this pressure to be best football player, student, athlete, family member, brother, friend. I wanted to be the best at all of those things. Even when I wasn't doing great, I'd like to appear that I was.

CARSON MOLLE: I was 14 was when it kind of felt like it was too difficult for me to bear.

There had been a string of failures... failing a math test, getting injured, having disagreements and arguments with my parents and feeling like I was a disappointment.

I thought to myself all these people around you, what if they were better off if you weren't here?

AMBER MOLLE: He often took time to go to his room and charge his battery sometimes. And those were moments that he was probably struggling, but we didn't see it as uncharacteristic of Carson.

We saw him as a kiddo that was definitely encountering some obstacles at that time in his life. But never really did we imagine that it would bring him to the place that it did on that night.

CARSON MOLLE: That night I stayed up because my mind was just such a whirlwind of, of dark negative emotions. I was just kind of laying in my bed stewing in my thoughts.



That was the first time I had ever considered or thought about a suicide attempt.

I let those feelings of failure and those feelings of disappointment kind of sit in my mind. And I just kind of waited.

Obviously my parents were and present in the home. I waited till they went to sleep. So they obviously wouldn't wake up and stop me.

I knew the keys to the gun cabinet were kept in the center console of, of my dad's truck.

I'd never used the keys at all. I just happened after a hunting trip, to see him put the keys back in the console.

CARSON MOLLE: I remember loading it, undoing the safety. And I sat there for probably about a minute and I thought, is this really what I wanna do?

And then I fired.

DR CURT WEST: Amber Molle's son, Carson survived. He's one of the lucky ones. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among people ages 15 to 24 in the United States. In fact, suicide rates for 15- to 19-year-olds have jumped by 29% in the past 10 years.

DR CURT WEST: More than half of those suicides are by firearm and most of those belong to a family member.

DR CURT WEST: If we truly want to prevent teen suicide, we need to be sure that those firearms are impossible to access in a moment of crisis.

DR CURT WEST: But what's the best way to make sure that teens living in a home with firearms can safely navigate the strong emotions and impulses of adolescence without access to a potentially lethal tool for self-harm? How do we talk to teens about firearm safety?

DR CURT WEST: I'm Curt West: psychiatrist and scientist at the Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress at the Uniformed Services University. Today, in *Let's Talk About Your Guns* we'll talk to Amber Molle and her son Carson, who survived a suicide attempt and is now working to educate people about how to keep teens safe when they're having a mental health crisis.



DR CURT WEST: We'll also talk to Dr Steve Cozza, Professor of Psychiatry and Pediatrics at Uniformed Services University. Dr Cozza's work focuses on child and adolescent mental health, including safe storage of firearms.

DR CURT WEST: Firearm safety in the home is built around five principles. Weapons should be stored unloaded. They should be taken apart or stored with a disabling device. They should be stored in locked containers. And ammunition should be stored in a separate locked container. Finally, firearm safety in the home involves having a plan in advance for storing guns in an alternate location during times of crisis.

DR CURT WEST: Today, we'll discuss the best way to make sure that teens don't have unsupervised access to firearms – especially if they're in a crisis. Because this podcast isn't about whether you are for or against firearms. It's about how to have open and honest conversations about safe storage, conversations that may save a life.

DR CURT WEST: Carson, do you remember what thoughts you had as soon as you realized you survived?

CARSON: The second that I was conscious, I knew that it was a mistake and that I wanted to live.

It wasn't even necessarily a thought I had, it was more of an instinct. I thought that I had that I was alive for a reason and I was given a second chance from something that most people don't get a second chance from.

DR CURT WEST: How long did you actually think about shooting yourself before you pulled the trigger?

CARSON: The time between the decision and, and the actual attempt was relatively short. It was maybe 10 minutes between getting out dead and then firing the gun.

DR WEST: Amber, can you tell me about your family's plan for firearm storage?

AMBER: Our plan for firearms storage at the time seemed like a good plan. We had a gun cabinet that was locked, the ammunition was locked separately from the guns in the same cabinet in the garage.

