

Some Things You Should Know About Preventing Teen Suicide

American Academy of Pediatrics

- In a recent study on the long-term impact of child abuse, adult women who said they were physically or emotionally abused as children were more likely to have mental problems, suffer from depression and to have attempted suicide.¹
- Suicide is the eighth leading cause of death for young people aged 15-24: and the fourth leading cause of death for persons between the ages of 10 and 14.²

It is important to take the subject of suicide seriously. It doesn't seem right that a teenager - who has lived for such a short time - would choose to die. But adolescents who can't get over their depression sometimes do kill themselves. Boys commit suicide more often than girls, but no one is immune. In one recent survey of high school students, 60 percent said they had thought about killing themselves. About 9 percent said they had tried at least once.

Why has the youth suicide rate gone so high in recent years?

- It's easier to get the tools for suicide (boys often use firearms to kill themselves; girls usually use pills);
- The pressures of modern life are greater;
- Competition for good grades and college admission is stiff; and,
- There's more violence in the newspapers, video games and on television.

Lack of parental interest may be another problem. Many children grow up in divorced households; for others, both of their parents work and their families spend limited time together. According to one study, 90 percent of suicidal teenagers believed their families did not understand them. (However, this is such a common teenage complaint that other factors are playing a role, too.) Young people also reported that when they tried to tell their parents about their feelings of unhappiness or failure, their mother and father denied or ignored their point of view. If your teenager has been depressed, you should look closely for signs that he or she might be thinking of suicide.

- Has his personality changed dramatically?
- Is he having trouble with a girlfriend (or, for girls, with a boyfriend)? Or is he having trouble getting along with other friends or with parents? Has he withdrawn from people he used to feel close to?
- Is the quality of his schoolwork going down? Has he failed to live up to his own or someone else's standards (when it comes to school grades/sports, for example)?
- Does he always seem bored, and is he having trouble concentrating?
- Is he acting like a rebel in an unexplained and severe way?
- Is she pregnant and finding it hard to cope with this major life change?
- Has he run away from home?

¹ Mullen, P.E., et. Al., "The Long-term Impact of the Physical, Emotional, and Sexual Abuse of Children: A Community Study," *Child Abuse & Neglect*, Vol. 20, No. 1, pp. 7-21, 1996 (Pergamon)

² Friday, J.C., PhD, "The Psychological Impact of Violence in Underserved Communities," *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*, Vol. 6, No. 4, 1995, pp. 403-409.

- Is your teenager abusing drugs and/or alcohol?
- Is she complaining of headaches, stomachaches, etc., that may or may not be real?
- Have his eating or sleeping habits changed?
- Has his or her appearance changed for the worse?
- Is he giving away some of his most prized possessions?
- Is he writing notes or poems about death?
- Does he talk about suicide, even jokingly? Has he said things such as “That’s the last straw,” “I can’t take it anymore,” or “Nobody cares about me?” (Threatening to kill oneself precedes four out of five suicidal threats.)
- Has he tried to commit suicide before?

If you suspect that your teenager might be thinking about suicide, do not remain silent.

Suicide is preventable, but you must act quickly.

- Ask your teenager about it. Don’t be afraid to say the word “suicide.” Getting the word out in the open may help your teenager think someone has heard his cries for help.
- Reassure him that you love him. Remind him that no matter how awful his problems seem, they can be worked out, and you are willing to help.
- Ask her to talk about her feelings. Listen carefully. Do not dismiss her problems or get angry at her.
- Seek professional help.