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Preventing Suicide In Our Youth

Job, Jonah, Elijah are some of the biblical examples who had reached a point of hopelessness and wished for death. We know that King Saul and Judas Iscariot actually crossed the line of taking their life. Sections of the Psalms and the book Lamentations remind us we live “in this world” and with the consequence of sins and the fallen state of mankind, sometimes we hurt deeply and wonder how to go on. Yet in the midst of pain, there is hope and we are thankful for the redemptive work of Jesus Christ and for the good news of the Gospel!

This article is intended to be an overview regarding the topic of Preventing Suicide in our Youth. Content headings are excerpts from the *Alive to Thrive* eBook from *Focus on the Family* (link at end of the article).

Statistics- what do the numbers tell us.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2013) – suicide is now second only to accidents as a leading cause of death among young people ages 15-24. 575,000 teens take an action to end their life each year. Of that number, 4,600 will die by suicide which 12 kids per day.

Of those teens who think about suicide, about half actually put their thoughts into action. Among students in 9th-12th grades:

- 17% thought about suicide in the past year.
- 13.6% made a specific suicide plan in the last year.
- 8% actually took action to end their life one or more times in the last year.
- 2.7% required medical attention after suicidal actions.

Girls are more likely to take suicidal actions than boys- three times more likely. On the other hand, boys are more likely to die by suicide on their first attempt. As a result, 81% of all suicide victims are male. This is largely in part to the methods employed. Most males will use firearms, while females will usually try a drug/harmful substance overdose.

Youth suicide reached its apex in the 1990s, and then fell about 15% to lowest point in 2007 to 3.9%. However, the last decade has seen the numbers spike to almost the same levels as the 1990s. Experts now tell us the suicide rate for white children and teens from ages ten to seventeen rose 70% between 2006 and 2016. While black children and teens kill themselves less often than white youth, their rate of increase was even higher, at 77 percent.

While the overall rates are still lower than they were 20 years ago, statistics are meaningless if it's your child who's the one in one hundred thousand. While there's no need for panic, there's a real need for vigilance and hard work. After all, even one young life lost to suicide is one too many. And there are good reasons to suppose we'll be losing a lot more than that unless all of us—parents, teachers, pastors, youth workers, and public servants alike—take deliberate, preventative measures

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CAUSES

Why do so many kids feel tempted to take their own lives? How can you tell if your child is susceptible to this trend and at serious risk of hurting himself? Studies have identified six top reasons for adolescent suicide:

1. Depression. Always accompanied by a pervasive sense of suffering, hopelessness, and despair, severe depression often seems to be too much to bear. It is by far the most common reason for teen suicide. About 75 percent of deaths by suicide are the result of depression, anxiety, or a sense of being trapped in difficult circumstances.
2. Psychosis. Malicious inner voices often command self-destruction for unintelligible reasons. People with schizophrenia will usually give honest answers about thoughts of suicide when asked directly.
3. Impulse. Under the influence of drugs or alcohol, some people become overly emotional and attempt to end their own lives. When sober, these individuals usually feel genuine remorse.
4. Cry for help. Some people don't want to die—they want to send a signal to others that something is seriously wrong. They frequently use methods they believe won't kill but often cause unintentional and irreversible damage.
5. Philosophical reasoning. For some, the decision to kill themselves is a deliberate, reasoned choice, sometimes motivated by a painful terminal illness from which there is little or no hope of recovery.
6. Mistake. Deaths in this category are often the result of experimentation with autoerotic asphyxiation—self-induced oxygen deprivation intended to produce sexual stimulation or a similar high.

Since the number-one cause of suicide among young people is depression, it's particularly distressing that only one in five depressed teens actually get help, often due to fear of stigma. This is all the more reason for us as parents to keep an eye out for the symptoms of depression

It's important to add that depression in and of itself is rarely sufficient to drive a young person to take his/her life. Almost every suicide has a triggering circumstance or an immediate crisis of some kind that compels kids to translate their feelings into action. These triggering circumstances can include such events as:

- Divorce of parents
- Violence in the home
- Inability to succeed in school
- Breakup with a boyfriend or girlfriend
- Feelings of worthlessness
- Rejection by friends or peers
- Substance abuse
- Death of a loved one
- The suicide of a friend or acquaintance

To a certain extent it would be fair to say that all teens, even the most normal and well-adjusted ones, are at risk for suicidal thoughts and behavior. That's because adolescence can be a stormy and tumultuous time of life under the best of circumstances. Hormonally driven emotional swings can deepen the feelings of helplessness and worthlessness that many young people experience during this stage of development. And there are other factors that can come into play as well.