The keys were stored in the console of my husband Matt's truck. Carson was Matt's hunting buddy and Carson knew where the keys were for the gun cabinet because he would often help Matt get ready for going out into the woods.

CARSON: Yeah, we were very strict about the rules and we were very clear about what we were allowed to do and not to do, with the firearms.



Our family's relationship with firearms is always purely for hunting and outdoor purposes. So obviously we were always very safe about it. My dad made sure that we took all the proper hunter safety courses. and we're familiar with how to operate and safely use a firearm before we were ever allowed to, to touch one or to, to use one. We always used safe and proper, techniques of storage and use.

DR WEST: Amber, did you ever consider any of the kids might get ahold of the keys without your permission?

AMBER: Matt and I have gone over this with a fine-tooth comb in our minds.

We thought we were doing the right thing with the gun cabinet and the keys and this and that given the information that we had at the time. So knowing what we know now about how fast teens brains can change, how fast they can drop, how fast these things can come on, how impulsive kids can be.

All the things that we've learned as very hard and difficult truths in the last seven years have caused us to know that in retrospect, if, if we had to do it over again, we would have a gun safe and Matt would be the only person with the combination to it.

DR WEST: Dr Steve Cozza is Professor of Psychiatry and Pediatrics at Uniformed Services University. As a child and adolescent psychiatrist, he's heard stories like Carson's before.

DR COZZA: With Carson's story, there were several things that struck me. First of all, in many ways, it was a very familiar story. I'm hearing about a teenage boy who's struggling, who became increasingly despondent, seemingly related to events that were occurring in his life, but also maybe the development of a mental disorder, depression. He had a number of disappointments sounded like he was becoming increasingly isolated and hopeless. And he lived in a household where firearms were present and the family believed that those firearms were safely stored. But in fact, he was in a position to gain access to them.

DR WEST: So Carson's parents kept the guns locked. They kept the ammunition locked separately. They practiced safe storage, but you're saying that wasn't enough.

DR COZZA: One of the comments I'm going to make is about this term we use called safe storage. We often use that term to describe our desired outcomes, which are secured storage, meaning that all firearms are locked and inaccessible to any unauthorized individual and that ammunition is similarly locked and stored separately.

But people's definition of safe varies. So if you asked Carson's parents, they would have told you that they thought they had safely stored those firearms and for the most



part, they ensured that those guns were inaccessible to everyone who didn't know where that key was.

But unfortunately Carson knew where that key was and was able to gain access. I don't want to add burden to or judge them for what they should have done or could have done because I'm sure they're doing enough of that on their own. But if there is a lesson to be learned it would be that if we own and store firearms in our home have we actually protected anyone from gaining access to the weapon in an unauthorized way?

DR WEST: One word that's sort of floating in this conversation is the question of trust.

I know some parents would come back and say, but I know my son, I know my daughter, I trust him, I trust her. Does restricting unsupervised access of firearms have anything to do with trust?

DR COZZA: The discussion about trust, I think, is a very important one because it's complicated. I mean, there's something that feels sacred when parents are talking and children are talking about trust within a relationship.

So there's no question that can be harder for a parent to answer than a teenager asking, why don't you trust me? Parents want to trust their teenagers and so many find themselves getting into discussions about trust when it comes to firearms.

But I think we need to leave that word trust out of the discussion and focus more on the probability of risk and the importance of safety for all. As was the case with Carson where his parents trusted him, circumstances are dynamic and impulsivity is dynamic and no one can predict the behaviors across a child's teenage years.

So to refer to this as trust or not trust, I think it sort of complicates and burdens the situation. And parents feel like they can't do something that they think would, in fact, keep their kids safe because they feel like I'm not trusting my child if I lock all the guns.

And I would say, let's not have that conversation. There are certain experiences in a teenager's life where parents don't have discussions about trust. It's more discussion about you can or you can't do that because it's simply too unsafe for you to be doing certain kinds of things.

DR WEST: So this conversation is not so much about trust as it is about protecting them.

