



TEEN SUICIDE:

What Parents Need to Know



The world was shocked when famous actor Robin Williams committed suicide. Although there were reports that he had been battling depression for quite some time, on our side of the camera we usually saw him as someone who was funny and made us smile. We need to understand that even when others are putting a smile on our face, they still might be suffering on the inside. Often times, we don't know who is depressed—and especially depressed to the point that they are contemplating suicide—but in today's world it's important to try and tune into the signs.

It's not just some celebrities who take their own lives and leave people behind who are shocked, hurt, and left to wonder what could have been done to prevent it. There are parents around the country who are fac-

ing the same issue when their teenager has committed suicide. One quick search of the online news brings up a list of shocking stories about teens who have committed suicide, especially those whose suicide was attributed to bullying. There are many news stories involving teens ranging from 13-18 who have taken their own lives.

It's important for parents, educators, and community leaders to be aware of how serious the issue of suicide has become in America. It is equally important for people to understand the problem and what leads to it, the signs and symptoms to watch for, and what to do to help prevent it. Only when armed with this knowledge can people try and help our teens around the nation to find a better route to take when they feel they can take no more.

The Sad Facts

The hard facts about teen suicide are both alarming and eye-opening. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), suicide is the second leading cause of death among people ages 10-19, coming in only behind unintentional accidents. During 2014 alone, there were roughly 6,000 suicides of people between the ages of 10-24. Of that number, 425 of them were kids who were only between the ages of 10-14.

It doesn't stop with that eye-opening fact, either; there is much more to this picture. In the July 2016 issue of the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, researchers report that one in every seven youths in the U.S. has seriously considered or made a plan to commit suicide, and one in every thirteen youths has attempted suicide during the previous year. To put that into perspective, let's consider a child's typical classroom that may have 22 students in it. Looking around that classroom, there's likely to be at least three students who have seriously considered committing suicide, and at least one who has attempted it.

The journal went on to report that suicide represents a—if not *the*—major public health problem in adolescents. While many parents may not be aware of what is going in this regard, whether with their own child or with the country's youth as a whole, teen suicide is a major issue that is beginning to get some serious attention.

The CDC reports that more young people survive suicide attempts than actually die. Many parents, teach-

The Bullying-Suicide Connection

- Youth who report that they frequently bully others and youth who report being frequently bullied are both at increased risk for suicide-related behavior.
- Youth who report both bullying others and being bullied (bully-victims) have the highest risk for suicide related behavior of any groups that report involvement in bullying.
- We know that bullying behavior and suicide-related behavior are closely related.

Source: Centers for Disease Control & Prevention

ers, and people in the community may not even be aware that their child has contemplated or attempted suicide.

While teen suicide affects everyone, there are some groups more at risk for it than others. Girls are more likely to attempt suicide, but boys are more likely to succeed at doing it. Research shows that 81 percent of all teen suicides are males.

Another alarming statistic that is important for parents to be aware of is that each year, there are roughly 157,000 youth between the ages of 10-24 who are treated at emergency room departments around the U.S for self-inflicted injuries.



Risk Factors

Numerous risk factors are important to consider when discussing teen suicide. Some of the things that put a teen at higher risk for suicide include:

- Having attempted suicide before
- Having a family history of suicide
- Having mental illness or being depressed
- Being involved with drug or alcohol abuse
- Having a stressful life or experiencing significant loss
- Having easy access to lethal medications and unlocked firearms
- Being a victim of bullying
- Being exposed to the suicide of a friend or family member

The National Institutes of Health (NIH), reports that one in every five teenagers have depression at some point. Depression is more than a teen being sad or down once in a while. Parents need to become concerned

when those down and sad feelings are hanging around for two weeks or longer; it may be a sign that they have depression. Teens who are depressed may be irritable, sensitive to criticism, withdraw from people and activities, feel tired a lot or try to sleep more, complain of body pains and aches, and seem sad most of the time. Teen girls are twice as likely as teen boys to have depression.

Anyone who has been watching the news is becoming aware of the strong connection between bullying and suicide. Kids who are bullied are at a much greater risk for considering suicide than those who are not bullied, whether in person or through cyberbullying. A study in the journal *Adolescent Health, Medicine, and Therapeutics*, reported that cyberbullying has become an international public health concern among adolescents and that cyberbullying poses a threat to adolescents' health and well-being. Further, they report that adolescents who are the victims of cyberbullying report having an increase in depression, anxiety, loneliness, and suicidal behavior.

What to Look For

It's important that parents and educators know the seriousness of teen suicide, but they also need to know what to look for and how to help. Just knowing the facts isn't enough. There are no absolute ways to help prevent suicide, just as there is not one single sign to look for to help identify a teen who may be contemplating it. But there are signs and symptoms that may help parents and teachers identify those teens who may be struggling and considering taking their own life.

