



Teen suicide: Can you see it coming?

The call comes. 'He's gone.' You realise who they are talking about, and he's just too young to have died in any other way but tragically....it was suicide. You can't believe it. Nobody saw it coming...

“We cannot measure the value of life cut short by suicide. We cannot calculate the impact a person might have had on the world around them or on the people whose lives they may have touched. But through a partnership between survivors, business and community leaders, scientists and dedicated individuals we can banish this needless tragedy.”

These are the words of Dr Shabeer Jeeva, specialist psychiatrist, who cites the World Health Organization's statistic that a suicide occurs every 40 seconds globally and an attempt is made every three seconds. “In South Africa the average suicide rate is 17.2 per 100 000, which translates to 8% of all

deaths. The suicide rate for children aged 10-14 years old has more than doubled over the last fifteen years. These stats relate only to deaths reported by academic hospitals - the real figure is higher.”

In September 2011, the Eastern Cape Education Department's biannual Learner Mortality Report brought to light an alarming fact about the province's school children, reporting that on average, 16 school children committed suicide in the Eastern Cape every month in the first half of this year. A shocking 109 pupils apparently took their own lives during 2010. By June of 2011, 96 pupils had killed themselves. And that, sadly, is just in the Eastern Cape!

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According to Dr Jeeva, risk factors for suicide among the young include the presence of mental illness - especially depression, conduct disorder, alcohol and drug abuse, previous suicide attempts, and the availability of firearms in the home. "In South Africa," he says, "some 60% of people who commit suicide are depressed," adding that the most frequently employed methods of suicide in this country is hanging, followed by shooting, gassing and burning.

What are the signs parents should look for?

While almost everyone who has a suicide in their family will be stunned - most suggesting they 'never saw it coming' - there are some signs medical practitioners warn parents and friends to look out for. Dr Jeeva explains that it can be hard to remember how it felt to be a teen, caught in that grey area between childhood and adulthood. "Sure, it's a time of tremendous possibility but it can also be a period of great confusion and anxiety. There's pressure to fit in socially, to perform academically and to act responsibly. There's the awakening of sexual feelings, a growing self-identity and a need for autonomy that often conflicts with the rules and expectations set by others."

Importantly, Dr Jeeva reiterates that untreated depression is the number one cause for suicide and knowing the symptoms of depression can help parents to take action.

WARNING SIGNS:

- » Persistent sad, anxious, or 'empty' mood
- » Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities that were once enjoyed, including sex
- » Feelings of hopelessness and pessimism
- » Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness and self-reproach
- » Insomnia, early-morning awakening or oversleeping
- » Appetite and/or weight loss or overeating and weight gain
- » Decreased energy, fatigue and feeling run down
- » Increased use of alcohol and drugs - may be associated but not a criteria for diagnosis
- » Thoughts of death or suicide and suicide attempts
- » Restlessness, irritability, hostility
- » Difficulty concentrating, remembering, making decisions
- » Persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment, such as headache, digestive disorders and chronic pain
- » Deterioration of social relationships.

Who is at risk?

"A teen with an adequate support network of friends, family, religious affiliations, peer groups or extracurricular activities may have an outlet to deal with everyday frustrations. However, many teens don't believe they have that, and feel disconnected and isolated from family and friends. These teens are at increased risk of suicide," Dr Jeeva asserts, warning that the factors that increase suicide risk among teens include:

- » A psychological disorder, especially depression, bipolar disorder and alcohol and drug use. In fact, approximately 95% of people who die by committing suicide have a psychological disorder at the time of death
- » Feelings of distress, irritability or agitation
- » Feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness that often accompany depression (a teen, for example, who experiences repeated failures at school, who is overwhelmed by violence at home, or who is isolated from peers is likely to experience such feelings)

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