

With Suicide the 3rd Leading Cause of Death Among Youth, Know the Signs of Danger

Public Education Efforts, Free Resources Available

NEW YORK & 65 CENTERS NATIONWIDE -- Suicide is the 11th leading cause of death among adults, but it ranks a horrifying third among the country's young people. Make sure you know the warning signs, life-saving tips, and free local resources that could make a difference for a child you know.

“From abuse and neglect, to bullying, eating disorders, peer pressure – even fears of war and terrorism – the strain on kids today is unprecedented and sometimes it may become too much to bear,” says Dr. Herb Mandell, medical director for the 125-year-old national children's crisis charity KidsPeace. “When this happens, kids begin to seek some form of escape from their woes and in the most severe cases, when there does not appear to be an alternative, children may even turn to suicide to free themselves from the pain, grief, dread, or despair they are suffering.”

Why Would A Child Take Her Life?

There are a number of reasons why children, like adults, may find themselves thinking the unthinkable. At the core of all motivating factors lies a desperate need to cope with a situation that may seem beyond remedy. The most important reasons include:

- **Ending an unresolved conflict**
- **Ending suffering of acute or prolonged pain** (emotional or physical)
- **Escape from an unbearable situation**
- **Grief and loss**
- **Desire to join a deceased loved one**
- **Means of self-punishment**
- **Anger at others**
- **Act of defiance, punishment of survivors, or revenge**
- **Means of gaining status or “fame”**
- **Copycat intent – following a school suicide, the chance of a second one increases by 300%**

Spotting the Warning Signs

“There are a number of risk factors, signs and symptoms that might provide hints or clues that a child is contemplating or planning to attempt suicide,” says Jodi Campbell of the KidsPeace Institute, which provides educational training to childcare workers. The most important signals to look out for are:

- Prior history of attempted suicide or suicide by someone close to the child
- Writings about suicide (poems, stories, etc.)
- Indirect threats (“I wish I was dead.”) or direct threats (“I’m going to kill myself.”)
- Preoccupation with death including:
 - Talking about death or compulsively thinking about and longing for a dead person
 - Sudden, intense interest in religion and afterlife
 - Making final arrangements (writing a will, talking about their funeral, etc.)
 - Giving away prized possessions
 - Creating artwork or writing or listening to music about death/dying
 - Visible changes in behavior, physical condition, thoughts, or feelings such as withdrawal, isolation, or loss of interest in social interaction
- Diminished involvement in usual interests, activities, or hobbies
- Increased risk-taking behaviors, recklessness, or aggressiveness
- Decreased academic performance
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Crying easily
- Abrupt changes in appearance
- Recent weight or appetite change
- Change in sleep patterns
- Exhaustion, extreme drowsiness
- Inability to concentrate or think rationally
- Exaggerated fears, extreme anxiety, or depression
- Low self-esteem
- Hopelessness or helplessness
- Increased irritability or anger, mood swings or withdrawal from communication
- Stress from difficult situations including the inability to cope with loss (such as divorce, breaking with a boy/girlfriend, loss of a job or status, death of a loved one)
- Feelings of worthlessness
- A victim mentality caused by physical, sexual or emotional abuse

Suicide More Common Among Young People

Learning these facts are increasingly important. Not only is suicide the third leading cause of death among young people 15 to 24 years of age, but from 1980-1996 the rate of suicide among 10 to 14-year-olds increased by 100 percent. Since 1950, the suicide rate for white females ages 15-24 has doubled, and for white males ages it has tripled.

Information & Resources

A variety of free informational efforts and resources exist to help both parents and children. Here are just a few:

- www.kidspeace.org offers a free, downloadable suicide information and prevention brochure, along with many other prevention materials to help lessen the stresses on today's kids
- www.TeenCentral.net is a free, safe, and anonymous problem-solving resource where older kids and teens can go to find hope, encouragement, and clinically screened advice to defuse crises in their young lives before they become overwhelming

KidsPeace is a 125-year-old national children's charity dedicated to helping America's kids avoid and overcome the kinds of crises that can strike any child – from traumas to neglect, depression, and the stresses of modern life. Founded in 1882 in Bethlehem, Pa., KidsPeace helps thousands of children a day at 65 centers nationally and millions more through public education and outreach with the support of its National Spokesperson Leeza Gibbons, Harvard's Dr. Alvin Poussaint, RETRO BILL, and other notables. KidsPeace was called "the outstanding organization" of its kind by the American Association of Psychiatric Services for Children and "a prototype of what we need for all children everywhere" by family expert Dr. Lee Salk. For more information, go to www.kidspeace.org.

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