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Whose kids? Our kids!

Teens and suicide

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The facts about teenage suicide are frightening. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15- to 24-year-olds. These statistics may actually even underestimate the extent of the problem due to the social stigma attached to suicide and the possibility that some suicides may be reported as accidents. For every completed suicide it is estimated that there are 50 to 150 attempts. While teenage girls are about three times more likely than boys to attempt suicide, teenage boys are about three times more likely to complete a suicide since they tend to use more lethal means. Handguns are the number one killer of boys, and drug overdose is the number one killer of girls.

Why suicide?

Whether or not a teenager wants to die, suicidal behavior often stems from feelings of helplessness. Teenagers who attempt or complete suicide tend to:

- ✓ Be isolated. Absence of family communication and overall isolation from peers can cause a child to become despondent and withdrawn.
- ✓ Have experienced multiple stressors including family problems such as divorce, remarriage, marital discord, as well as school problems, peer problems and many losses of close friends or family members.
- ✓ Be genetically pre-disposed. Suicide can run in families. Twenty-five percent of children who complete suicide have a relative who has committed suicide.
- ✓ Have depression or other psychiatric problems such as extreme defiant behaviors and substance abuse problems. A high incidence of drug and alcohol abuse by the parents of suicidal teens is common.

Also, suicidal teens tend to engage in higher rates of alcohol and drug use.

Many suicides involve chemical substances. Use of these chemicals intensifies the already-existing feelings of helplessness and hopelessness that the teen is experiencing.

Parents make a difference!

Teens who are close to their families are less likely to have suicidal feelings. For example, parents who are regularly involved with their teens either by sharing interests or by participating in activities together are less likely to experience this as a problem.

Families who are aware and take an interest in their teen's ideas and activities, and who provide regular emotional support, are less likely to experience this problem. In addition, parents who have a close relationship with their teens are in a better position to notice warning signs and offer help. Teens whose parents are aware of their peer group and support their friendships are at a lower risk for teen suicide. Teens who receive emotional support from one or two close friends and feel accepted by them, are less likely to feel suicidal.

Many of the symptoms of suicidal feelings are similar to those of depression. Parents should be aware of the following warning signs of teens who experience suicidal feelings. Mental health professionals recommend that if one or more of these signs occurs, parents should talk to their child about their concerns and seek professional help if the concern persists. Talking to your teen about suicide will not put ideas into a teen's head that were not there before. In fact, teens report that they are often relieved that someone cares and wants to talk about their feelings.

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Warning signs of suicide

- ✓ A significant change in eating and sleeping habits
- ✓ Withdrawal from friends and family and regular activities
- ✓ Violent or rebellious behavior, or persistent running away
- ✓ Drug and alcohol use
- ✓ Radical personality change
- ✓ Frequent complaints about physical symptoms, often related to emotions, such as stomach ache, headache and fatigue
- ✓ Loss of interest in pleasurable activities
- ✓ Neglect of personal appearance, especially if great care was taken previously
- ✓ Self-mutilation
- ✓ Many recent losses such as the death of a friend or a family member (especially if the cause of death was suicide), or a recent relationship break-up or family divorce

In addition to these warning signs, adolescents who are thinking about suicide may also provide “hints” that they are considering suicide as an option. For example, some teens may refer to the fact that they may not be around much longer, or indicate that they are overwhelmed by statements such as, “What difference does anything make?” or “Life makes no sense.”

Actions may also reflect suicidal thinking, such as a sudden interest in giving away important or favorite possessions, making amends and saying good-bye. Adolescents may make suicidal threats such as in a letter or note to a friend or verbal suicidal threats in the presence of others.

Taking action

What can parents do if they suspect suicidal thinking? If you suspect your teenager is depressed or suicidal, ask them about it. If your child exhibits more than one of the warning signs listed previously, it is important that you approach your teen with your worries. Some teens will feel comforted by your concern and want to talk about these scary feelings. Just by listening, you may counteract some of the feelings of hopelessness. Other teens may be so depressed that they may not be able to discuss it directly with you. Depression and suicidal feelings are treatable.

If you are concerned that your teen is thinking about suicide, consult with your doctor or school mental health professional immediately. A psychiatric examination or a discussion with a mental health professional will do no harm to your teen. Remember, asking questions about suicide does not encourage a child to think about or act on suicidal feelings. It is always better to acknowledge the potential for these feelings rather than ignore signs that may mean something serious.

Tips to communicate with your teen

- ✓ Be a good listener.
- ✓ Express concern.
- ✓ Be open and frank. Do not be afraid to ask about suicidal feelings directly.
- ✓ Be non-judgmental. Do not judge your teen’s reasons for feeling depressed or suicidal. For example, do not say something like “You have so much going for you, you should be happy.” This will only serve to make your teen feel even guiltier.
- ✓ Be supportive.
- ✓ Contact a mental health professional if you are concerned.
- ✓ Call a crisis hotline.

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