

Suicide: The Rising Cause of Death for America's Adolescents

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Children are killing themselves in record numbers. The statistic of suicide as being the 3rd leading cause of death for those adolescents between the ages of 14 and 24 does not include death by reckless behavior: impulsive actions, exhibition driving, drug use, under aged smoking and drinking, reckless sexual encounters are all behaviors that by their very nature are suicidal.

Suicide is the 5th leading cause of death for children ages 5-10. Before age five, there are no reports of suicide. AGE FIVE! From ages 10-14 the numbers begin to climb, and by age 14, the statistics skyrocket through age 35. Sometime in their 40s, the incidence actually goes down, then climbs rapidly again with the elderly.

Society is failing. These horrific statistics show a social problem that must be addressed. Can young adolescents who take suicide as a way out of pain and seeming hopelessness truly know the finality of what they are doing. A five year old, ten, or fourteen year old, or even an eighteen year old, what do they know of life? How could they possibly know about death?

What compels a person to take his or her own life?

Children do not naturally kill themselves. Without exposure to the idea of suicide, it would not take place. Kids learn violence in the home, from violence as entertainment in video games, on television, and in movies and music. And no one argues the fact that the breakdown of the family is at the core of violent death, including suicide. Our social fabric is frayed and stretched; human balance is upset as we seek repositioning of the roles of parenting, working mothers, and stay-at-home fathers. Family time has become abnormal, leaving the media to raise the kids.

Desensitization is a huge factor in adolescent suicide. At best, death is over-exposed in video games, movies, music, and in so-called prime time television. At its worst, it is glamorized by the media, with the shocking truth being that by the time a child reaches age twelve they have witnessed thousands of virtual murders and volumes of violence via the media. Impressionable youth with yet-to-be-fully-developed frontal lobes (the part of the brain that controls reasoning and impulsivity) are exposed to too much, with too little processing ability. Youth do not have the capacity to sort truth from fiction. Holding the trigger on a video game or holding the trigger on a loaded gun is equal; fact and fantasy cannot be separated in young evolving brains. Mimicking behaviors is how children learn. Just as a computer depends upon good programming in order to operate successfully, unsophisticated minds process information according to data with which they are being programmed.

Young people especially, have learned few problem solving techniques, and have not yet mastered many life-skills. Add to the complexity of adolescent development, peer pressures,

bullying (including on-line cyber-bullying that leads to what has been coined cyber bullying), imbalanced hormones causing chaos, and emotions running wild, and you have a volatile mixture that often leads to an impulsively reckless, irrevocable response of suicide. Youth, especially teens, are notorious for taking risks, for trying on behaviors that often lead to devastating results, for acting out behaviors as they have begun to interpret those roles. Six-foot-tall and bulletproof; is more than an adage; it is a testament to how young persons envision themselves. No matter by what means of death, dead adolescents are generally enshrined, immortalized by their friends, making suicide appear attractive to an adolescent seeking popularity.

It isn't just the self-proclaimed "Gothic" or "Emo" kids dressing in black garbs, listening to depressing lyrics, reading and writing dark poetic verse, who are committing suicide. It is your child and mine. It is main stream, well mannered, seemingly well-adjusted youth, children earning good grades in school, having seemingly normal childhoods, making the irrevocable choice to end their lives in an instant.

AFFECTS & EFFECTS

Hearts and families are blown apart at the news of suddenly losing a loved-one and often never recover. Because suicide is generally ignored, or is socially ostracized as being something that "happens to other people," survivors may find it difficult to find support to help them get through the pain and suffering resulting from losing a loved-one to suicide. Quite often, this leads to yet another suicide as friends, siblings, and loved-ones unsuccessfully wrestle with the pain and confusion of the sudden loss.

KNOW THE WARNING SIGNS

Depression: Does the youth exhibit sadness or despair lasting for more than short intervals or have deep feelings of futility, of overwhelming self-doubt and/or paralyzing insecurities? Does the youth exhibit a sad demeanor for longer than a few hours or perhaps a day or two at a time? Adolescent hormonal mood swings are different from chronic dangerous depression. **LEARN TO RECOGNIZE THE DIFFERENCE.**

1. Art: Whether the art is manufactured by the adolescent or is art the adolescent is drawn to matters little. Artistic expression and attraction are clear, and are serious indicators of the youth's thoughts and feelings. What is the general, *overall expression of the art* the youth is creating or smitten with?
2. Music/Media: What do the lyrics express? Does the adolescent gravitate to dark, fatalistic lyrics and/or morbid audio and video content? Yes, lyrics and music, and video games and pals all have an impact on an impressionable youth. *Who or what is impressing your adolescent?*