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For example:

- Aggressive or disruptive behavior
- Confusion regarding gender identity or sexual orientation
- Spotty mental health screening
- Poor access to mental health services
- Reluctance to admit having a problem
- Bullying (whether at school or online)
- Disturbing societal issues and trends

Add to all of this the fact that many teens lack self-control and are temperamentally inclined to risky, impulsive behavior, and it's easy to see the need for parental vigilance.

WARNING SIGNS

Understanding tendencies and theoretical possibilities, while important, don't in itself lead to suicides. A risk factor is not necessarily a problem - it's a weakness that could lead to a problem. A bald tire is not a flat tire, but it might become a flat tire under the right conditions very easily. When that starts to happen, there are usually some warning signs: wires sticking through the treads, for instance, or a bulge, or a slow loss of air. It's the same, metaphorically speaking, with people considering suicide.

Studies show four out of five teen suicide attempts have been preceded by clear warning signs: changes in behavior or attitude indicating a dangerous psychological shift. *An important part of averting a teen suicide is staying involved in your child's life—especially if he/she is at risk for some reason—and watching for these signals:*

- Sudden changes in behavior, attitudes, or social habits
- Expressions of intense guilt or hopelessness
- Declining grades and other problems at school or work
- Behavioral issues
- Difficulty concentrating or paying attention
- Increased boredom
- For boys, sudden outbursts of anger and violence
- Substance abuse, unsafe sexual activity, and other risky behaviors
- Lack of positive response to praise
- Physical complaints (fatigue, aches, pains, migraines) resulting from emotional distress
- Loss of interest in favorite extracurricular activities
- Changes in sleep patterns - too much or too little
- Changes in eating habits
- Withdrawal from family and friends
- Threatening, talking, or joking about suicide
- Sudden interest in procuring potential tools for suicide (firearms, pills, poisons, etc.)
- A teen who has been struggling with depression, stress, anxiety or deep disappointment suddenly seeming happier and calmer; this may be a sign that he/she has made up his mind to end his/her life.
- "Cleaning house": a sudden impulse to give away personal possessions.
- Neglect of hygiene and other matters of personal appearance.

Not all of these signs will be present in every case. There have been instances in which a seemingly well-adjusted teen committed suicide for no apparent reason. But vigilance is always important, especially if two or three of the signs listed

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above appear in combination. It's always better to err on the side of caution. In particular, any talk about suicide on the part of your child needs to be taken seriously and given full attention. If your kid says something such as, "I'd be better off dead," or "Maybe life would be easier for you if I wasn't around," take action.

ASSESSING THE DANGER

On an even more serious level, the following behaviors may indicate your child is actually in the process of putting together a suicide plan:

- Open declaration: "I'm thinking of committing suicide," or "I wish I could die."
- Verbal hints that could point to suicidal thoughts or plans; for example, "I want you to know something in case anything happens to me," or "I won't be troubling you anymore."
- Suicide notes or diary entries
- Verbal expression of bizarre or unsettling thoughts

WHAT NOW?

If you become aware of any of the warning signs listed above, sit down with your child and have a heart-to-heart talk. Don't be afraid to get pushy. Press your son or daughter with some direct questions. You might begin by asking, "Where are these negative feelings coming from?" or "What is it that's causing you to talk so much about ending your life?" It could be especially helpful and revealing to ask, "Exactly what would have to change for you to feel better?" You may also want to get an official psychiatric diagnosis so you can find out what's behind the depressive behavior and talk of suicide.

The important thing is to take action now—before it's too late.