DR COZZA: What we have to balance is the risk of the potential damage of what that teenager could do with a firearm in terms of hurting themselves. We know that in any circumstances in which a firearm is used in a self-harm event, 90% of those situations result in lethality. So do parents in general want to be taking the risk of allowing a



teenager // access to an instrument that could result in their death, where there's no turning back?

DR WEST: As parents, you know, we do that throughout our children's lives. You know, we start with this maximum level of protection around them. And as they grow and as they develop, we allow them to take more risks. We want them to take risks. But we should be very honest about the risk that unsupervised access to firearms poses.

DR COZZA: The data are pretty clear that children who live in homes where firearms are maintained are at higher risk for injury and fatality.

Parents typically believe that guns are adequately hidden in their homes and their kids would never use them in a suicide attempt, but studies show parents not infrequently underestimate their children's experience handling guns in their homes.

In certain reports, 39% of parents who reported that their children did not know the storage location of household guns were contradicted by their children's reports.

22% of parents in that same report stated that their children had never handled a household gun, they were contradicted by their children's reports.

In an alternate study in households where parents said their teenager could not access a firearm, 22% of those children indicated they could within 15 or within five minutes.

So parents think they understand where children are in terms of their capacity, and they think that they understand what their children are doing, but they don't necessarily understand accurately just how capable children and teenagers are in accessing and handling firearms in their homes.

DR WEST: You mentioned teenagers and mood swings and being emotional. What do we know about impulsivity in teens?

DR COZZA: That's a really interesting question. Teenagers vary widely in their ability to manage impulsivity. But in general, teenagers' brains are not fully developed. There's a process that occurs throughout the teenage years and well into young adulthood called myelination. And it starts at the back of the brain and it moves to the front in an area that we call the prefrontal cortex. And what that area, the prefrontal cortex is, is the self-control center of the brain. It's the area that regulates our thoughts, our actions, and our emotions. And as a result, some teenagers tend to have more difficulty with self-regulation and impulse control.

And this is much more likely to occur in situations where they feel threatened or if they're emotionally distressed. The other thing about impulsivity with teenagers that's important to think about is that it's not one or the other. So teenagers who largely are in



very good control may be in a position where something occurs, where they wind up doing something impulsively in a much more risk-taking way than adult might do. And that can be relatively unpredictable.

If we think about impulsivity and how it plays out in relationship to firearms the challenge is when teenagers, and Carson is an important example of that, are generally not thought to be impulsive. When parents need to understand is that teenagers, any human being, in fact, can find themselves to be impulsive in certain circumstances. So impulsivity is dynamic and shifting.

DR WEST: We've been talking a lot about suicide and firearm safety. Interestingly, people are talking about teens and guns, one of the things that comes up fairly often is the risk of violence towards others. People are imagining school shootings. Is this something parents should also be concerned about with their teens?

DR COZZA: I absolutely think it's important that we think about any misuse of a firearm, whether it's a danger to self or others as we consider ensuring that we keep firearms out of the hands of teenagers and certainly vulnerable teenagers. On the other hand, not to minimize the numbers of deaths associated with school shootings, the numbers of firearm -related suicides in the country absolutely shadows the numbers of deaths associated with firearm use in school shootings.

DR WEST: Can you say more about that?

DR COZZA: We know that from 2011 to 2021, there has been increasing concern that resulted in the U.S. Surgeon General and a number of professional health organizations defining a youth mental health crisis. So, our kids have really been struggling and COVID made things a whole lot worse because of the isolation, because of the quarantine, most likely because of children not being actively engaged in school. We've seen an increasing number of students reporting persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness.

It's not uncommon for adults to be unaware of challenges that their teenagers are going through. Teenagers can be moody, they can be non-communicative at times, and parents can have difficulty understanding whether a teenager's response or lack of response is due to a phase that they're going through or an indication of a more serious underlying mental health problem.

Don't be afraid to have conversations with your kids about mental health and suicide. Ask your child how they're doing, what's happening in their world these days and what their concerns are.

