

# THE COUNSELOR

A PUBLICATION FOR PARENTS, COUNSELORS & EDUCATORS • PROVIDED BY: CHRISTIAN COUNSELORS OF HOUSTON

VOL. 3, NO. 3

Stephen Rossi, M.A., L.P.C.

AUGUST 2000

## TEEN SUICIDE: A PREVENTABLE TRAGEDY

Ted's friends and family knew he was deeply affected by the break-up with Jackie, but no one suspected what would happen exactly one week later. He came home from school and shot himself. Ted committed suicide. No notes, long speeches, threats, or reaching out for help. He ended his life because he could not bear the emotional pain. Ted's situation is our worst nightmare, a human tragedy that devastates lives. Five thousand teenagers commit suicide every year in the U.S. Over half a million try to kill themselves. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15 to 24 year-olds and the sixth leading cause of death among those 5 to 14 years old. Suicides among young people nationwide have dramatically increased in recent years. Sixty percent of the high school students surveyed admitted that they had thought about killing themselves while 9 % said they had tried at least once. Teen suicide is a national epidemic. Suicide is preventable. This newsletter addresses teen suicide, the grim topic most people avoid but desperately need to understand and talk about.

### Issues & Causes

The teenage years are a period of turmoil for just about everyone. They face new social roles, developing new relationships, getting used to changes in their bodies, and making decisions about the future. No one seems to have answers to the questions they have. They can feel quite alone. Adolescents experience strong feelings of stress, confusion, self-doubt, pressure to succeed, financial uncertainty, and fears of growing up. For some teenagers, divorce, the formation of a new family with step-parents and step siblings, or moving to a new community can be very unsettling and can intensify self-doubts. In some cases, suicide appears to be

a "solution." During times of stress, teens often obsess about suicide as an escape. The majority of youngsters who attempt suicide are depressed because of major life changes such as divorce or death in the family, alcoholism, physical or sexual abuse. Many try to medicate their pain with drugs and alcohol. Depression is common among teenagers. Feelings of helplessness and worthlessness, along with disturbances in sleep or appetite, create a downward spiral of health and grades. Perspectives become cloudy, making every thought seem intolerably difficult.

It is easier to get the tools for suicide. The pressures of modern life are greater and the competition for good grades and college admission is stiff. There's more violence in the newspapers and on television. A lack of parental interest may be another problem. Many children grow up in divorced homes. Others with parents present, spend limited time together. Ninety percent of teens in a study believed their parents did not understand them. Many teens tried to tell their parents about their problems, unhappiness or failure, but their mother and father denied or ignored their point of view.

### Impact

Suicide survivors are deeply impacted by suicide. They are traumatized by the untimely death of their son, daughter, sibling, relative, or friend. Many are left feeling responsible for not preventing the suicide. Some even feel they caused their loved one to take his or her life. The dark cloud (stigma) hovers over a family for having a member commit suicide. The family, school, church, and community are deeply affected. They are left with the pain, anger, confusion, and unanswered questions. They feel a tremendous burden and loss. Survivors go through a grief



process. Many report feeling numb and confused upon hearing of the death of a relative or friend. They usually experience intense anger, rage, fear, guilt, anxiety and depression over the next several months. Survivors frequently have considerable stress and relationship problems. The pain stops growing and gives way to interminable ache. Eventually the consequences of the loss sets in as the survivor tries to adjust. The wound lasts a life time.

### Intervention

Suicide is the outcome of a neuro-biological and psychological breakdown (A.E. Slaby). Becoming suicidal is a process that begins in severe stress and pain generated by a serious life crisis. Stress and pain increase as the crisis, or the perception of it worsens. As this happens, control and self-esteem deteriorate. Depression may be a cause or side effect of the process. Suicidality occurs when the stress induces psychological pain so unbearable that death is seen as the only relief. Prior to this point the individual is at risk of becoming suicidal. Beyond it the individual is at risk for completing suicide. Suicidality entails changes in brain chemistry and physiology. Most notable is a depleted serotonin, a neuro-transmitter that inhibits self-harm. There is a neurological threshold and those near or beyond it must be treated with medications. There is no choice. Suicidal individuals are beset by suffering that is distracting and disabling. Suicidality is a state of total pain which limits options to enduring or ending utter agony. Suicide is killing the pain (Salvatore 1998).



Effective intervention rests entirely on understanding the suicidal process recognizing the severe psychological pain, the depression, the potential lethality (suicide risk), keeping the person safe, and getting effective treatment which focuses first on managing the psychological pain and eventually working through it. Pain management involves screening the pain, believing the individual, and trusting their pain testimony. Help the individual draw from their support system. Help them deal with the pain, giving relief not insight. Care for the pain. Time is critical with suicidal individuals. The only way to save lives is by immediately impacting their pain (Salvatore, 1999).