3. Obsessions: Look at the whole picture. Is the adolescent obsessed with the way they are being treated by peers, teachers, or persons in positions of authority? Is the adolescent obsessing over a possible crush? Does the youth have an unhealthy focus on guns, violence, death, sex, food, self-image? Is the youth being tormented at school, or on the Internet, or through any number of social settings? Is the youth *obsessed* with the Internet?
4. Withdrawing: Adolescents will go through a period of separation from their parents; this is a critical part of growing up. However, if the youth is spending each waking and sleeping hour alone, it is time for an intervention. Is the teen withdrawing because they feel helpless to effect a situation? Is the child being bullied? *Find out.*
5. Lethargy: Does the youth seem to be listless and want to sleep life away? This is a serious sign of depression and must be addressed immediately. **SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP.** Ask. Listen. Love. What is the underlying cause of the lethargy? Don't judge. Be the safe place your child knows he can come to. Know *what's going on* in your child's life.
6. Changes in Appearance: Adolescence is a time of developing self-expression and public persona. How adolescents wish to be seen by their peers and society at large is portrayed in rapidly changing outfits and costumes. Adolescents try on different looks, and watch for a reaction to their new look. These changes are normal. However, appearance is a clear determinant of how a teen is feeling inside. Has the look become slovenly or unkempt? Does the outfit reveal an Edgar Allen Poe attitude? Is the attire suddenly solid black? Are gang colors being flashed? What is the message the adolescent is sending? Are you getting it? Does it need to be addressed? It does if the attire and attitude presented is dark, is of a gang nature, or is one that reflects loss of interest in *personal hygiene.*
7. Changes in Habits: Have sleep habits, everyday rituals such as teeth brushing and bathing (hygiene), or any behaviors that are considered normal to your child changed? Look for signs in day-to-day activities. Sometimes we are so close that we don't notice what others notice. Take a step back and see what is going on in the life of your child. What appears to be laziness may be a serious *sign of depression.*
8. Substance Abuse: *Self-medicating* is a huge red flag that your youth is in danger. Watch for any signs, including cigarette smoking. It is more than just a struggle to 'fit in' with the crowd. Substance abuse can be a serious indication that the youth is seeking pain release and relief. Watch closely for the signs. **TREAT IMMEDIATELY.**
9. Self-Mutilation: Perhaps the most outwardly visible sign that something is wrong, self-mutilation indicates that the youth needs to feel a physical pain, perhaps to take the focus off the emotional pain he or she is feeling. Add to this the obvious, that is, the clear message of feeling abused, possibly by others. Self-mutilation is a scream for attention. *Hear the scream.*

- 10. Eating Disorders:** When a person feels as if they have no control over their life, eating is one thing they know they can control. In addition to reflecting a value of self-image, an eating disorder is a sign of inward turmoil, of being out of control. Eating disorders kill. Eating disorders are another way of committing suicide. *Get professional help.*

What Can Be Done ~Ask, Listen, Love♥~

According to research in the 1970s reporting on suicides caused an increase in suicides in impressionable adolescents. "Cluster suicides" were attributed to numerous "copycat" suicides whenever the local TV reported a teen suicide. Because of this research, television stations are reluctant to cover suicides. (If they took this same stance on reporting homicides, and ceased the notorious celebrity-status coverage of killers the murder rate would unquestionably drop.) There is always going to be a potentially suicidal kid who believes that by committing suicide they can get-back-at those people who are perceived as having been mean. "Cutting off their nose to spite their face" is the general adolescent condition. The answer is not to cover more suicides; rather, it is to feed the masses a healthier diet. The media does not often cover "good" news stories because they are reportedly lacking in sensationalism that sells. Feel goodnews accounts that bring tears of joy rather than shots of adrenaline to the viewer are a rarity. Where is the coverage of prevention programs, or of the events that seek to empower? Where are the role models for choosing life, for finding the lemonade in the sometimes-overwhelming pile of tart lemons? Where is coverage of the heroes that make a difference to all of us? If the media needs sensationalism, let's sensationalize the art of living a sensational life. Let's broadcast that on the television and on the big screen. Extensive media exposure and coverage of multiple reasons to live may just save a life.

To be fair, it's not just the fault of the media, and simply turning off the television is not the answer because things happen outside of the television set. And, it would not be fair to simply open this box of horrific statistics without offering a way to manage the problem. Solutions start at a grass roots level, and there is a grass roots organization that has made a primary goal of stopping the incidence of suicide. "Shining the light into the darkest corners to show that we are never alone" is what they do. But moreover, they shine the spotlight into the corners of issues that as a society we would like to pretend don't happen. "Not My Kid," is not an acceptable excuse for ignoring the pandemic of adolescent suicide. It is crucial to ensuring parents, teachers, legislature, and the media acknowledge the horrific nature of this life changing social issue, before it's too late.

Following are some suggestions they offer as for things that can be done individually to enact change:

- Support State legislation that promotes a healthy life-style choice curriculum, without the course content being religious, politically partisan, or judgmental in nature.
- Work together to attract celebrity endorsement as spokespersons for choosing life as opposed to the fatality of suicide.

- Support youth activities, especially between the hours of 3-6 p.m. when kids are most often left unattended, and when the majority of bad decisions are made.
- Monitor your child's media diet, and remove violence from the menu. Add video games, music, and media content that encourage positive thinking, feelings of well-being and courteous behavior. Talk with your children about what computer programmers know so well: "Garbage-in, garbage-out." Encourage them to seek out soul-feeding activities. Provide alternatives to television and video games.
- Help by supporting the means to build a community center of light, where artistic expression is offered as an alternative outlet for emotions that often remain bottled to the point of explosion and self-mutilation, or worse.
- Become a mentor. Provide fun, laughter and creative expression to youth. YOU will reap the rewards, and you just may save a life.
- Intervene, and report if you suspect any behavior that may be suicidal.
- Speak up. Almost everyone knows someone who has suffered depression, or has committed suicide. Let's raise awareness of this horrific social problem, and find solutions. Our community legacy needs to be altered to be one of mental health and a LOW rate of suicide. You can make a difference simply by speaking up.

Buy the book that empowers with candor, and boldly shines the light on suicide:

Blessings in the Mire: A True Story of Miracles & Recollections
<http://www.buybooksontheweb.com/product.aspx?ISBN=0-7414-3850-X>