RESPONDING TO THESE ISSUES THROUGH PREVENTION AND BEING PROACTIVE

God has made it clear throughout Scripture, and especially in *Ephesians 2:10* and *Psalms 139*, that we are carefully created with love and with purpose. Yet Satan's mission is to destroy that core identity and distort perceptions. The faulty messages communicated by our culture help the enemy do just that. In fact, many times people don't realize they're self-destructing. They think they're pursuing what will make them feel better, which could include hurting themselves or making other people feel sorry or bad for them. We don't want our children to self-destruct. We want them to find what they need: belonging, purpose, relationship with God and others. As we build our children up, listen to them, and help them find their God-given talents and purpose, we also need to help them clearly see the culture's lies.

CORRECTING FAULTY CULTURAL MESSAGES:

The following destructive messages are rampant in our culture. Teaching your children about them will help them develop a healthy identity.

It's All About Performance

Kids today are being raised in a performance-driven culture. Good grades, athletic trophies, ribbons at music and debate tournaments, and badges earned for activities conquered seem to signify to others that they're doing well in life and to us as parents that we're raising highly productive children. Encouraging your kids to strive to do their best is important to teach hard work and develop perseverance. Yet when performance excellence is emphasized more than character excellence, coping with the pressure to perform or the inability to perform well may lead our kids to self-destructive behaviors. It doesn't help that our culture definitely elevates some skills—specifically athletic, musical, and intellectual talents—over others. Some kids aren't able to perform well in these areas simply because they lack the physical, creative, or intellectual skills to do so. And the adage that "You can do anything you want to if you simply believe in yourself" is misleading. While desire and will can take us far in life, if often can't overcome some deficits that exist in all of us at some level.

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If your child struggles with self-destructive behaviors, in addition to seeking medical and psychological help for them, begin to encourage them to love and respect themselves for who God made them to be instead of for what they have done or accomplished.

It helps if you:

- notice the positive character traits in your child and point them out.
- try to find opportunities for them to use those traits while contributing to the well-being of others.
- identify peers and older mentors who can provide good examples of healthy self-esteem.
- express admiration about others when you see them using their God-given traits and skills in ways that honor God and serve others.

Failure Is Bad

Failure is a part of life. So much so that most people have far more experience with failures than with successes in life. Think about it. The road to learning a new skill is almost always littered with multiple failed attempts along the way. In fact, trying and failing is usually necessary in order to find the right answer. There are many examples of individuals - Thomas Edison, Abraham Lincoln, etc. who overcame failures.

Even so, failure is often presented as something to be avoided in the 21st century culture. It's as if failing at something makes you, as a person, a failure. To further irritate the wound of failing, peers tend to attach labels such as loser to their friends who've been unsuccessful in various ways and then broadcast their failures over social media platforms. This leaves the person who has failed feeling alone, discouraged, and in need of comfort that may be found in some self-destructive behaviors. You can encourage your children to accept failure as a part of life if you:

- define failure as a necessary step on the way to success.
- share the lessons you've learned from failure.
- talk with your kids after they experience failure and help them identify what they can learn.
- help your kids identify any ways they may be setting themselves up for failure.
- teach them how to successfully deal with a failure, learn from it, and move forward with confidence.

I Deserve to Be Happy

Commercials and culture in general give the message that we deserve to be happy. This false message removes gratitude, which is an antidote to depression. Nothing is deserved. Happiness is not deserved or even the ultimate goal. Rather encouraging our children toward pursuits such as close and connected relationships, optimism, healthy decision-making, and resilient thinking is vital. The message "I deserve _____" leaves kids looking for happiness through drugs, sex, risk, money, and many other things. God provides some guidance on contentment through His Word. He tells us in *Philippians 4:8* what to think about to help our thoughts be less anxious. He tells us He comes alongside the humble; He will satisfy the thirsty; and He will strengthen the weak. Scripture and science both agree gratitude, instead of demands, brings a sense of contentment, which can lead to happy feelings.

Drugs, Alcohol, Sex, and Money Can Meet My Needs

The reality is that drugs, alcohol, sex, and money create a temporary fix, providing good feelings lasting for only a moment. Depending on these things to meet our needs is similar to drinking soda while hiking in the desert—a sugary drink might taste good at first, but it will only leave you thirstier and dehydrated. The pursuit of money, drugs, alcohol, and sex outside of marriage will likewise leave you with temporary relief that unravels and dehydrates the soul over time. Our brain tends to gravitate toward the easiest way to feel pleasure but benefits most from our self-discipline and motivation to pursue the higher and more satisfying longer-term goal. Learning how to manage pain, disappointment, loss, relationships, failure, and loneliness takes effort, but is worth it in the long run.

