

## **Signs of Suicide**, an article by Dr. Allan Gold

When a teenager suddenly and unexpectedly commits suicide a whole community is affected. When this happens in a small town, like Tiburon, shock and grief are shared by peers, families, and adults (teachers, church members, sports coaches, etc.) who knew the student. After the initial shock passes, everyone asks questions like:

Why did s/he do it?

What signs did we miss?

Did anyone know s/he was thinking about this?

What could we have done to prevent this?

Is there something we did wrong?

Fortunately, or unfortunately, we know a lot about the risk factors for teen suicide; we know what the warning signs are, and we know that there are things that parents, friends, and other adults can do.

### **Risk Factors:**

Growing up is not easy for kids these days. The difficult decisions that they face and the conflicting messages from peers, families, teachers, and the media at times seem overwhelming. Common situations that might cause some kids to think about suicide are rejection by friends and cyberbullying, breaking up with a boy or girl friend, failing in school, intense family problems, abuse, significant traumatic events, fear of or actual rejection and harassment because of different sexual orientation or gender identity.

Any previous bouts of depression, substance abuse, family stress, presence of a firearm in the house, and situational crises, such as a death of a loved one, abuse, or family violence are all factors that increase the probability of suicide occurring.

### **Warning Signs:**

Most kids will not seek help, but they do show warning signs that indicate that they may be considering suicide. These may include:

Direct and indirect suicide statements (“I want to die,” “I am going to kill myself,” “The world would be better off without me,” “Nobody will miss me anyway.”)

Suicide notes

Prior attempts or threats of suicide

Depression: strong thoughts of helplessness and hopelessness, pessimistic views of the future

Masked depression: acts of aggression, substance abuse, gunplay – indicating lack of concern for their own safety

Making final arrangements – preparing a “will,” saying goodbye, giving away prized possessions (jewelry, clothes, journals, pictures)

Preoccupation with death: in drawings, class or homework, journals  
Changes in behavior, appearance, thoughts, feelings: inability to sleep, sleeping all the time, sudden weight gain or loss, disinterest in hygiene, withdrawing from or avoiding friends, skipping school, discontinuing involvement in once important activities

A lifting of mood, where the person unexplainably seems happier after a long period of being down - indicating that a decision has been made to commit suicide.

Plan, method, access: increased interest in guns, weapons, pills, hints at plans. The greater the planning, the more likely the suicide attempt will occur.

What Parents and Friends can do:

When a teen gives any of the above signs that he or she may be considering suicide, do the following:

Remain calm

Ask the young person directly if s/he is considering suicide

Focus on their wellbeing and don't be accusatory

Listen

Reassure them that help is available and they won't feel that way forever

Provide constant supervision; don't leave the person alone

Remove means for self-harm

Get help: peers should not keep this information secret – they should tell a parent, teacher, counselor, school psychologist. Parents need to seek help from a public (Community Mental Health, Suicide Prevention, Marin General Hospital Crisis unit) or private psychologist or psychiatrist as soon as possible.

For peers especially:

Know the warning signs

Listen to your friends' feelings, but don't expect to be able to prevent them from hurting themselves all by yourself; you need to get adult help

Never make a deal to keep a friend's suicidal thoughts secret – you have to tell to save your friend's life!

Talk to a trusted adult and don't wait; that is the best thing that you can do. Adults will take you seriously; even if you are not sure your friend is suicidal, it's better to be safe.

Some Preventive Factors:

While it is impossible to shield any child from the stresses and disappointments of life, families, schools, and social groups (religious groups, sports teams, extracurricular activities) can foster the development of resiliency. With resilience young people will be less likely to be overwhelmed by the situations and risk factors that lead to suicide.

These protective factors include:

Good family communication, support and cohesion

Peer support and close social networks  
School and community connectedness  
Cultural and religious beliefs that discourage suicide  
Good problem solving and conflict resolution skills  
A sense of purpose in life, good self-esteem, and satisfaction with life  
Easy access to mental health resources

The tragedy of teen suicide is profound. As a community we must all be responsible for keeping our eyes and ears and hearts open to the pain that our young people sometimes feel and communicate, even if they are not telling us directly. The best lesson that we can learn from a tragedy like this is how to keep it from happening again.