And you know, I think the other thing is we tend as parents want to jump in and fix things for our kids or to provide them direction. It's important to listen intently and not be judgmental. Use open -ended questions, ask them things and resist that urge to



quickly respond or provide fixes to them, which they were likely to shut down the conversation. And most importantly, validate your children's feelings, support them.

Lastly, and most importantly, don't be afraid to specifically ask questions about suicide. And that can be as simple as, it sounds like you've been dealing with a lot lately. Is it ever so tough that you think about ending your life? Just say it. Ask the question. Many parents are afraid to do that. Some people still fear that by asking a question about suicide, it somehow plants the seed for people acting on suicidal thoughts. We know in fact that's not true.

And very often teenagers are relieved when adults ask them specific questions about how they're doing and whether they need assistance.

DR WEST: So your recommendation is parents should be open when they are concerned about their teen and give them space to talk about what they are feeling.

DR COZZA: Yes. Very often a decision or an impulse to hurt oneself is imminent and it occurs, but also maybe is not a permanent sort of feeling, is not a permanent feeling. And therefore people move on from that feeling. But if they act violently within the moment, using an instrument like a firearm, they may not have any opportunity to live through that event to discuss it.

Carson's example is a wonderful one because he lived to talk about the experience. That does not occur in the vast majority of circumstances in which someone attempts to kill themselves with a firearm.

DR WEST: In the years since his suicide attempt, Carson Molle has made it his mission to help other teens are struggling realize that suicidal thoughts are temporary and it does get better.

CARSON: I remember specifically the motivation for me to share my story. It was four years after my attempt and up until that point, my mental health journey and my recovery process had not been all good. And I remember kind of just laying in bed that night thinking I don't want my life to be spent sitting here wallowing in all the bad things I've gone through and just in a state of depression. And I knew at that moment that something had to change.

And the first thought that popped into my mind was what if I can prevent other teenagers who were like me and going through the same things that I was going through? What if I could prevent them from ending up in the same spot?

So that night, I made a quick 60-second video, on tiktok, detailing my story like this. My name is Carson. I attempted to take my life. I want you guys to know you're not alone.



There are people struggling with mental illness and encourage them to get help. I woke up the next morning and it had hundreds of thousands of likes, thousands of comments. And as I was scrolling through the comments that morning, I saw that there are a lot of other people like me going through these things and they're going to reach out and talk about it and open up about it and get help from there.

DR WEST: Amber, what can you tell us about your recovery?

AMBER: My recovery, I would say has really revolved around guilt and trying to work through that guilt and making sure that it doesn't immobilize me to be able to move forward and do the best thing I can for all of my kids because again, we have four kids, we don't just have Carson and I need to be healthy and productive and available for all of them.

Matt and I as parents explicitly remember driving down to Milwaukee to Children's Hospital and we looked at each other and we said we forgive each other for any perceived wrongdoing that had led to this event because again, pointing fingers being angry, casting guilt was not going to get us where we needed to go.

And you know, one of the things we had to talk with Carson about was he was 14. He still had a lot of teenager years and a lot of growing up to do and we couldn't walk on eggshells and stop parenting him at that time because we were so afraid of what might happen and afraid of making wrong moves. So we educated ourselves the best we could on mental health. And we changed so many of the things that we do as a family, including mental health check ins. We've all received different types and degrees of therapy. We've all added tools to our mental health toolbox to be able to follow this journey.

So going forward, what we have done differently is we've had, you know, the firearms safe with Matt only knowing the combination to it and we would never ever allow unsupervised access to any of the firearms at this point or going forward, you know, with any of the people in the house.

DR WEST: There is a lot we can learn from Carson's story about secure storage of firearms when teens are in the home. Adolescence is a challenging time. Teens live with secrets and might not tell parents about their struggles, no matter how open that family relationship is.

Teens experience strong emotions and sometimes equally strong impulses. All this suggests that in addition to the five principles of secure storage, when teens are in the home, parents need to take the additional step of ensuring that those teens can't get unsupervised access to firearms.



DR WEST: Thank you to Dr Steve Cozza and to Amber and Carson Molle for participating in today's discussion.

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