

Teen Depression and Suicide

Staff contributions

Dark shadows of loneliness...

Pits of despair

Bottomless. Alone and silent

These lines were written by an RMSH student who has attempted suicide. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among people ages 15 to 24. Most people don't like to talk about it but suicide is a terrifyingly real problem.

A person who tries to kill himself is usually depressed. The longer the period of depression, the harder it is to recover. Depressed people have often gone through extreme life changes. There are 30 to 50 times as many attempted suicides as completed suicides. Any attempt, however, is a cry for help.

Depression gets to the point of suicide when victims feel their family and friends don't understand them. They hide their feelings. Some parents view depressive episodes as normal teen mood swings. Anyone can become depressed and suicidal. Depression is not confined to any specific gender, age, race, social status, income level, or ethnic background. There are many gender-specific situations. Four times as many males complete suicide than females, but females attempt suicide twice as often as males. Males tend to use more violent methods while females primarily favor drug overdose.

Substance abuse and mental disorders are also a problem for depressed teenagers. Almost all suicide victims have at least one mental or substance abuse disorder, and over half have more than one disorder. Suicide risk and depression may not entirely form on its own. There may be a biological cause, like an imbalance of certain chemicals in the brain.

Sometimes, other people are at risk in a community where a suicide has occurred. Biological relatives are at risk when a family member commits suicide. Teenages in a community or school where a suicide has occurred often attempt and sometimes succeed at killing

themselves. This is called a suicide cluster.

The symptoms of a depressed and suicidal person include changes in sleeping and eating patterns. Weight gains and losses are common. Depressed people tend to withdraw from friends and family. They lose interest in hobbies and have trouble concentrating in school. Mood swings are present. Feelings of guilt and hopelessness lead to feelings that life is no longer worth living. Talking about suicide and giving away treasured possessions are other symptoms.

If you should notice any of these symptoms and think someone may be suicidal, talk to the person and listen to everything they have to say. Don't let them feel like they are alone or worthless. Reassure them that they are suffering from depression, which is medically treatable. Other teens should NEVER deal with a friend's suicide threats alone. Bring trusted adults into the situation to help. Don't leave a potential victim alone if you have a gut feeling that he or she will try to commit suicide. Keep firearms and other weapons, and medication, away from the victim until the crisis has passed. Don't be afraid to talk with them about their experience. Bringing up the subject of suicide does not give teens ideas, but instead opens the lines of communication so that it may be discussed.

Suicide and depression affects everyone in a family or community. Families should consider family counseling if any member is depressed and has attempted suicide. Support groups offer a place to share fears, concerns, and hopes with people going through the same thing. Although counseling is expensive, it's possible to find mental health care organizations that use sliding scales, which only ask for as much money as you can pay. Free counseling centers are also an option. If you or someone you know is depressed or may be suicidal, seek help immediately. Waiting can mean losing a friend, family member, or even your

own life. The counselors at RMSH are willing to talk to anyone in trouble. If you don't feel comfortable talking to a friend, family member, or school counselor, then call one of the toll-free hotlines we have available, such as 1-800-SUICIDE.

The following stories are about RMSH students. To ensure their privacy, names have been changed.

Julie's Story

Depression can begin very early in life. Julie's depression began in third grade. Her parents quit talking. She began to go through puberty and gained weight. She had few friends and disliked her mother. She began cutting herself. In ninth grade, she took two bottles of aspirin. Her parents ignored the situation, refusing to get her the psychiatric help she needed. Then, two weeks after her first attempt, Julie turned to stronger drugs. "I snorted enough cocaine to kill a 400-pound man," says Julie. Finally, she was sent to a psychiatric facility for three months. Today, Julie is better. She has been off her antidepressants for almost two years. Julie wants to help others in her situation. "There is a way out, and suicide is not the best way. Everyone has thoughts of killing themselves when you get in a rut, but admitting you have a problem is the first step to correcting it."

Hannah's Disaster

Hannah's problems, like Julie's, began in childhood. Her parents split up. When her mother began dating again, her boyfriend was emotionally abusive to Hannah. He was controlling about her diet as well, and her mother began to sneak Hannah food to her room. Hannah's father never came to visit her, and her favorite uncle died from cancer. Her brother and children at school would tease her about her weight. Hannah's self-esteem sank lower and lower, and she began to feel worthless. In high school, her peers still made fun of her, and she stopped going to school. Hannah ran away to try to avoid her problem, but her mother

found her. Eventually the police got involved. They took Hannah to the hospital, where she felt she was being treated unsympathetically. While at the hospital, she decided she didn't want to go home, and took a whole bottle of pills. She immediately regretted taking the pills, and told someone what she had done. Her stomach was pumped and she became a ward of the state. She was taken to a new hospital and began the treatment she needed. She wants to talk about her experience to help others. Hannah says, "Suicide is not the easy way out. It hurts you and your family more."

A Family's Nightmare

Kevin and his wife were surprised when their 14 year old daughter, Kylie, tried to kill herself. From all appearances she was a popular, vivacious normal teenager. The phone was always ringing. She was always talking to her friends, chatting with them on the Internet or spending time with them. Looking back at the time leading up to her attempt, Kevin says the signs just weren't there.

Following her attempt, Kylie suffered from misdiagnosis and the abandonment of friends. Now, however, she has the proper medication and is attending a new school where she is doing well. Kevin says his wish is that "young people will reach out to people like Kylie. They need someone to be there for them. Remember true friendships are measured when the ocean gets rough,"

Julie, Hannah and Kylie have made it through their hard times with help from family, friends and most importantly, professional help. Too many teens are depressed and suicidal. If you know someone, convince them to talk to a trusted adult. Even if they ask you to keep their secret, it is important for an adult to know what is going on. Suicide is not the answer to depression. The first step towards getting better is admitting there is a problem. Getting help means living.

Compiled By Elizabeth Massingill