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MOVING TOWARD HEALING HURTS

Addictions, eating disorders, and self-harm, at the most basic level, are ways to express and cope with emotional pain. When we experience a physical injury or illness, people around us can usually see the evidence of our pain in the form of bleeding or a broken bone, for example, and that evidence compels them to come to our aid. Yet when we experience an emotional injury such as grief after the loss of a loved one or humiliation after being bullied, it's hard for others to see our pain. And it's hard for us to connect with the pain because we feel it, but can't see it. Cutting skin, consuming alcohol or other drugs, and self-induced purging of food are ways to externalize inner pain and outwardly express that pain.

Because self-destructive behaviors are often an attempt to communicate pain to others and find some relief from that pain, finding healthier ways to communicate and relieve their inner hurts is important for youth.

These four steps will get you started:

Listen.

Listening is the first step in communication. You can listen and really hear what your child is feeling when you:

- prepare a place to listen to your child that is free from all distractions.
- ask your child to tell you exactly how they are feeling and assure them that there will be no negative consequences for their honest communication.
- allow them to express their feelings with no interruption.
- refrain from correcting any inaccurate information.
- repeat back what you've heard without adding your own views.
- write down what they say so you capture it all (if it helps you remember and focus).
- put yourself in their shoes. Display genuine empathy and compassion for what's happening in their life.

If your child appreciates touch, give them a hug or hold them. Sometimes kids just want to be held for a while with no words. They want the reassurance of your presence, much like we love to be reassured by the presence of our heavenly Father when things feel like they're unraveling.

Share.

Talk honestly with your child about your own experiences with emotional pain. Empathize with feeling alone and confused. Tell your child about times when you coped with your inner hurts in healthy and unhealthy ways. You don't need to go into a lot of detail, but share the fact that your life has not always been perfect.

Make a menu of options.

Work with your kids to develop a list of healthy activities they can do when they're stressed or experiencing negative emotions. Offer suggestions such as journaling, drawing, or other forms of artistic expression, physical exercise activities, and singing or listening to music. Rather than stuffing their feelings until they come out in unhealthy ways, help your children find acceptable ways to put those emotions into non-damaging activities. Yes, you eventually want your kids to be able to verbalize their feelings. But in the meantime, find some options that don't require conversation.

Seek support.

Asking friends, family members, pastors, and healthcare professionals for support will aid in healing from self-destructive behaviors. Social support is important to provide a buffer between the child and the hurtful things in this world, and professional support is necessary to help your child learn to cope with pain in healthy ways. Because self-destructive behaviors can lead to death, your child will need professional medical and mental health help.

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MOVING TOWARDS AN INTENTIONAL MINDSET

In prevention, we need a good balance of skills and awareness. An intentional mindset can help sharpen our eyesight on our youth and for our youth. Encouraging our kids to help others who may be at risk of suicide by being a Noticer, Builder, and Connector is also important. Use these questions to start the conversation:

Be a Noticer

Has anyone told you that they want to kill themselves? Have you ever had such thoughts? Why do you think people consider suicide?

Be a Builder

What do you think has been lost in a person's life if they want to skip to "game over"? How can you help someone feel a sense of worth? What are some ways you can reach out to kids who seem all alone? How do you know you are cared about in your home? When do you feel loved?

Be a Connector

Who do you feel safe sharing your experiences and feelings with? Why do you feel they are the best to understand? What can you do if a friend starts talking about suicide? Do you trust your teachers, school counselor, or principal to handle a situation like this? If someone is thinking about suicide, tell that person to contact one of these hotlines:

- [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](http://www.988lifeline.org) (www. 988lifeline.org)

This Lifeline is for people experiencing a crisis and is available 24/7 in the United States. If you need help for yourself, a friend, or family member, call or text 988 right away.

- [Lifeline Crisis Chat](#)

Additional Resources:

Focus on the Family "Alive to Thrive" program.

<https://alivetothrive.focusonthefamily.com/>

Alive to Thrive eBook resource link.

<https://focusonthefamily.webconnex.com/co-alive-to-thrive>