



Parents Make A Difference!

Teens and Suicide

August/September 2004

The teenage years are turbulent. As adults we sometimes forget how difficult it can be for teens to deal with the physical and mental changes, new relationships and the decisions about the future that are a part of the teen years.

The changes and challenges that are part of adolescence can lead to depression, self-medication through drugs and alcohol, expressions of rage and frustration through violent acts and too often opting out through suicide.

Teens and Suicide

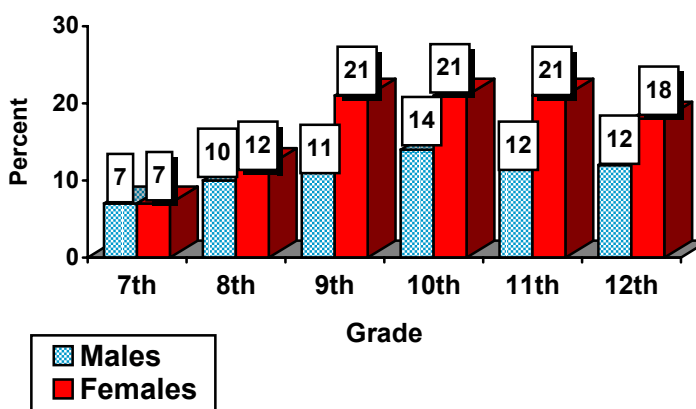
Suicide is the third most common cause of death for youth ages 15-24 and has become more common among youth ages 10-14 over the last two decades. Research from the recent Southwest Wisconsin Youth Survey (SWYS) of 5704 7-12th graders shows that teens in southwest Wisconsin are thinking about, planning and attempting suicide at rates that raise concerns.

SWYS found that when teens were asked, “during the **past month** have you **thought** about **killing yourself?**” one in five (20%) students said they had thought about it at least once. Most of the students who thought about suicide did not talk with anyone about it and those that did, talked with a friend.

Fourteen percent of teens that participated in SWYS said they had made a plan to kill themselves at some point in their

lives. As the graph below shows, girls are more likely to report making a suicide plan and the likelihood of making a plan to kill themselves is highest in grades 9-11. Fewer boys report making a plan to kill themselves, but the likelihood of making a suicide plan increases in the high school years for males.

Teens who report, “making a plan” to kill themselves at some point:



Finally, SWYS found that more than one in ten (11%) high school teens reported that they had actually tried to kill them self at some point in their lives. This number is especially troubling, but experts estimate that for every completed youth suicide, there are 50-200 attempts. As the graph below shows, the findings in SWYS regarding teen suicide attempts is consistent with state and national data.

Local, State and National Suicide Attempts by Teens

	TEENS ATTEMPTING SUICIDE	Source Of Data, Explanation
National	8.8%	2003 YRBS* – Teens grade 9-12 who report attempting suicide <u>in the past 12 months.</u>
State	8.6%	2003 YRBS* – Teens grade 9-12 who report attempting suicide <u>in the past 12 months.</u>
Local	11.0%	2001 SWYS – Teens grades 7-12 who report attempting suicide <u>at some point in their lives.</u>

* The YRBS (Youth Risk Behavior Survey) is conducted nationally and in Wisconsin. It is funded by the Centers For Disease Control and Prevention.

PARENTS MAKE A DIFFERENCE!!!

Mental health experts agree that suicide is preventable and that parents can make a difference if they learn the warning signs and take prompt action if they suspect their child may be thinking about suicide (see the next page). Most suicidal individuals give definite warning signs. Knowing what they are and how to respond is critical to preventing suicide. Talking

about suicide does not cause someone to be suicidal or put thoughts in their head. To the contrary, talking about suicide can convey that you are hearing your teen's concerns and understand the depth of their feelings.

For parents it is important to know that most teen suicides occur in the afternoon or early evening and in the teen's home. Research has shown that the access to and the availability of firearms is a significant factor in the increase of youth suicide. In fact, homes with a firearm are five times more likely to experience a suicide than homes without a firearm.

Teens who face problems that are out of their control, such as divorce, alcoholism in the family or exposure to domestic violence, are at increased risk for suicide. Teens who have poor relationships with their parents, who lack a support network and teens that are socially devalued by peers are at increased risk for suicide. A family history of suicide or depression increases a teen's risk for suicide, as does a history of physical, sexual or emotional abuse.

A strong support network can help decrease the risk. All teens need someone to talk to so they can share the possibilities, pressures, confusion, anxiety, and pitfalls that are a part of normal adolescence. If you are concerned that your teen is not talking to you, find someone else they can confide in.

KNOW THE SUICIDE WARNING SIGNS

Your Teens May Be Suicidal If They:

- Talk about suicide, death and/or indicate that there is no reason to live
- Are preoccupied with death and dying
- Have suffered a recent severe loss (death of family/friends or romantic relationship troubles)
- Have changed their eating and sleeping habits
- Are withdrawn from friends, family and regular activities
- Give away prized possessions
- Have had previous suicide attempts
- Exhibit violent action, rebellious behavior, running away
- Are using or abusing drugs and alcohol
- Have difficulty dealing with their sexual identity
- Unusually neglectful of personal appearance
- Have a marked personality change
- Express a sense of hopelessness
- Frequently complain about physical symptoms, often related to emotions, such as stomachaches, headaches, fatigue, etc.
- Do not tolerate praise or rewards

Be suspicious if a teen that has been very depressed is suddenly extremely cheerful or hopeful. This intense swing of moods might indicate that the person believes that suicide is the solution to their problems and is planning their suicide.

RESOURCES FOR PARENTS

National Suicide Hotline
1-800-SUICIDE
1-800-784-2433

www.hopeline.com

Local Law Enforcement

School Guidance Counselor

Healthcare Provider

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO TO HELP A DEPRESSED/SUICIDAL TEEN

- ❖ **Keep the lines of communication open.** Listen carefully and don't dismiss their problems or get angry.
- ❖ **Don't be afraid to use the word "suicide".** It may help reassure your teen that you have heard their cries for help.
- ❖ **Reassure them that you love them** and that no matter how bad their problems are, they can be worked out.
- ❖ **Seek outside help** and share your concerns about suicide openly with the professional.
- ❖ **Watch them carefully.**
- ❖ **Remove all weapons from your home.** This includes guns, pills, kitchen utensils, rope and other devices that can serve as a weapon.

"Parents Make a Difference" is a product of the Southwest Wisconsin Youth Survey (SWYS), a program of the University of Wisconsin-Extension, local school districts and UW-Platteville. This series is adapted from the UW-Extension "*Whose Kids?...Our Kids!*" series. This issue was written by Tom Schmitz, UW-Extension Grant and Lafayette County and edited by Deb Ivey, Ruth Schriefer and Sarah Weier UW-Extension Iowa County and Bev Doll, UW-Extension Grant County. Thanks are extended to the 5,704 7th to 12th graders from southwest Wisconsin who participated in the 2001 SWYS survey. Contact UW-Extension for further information, or by phone: Grant County (608) 723-2125; Lafayette County (608) 776-4820; and Iowa County (608) 935-0391 or on the web at <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cty/grant/tap/parentresources.html>. References for this edition of "Parents Make A Difference" include: The American Association of Suicidology, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Psychiatric Association, National Mental Health Association, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.