## Prevention

Look for those signs indicating that a person is at risk for committing suicide. In most cases the warning signs are there but not caught in time to intervene. An estimated 80% of people who commit suicide actually exhibit signs of their intentions before they kill themselves. If one or more of following signs occur, parents need to talk to their teen about their concerns and seek professional help.

### Warning Signs:

- Change in eating and sleeping habits.
- Withdrawn from friends, and family and regular activities.
- Violent actions, rebellious behavior, thrill seeking and running away.
- Drug and alcohol use.
- Unusual neglect of personal appearance.
- Marked personality change.
- Persistent boredom, difficulty concentrating, decline in the quality of schoolwork.
- Frequent complaints about physical symptoms, often related to emotions, such as stomachaches, headaches, fatigue, etc.
- Loss of interest in pleasurable activities.
- Not tolerating praise or rewards.

### Additional Risk Factors:

- Dwelling on death, or suicide in poetry, music, art, or creative writing.
- A loss or humiliation of some kind: loss of self-esteem by doing poorly on a test. The

breakup with a boyfriend or girlfriend, or the trauma of parent's divorce.

- Family histories of mental or substance abuse disorder, or suicide, in peers, or in news or fiction stories are factors.
- Fear of losing control, harming self or others, low self-esteem.
- Feeling worthless, shame, overwhelming guilt, self-hatred.
- Inability to tolerate frustration or unwillingness to communicate.
- Sexual promiscuity, theft, vandalism, hostile behavior, truancy, carelessness.
- Unusually long grief reaction.

### A Teenager who is planning to commit suicide may also complain of being "rotten inside."

They may give verbal hints with statements such as "Life isn't worth living anymore." They may put their affairs in order, for example, give away favorite possessions, clean his or her room, throw away important belongings, etc. Suicidal teens may become suddenly cheerful after a period of depression. Many have trouble with their girlfriends (or for girls, boyfriends), getting along with other friends or parents? Girls contemplating suicide may be pregnant and finding it hard to cope with this major life change?

Do not remain silent if you suspect that your teenager may be thinking about suicide. Suicide is preventable, but you must act quickly. Ask your teenager about it. Getting it out in the open lets the teen know you heard his cry for help. Reassure him that you love him. Remind him that no matter how awful his problems are they can be worked out, and you are willing to help. Remove all lethal weapons from your home. Seek professional help. There is a multitude of resources on suicide crisis intervention, suicide prevention, and research on the internet. The community crisis intervention hotlines are helpful. The church can also serve as a good source of support, comfort, healing, direction, and referrals.

## HOPE: Raising Healthy Teens

Teenagers who have a healthy relationship with God, their Creator and feel connected to their families are less prone to commit suicide. It is our responsibility as parents to prepare our children to face life's difficulties. We do this by establishing open communication with them from the beginning. We model openness and allow them to talk to us about their problems without judging, criticizing, or getting angry with them. We help them

come up with solutions without taking over or thwarting their growth and independence. We respect them. As parents, we need to connect with our children and teens. We do this by spending quantity solid time with them. We remain available for them. Parents need to keep an eye on their teens and take an interest in their lives. It is never too late to build or repair relationships. Begin now. There is no shame in admitting your shortcomings. Ask for forgiveness. Get help. Love them and draw them to the ultimate source of all hope and meaning, the Lord our God.

## Epilogue

Life is full of troubles and disappointments. Despite the problems of modern living we can have victory through all circumstances, God promises it, Himself! Furthermore, He promises that He will not give us more than He will help us bear. God loves us and has overcome the world for us. He is with us even in the Valley of the Shadow of Death. That valley can be anything that makes our life miserable from time to time. We can really support our troubled teens and children with God's help, healing, and grace in our own lives. Keep an open relationship with God and your teenagers. These types of relationships bring hope, love and healing. You will see powerful transformations, healthy families, and healthy teens. Teenagers will struggle. Bear with them, help them draw close to God. They will experience His love and power to overcome the world.

F.Y.I.

Steve Rossi, M.A., L.P.C.

CHRISTIAN COUNSELORS  
OF HOUSTON

9055 Katy Freeway, Suite 300  
Houston, Texas 77024  
(713) 984-1314 (Main Office)



SPEAKING  
ENGAGEMENTS

INFO: 713.984.1314

8/29 - Adolescent Drug Abuse  
Youth Pastor's Forum

10/15 - Grief  
Second Baptist Church  
(West Campus)