

SHRINK WRAP from the monthly newsletter to parents

Now that the darkest day of the year is behind us, perhaps its time to bring up a subject that I've been avoiding. But the tragic fact of suicide in adolescents and young adults tells me that this conversation is worth having. I also believe that a little knowledge sometimes can make a huge difference.

Sadly, some college students try to solve what may seem like an insurmountable problem by taking their own life. Triggers for suicidal behavior might vary from a relationship loss or a perceived failure to a humiliation or loss of self esteem. Some students are more vulnerable to handling such events in a self-destructive way. Evidence suggests that suicide may be more common in young people who have unrealistically high expectations of themselves and/or lack the ability to express their feelings to others in more constructive ways.

As a parent, you might feel particularly helpless when a son or daughter who no longer lives at home is in trouble. Some of these feelings go with the territory of watching your student move into young adulthood. The French physician and writer, Paul Tournier, once said that during adolescence, the lock on the child's door moves from outside to inside. Parents can feel frustrated and shut out when their student chooses to keep the door closed.

To enter the mind of young persons contemplating suicide can be challenging. From the outside, they may seem full of promise, gifted with talents, blessed by good friends and family. And yet, from their perspective, life may seem futile and their own promise, empty.

While sometimes it's difficult to make sense of suicide, typically it does not arise out of the blue.

Ninety percent of those who complete suicide have a treatable psychological disorder, most often depression. Alcohol plays a role in almost 1/3 suicides. Recent studies report that about 1/10 students seriously consider suicide in any given year, a rather disturbing statistic.

Fortunately, suicide often, but not always, announces itself before it occurs. I encourage you to pay attention to specific warning signs, such as:

- Talking openly about killing oneself or wanting to "end it all"
- Taking unnecessary, life threatening risks
- Expressions of hopelessness and helplessness

- Giving away personal possessions

While most people who take their own life are depressed, most depressed people do not resort to suicide. If you are concerned about your student, ask them directly. Be aware that men may mask or minimize their problems or difficult feelings. Other helpful responses include:

- Listen to what they say
- Offer understanding, patience and emotional support
- Don't argue with or lecture them
- Let them know that help is available
- Consult with a mental health professional

If your student is expressing suicidal thoughts, we urge you take them seriously and encourage the student to get professional help. Because suicidal people often feel cut off from others and perceive diminished options, they may be reluctant to seek help on their own. Yet, such help is available and can be very effective in working to restore a student's sense of perspective, emotional balance, and the possibilities for a worthwhile future.

At UO's Counseling and Testing Center, we see many students who are depressed and are struggling with the issue of suicide. You should also be aware of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK.

I often tell students that suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem. Often, by unraveling the path that led them toward self-destruction, developing new social and emotional skills, and learning self love and self care, students are able to find their way out and reconnect with the great road of life.

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