

Teen Suicide

By Elizabeth Marmesh
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"I never had the intentions of actually dying," says an 18-year-old Coral Gables High graduate, recounting an event that ended in a trip to the hospital. "I had never cut myself. But one night, I took six tranquilizers with a friend. I fainted. Poison control said it wasn't deadly, but that was the closest I had ever come to suicide."

This girl's attempt may have not been successful, but according to the most recent statistics from the Centers for Disease Control, suicide ranks as the third leading cause of death for people ages 15 to 24 in Florida.

Teens of the 90's live in a pressure cooker. They are confronted with issues such as sex, drugs and alcohol at very young ages. Add the stress of trying to get good grades, working jobs and dealing with home issues, and you've got the typical teen: emotional, stressed and struggling. Depression may often be the byproduct of this everyday struggle.

Sex and relationship problems are significant parts of a teen's life, and both are causes of suicidal tendencies in teens having problems in these areas of their life.

"Teenagers have a lot of sexual thoughts and sexual identity concerns that often

drive to suicide," explained Dr. William Matts, a school psychologist. "Teens often center their whole lives around relationships, and after a break-up, some become hysterical and despondent."

Miami-Dade Schools TRUST counselor, Catalina Fonts-Masvidal, is aware of more sex-specific problems.

"Teens who are homosexual often feel even more extra pressure," Fonts-Masvidal commented, "because they often don't know how or who to come out to."

The statistics of suicide related problems of young gay and bi-sexual males are startling when compared to those of heterosexual peers. According to Healthway Magazine, homosexual and bi-sexual males are 13.9 times more suicidal.

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But sex is only one of many pivotal factors. Divorce, alcoholism and strict parents also contribute to their feelings that life is overwhelming.

Fonts-Masvidal remembers a story about a Gables High student who was so pressured by her parents to achieve perfect grades, she became hysterical after receiving a B in one of her classes.

"A teacher had to walk her into my office," said Fonts-Masvidal. "She showed signs of depression, so we sent her to be psychologically evaluated."

As it turned out, the girl wasn't fit to be in the classes she had enrolled in.

"She was killing herself to get good grades," Fonts-Masvidal said. "The expectations placed on her were too high."

Indicators

The most challenging part of preventing suicide is determining which kids are, in fact, suicidal. Parents, teachers and friends need to be aware of key signs that may show a teen is in peril.

Drugs and alcohol use are usually signs that a teenager may be depressed or suicidal.

"I used drugs and alcohol as an attempt for self remedy. I thought something was wrong with me.

But what I didn't realize until I got beyond my own thoughts was that if I killed myself, I would be killing the healthy part of myself also," the Gables grad said.

Some teens let suicidal thoughts swell in their minds.

"Teenagers who are suicidal tend to overlook that any problem can be worked out. A problem that exists today may

disappear in the future," Fonts-Masvidal said.

Prevention

Plenty of resources are available for suicidal teenagers. It is only a matter of identifying those teenagers who often hide their feeling out of shame.

A good example of a suicide prevention program can be found right in the Miami-Dade Public School system. There are certain steps that counselors follow once they identify a student who may be suicidal. Matts used to be heavily involved in counseling troubled students.

"After hearing a child make any sort of suicidal ideation, counselors are supposed to immediately inform Miami-Dade's crisis intervention team. Then HRS will often get involved," Matts said.

Some teens opt to see a psychologist or psychiatrist. Effectiveness of the type of therapy varies from case to case. The Gables grad still visits a psychiatrist and a psychologist since her suicidal episode. She also went to Charter, which is a home for emotionally disturbed people, where she stayed for two weeks. In the end, it was determined that her depression was caused by a chemical imbalance. She was put on medication and continued in therapy.

Getting to the heart of why a teen is considering suicide may lead to the solution. "For me," the 18 year-old said, "suicide was a cry for help."