Here are some of the more common signs and symptoms parents and teachers should keep an eye out for:

- **Depression.** Teens who are depressed may become withdrawn, irritable, sleep more than usual, may not enjoy things they used to, and may seem sad most of the time.
- **Discussing suicide.** Be aware if a teen is talking about suicide or making statements about not being around. They may also talk about how they are a bad person or give verbal hints, such as saying that nothing matters anymore.
- **Self-medicating.** Teens who try to mask their feelings may turn to drugs and alcohol or engage in risky behaviors.
- **Changes in routine.** Notice if they have made changes in their routine, such as with their social life, sleep patterns, and eating.
- **Giving it away.** Suddenly giving away their things is a red flag, especially if the teen has other signs of depression.
- **Self-harm.** Teens who contemplate suicide often harm themselves in other ways or attempt to harm themselves while parents are unaware of the source of their hurt and pain.

■ **Bullying.** A teen who is being bullied is at a much higher risk for suicidal thoughts. Parents who have a child being bullied need to be diligent in finding a solution to bring the bullying to an end.

■ **Cheerful.** While we want our teens be happy, if a teen has been depressed and suddenly becomes cheerful, it could be a suicidal warning sign. They may suddenly feel happy because they have made their suicide decision and plans, which has given them a sense of relief.

Parents and teachers often see these issues in teens who may be having a difficult time, but they may not always realize that the signs could mean the teen is at a higher risk for suicide. Things like depression and suicidal statements should be taken especially seriously, and every effort needs to be made to get the child help. Some parents fear asking their teen if they may be thinking about hurting themselves out of fear of putting the thought into their head or making them feel uncomfortable. However, it's a discussion that parents should always have if they feel there are signs that point to their child being depressed or suicidal.

It's always better to discuss the situation, ask the questions, and gather as much information as possible rather than do nothing and simply hope for the best. Teens often know they need the help, but are not sure how to ask for it or don't want to burden, embarrass, or upset their parent by asking for it.



What Can Be Done

With the issue of teen suicide becoming more widespread, there are more entities becoming involved in finding a preventative solution. Pediatricians are taking notice so they can start looking for the signs, as are school counselors and teachers. Those who work around teens or see them on a regular basis can play an important role in reducing teen suicide rates.

There is no absolute way to prevent a teen who is on a mission to commit suicide. But there are things that people can do to try and help them and reduce the chances of them being successful at their mission. Here are some of the ways parents and those who are around teens can help:

- **Get the teen help.** If they appear depressed, are trying to harm themselves, or they are talking about suicide, it's important to get them professional help. Contact a psychologist or psychiatrist and get them in for an appointment as soon as possible.
- **Evaluate emergencies.** If the problem with the teen seems too dire to wait for an appointment with a doctor, take them to the emergency room. They will have the ability to provide them with a psychiatric evaluation.

- **Stick to the appointment.** Keep the appointment to see the professional even if your teen says they now feel better. Suicidal thoughts often come and go, but it's still safer to have them evaluated.
- **Talk to your teen.** Communication can go a long way toward helping your teen if they are depressed, being bullied, or are considering suicide. Let them know you are there for them, you will help them however you can, and they are not alone.
- **Call for help.** If a teen appears suicidal or parents have concerns, they can get help by calling (800) SUICIDE.

Parents, educators, and those who spend time around teens should take notice of any big changes in their behavior and reach out to them. Letting them know they are not alone and that you are there to help and provide support is one of the best things a parent can do. Also, it's a good idea to not allow a teen to keep isolating themselves from others.

Healthy Minds

Today's teens are struggling with a plethora of issues that range from a high family divorce rate to serious bullying issues to physical appearance insecurities. When you add those things together, it is easy to see how some things are difficult for them to take on, understand, and work their way through. Parents play a big role in giving them the best foundation to help them every step of the way.

One of the most important things that parents can do for their teens is to help them have a healthy self-esteem. Those with low self-esteem are more susceptible to mental health disorders, being bullied, and having difficulty asserting themselves in life. Parents can help teens develop a healthy self-esteem by focusing on the good things, teaching them that mistakes are a chance to learn, helping them find the areas where they excel, and setting goals that they can achieve. They can also help them identify those things they *can* change which they are unhappy with, and give them the tools or assistance to help them change those things.

Parents can also help teens become more confident and healthy-minded by setting a good example, not putting adult problems onto them, getting them involved in exercising, spending more time out in nature, and respecting their opinions and ideas. And while no parent should shower their child with unnecessary compliments, it's a good idea for parents to give praise where it's due and find those things their teen does well and give them kudos for them.

Teen suicide, like suicide at any age, is a serious issue. People may be laughing on the outside, like with Robin Williams, while crying on the inside. The more we are aware of the situation, the more we can help parents, schools, and those in the community work together to help reduce the risks and numbers associated with it.

Have Suicide Questions or Need Help?

Text trained suicide crisis counselors, 24/7:

Text **"GO"** to **741741**
or call **(800) SUICIDE**



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