

What parents need to know about teen suicide

Presenter – Aimee Prange, Clinical Social Worker

Hello, and thank you for joining. My name is Aimee Prange. I'm a licensed clinical social worker with more than 20 years of experience in the clinical field. And my areas of expertise are mental health conditions and suicide prevention and intervention.

In this session, we will discuss

Today, we'll be talking about what parents need to know about teen suicide. As a parent of two teenage boys myself, I know this is a very difficult topic but also a really important topic to talk about. So I'm glad that you've joined to listen today and I hope that you find this information valuable.

And as we go through, we'll talk about some of the misconceptions and misunderstandings about teen suicide and clarify some of those misunderstandings for you and give you some information that will help you have more meaningful conversations with your teens and know what to look for when you might be concerned that your child could potentially be at risk.

So, sit back and I hope again that this is valuable both for you.

What do you think?

So, let's take a little pulse on what your current level of understanding is when it comes to suicide. So, if you happen to have a piece of scrap paper handy, I'm going to read you some statements and just jot down whether you think that each statement is true or false. And then as we go through the presentation, we'll clarify each of these for you so that you can have a good understanding of where you fell in terms of thinking whether they were true or false.

So let's begin. Suicide is the eighth leading cause of death for teens ages 12 to 24, true or false? Teens that make threats about suicide are typically attention seeking, true or false? Talking about suicide or asking about suicidal intentions will encourage a young person to make an attempt, true or false? All people who are suicidal have a diagnosis of depression, true or false? Teens that think about suicide are just overly dramatic, true or false?

Once a person wants to die by suicide, there's generally nothing you can do about it, true or false? Young people often tell others especially their peers about their suicidal intentions, true or false? So how do you think you did?

I'll fill you in on a little tip. Most of these, if not all of them were false but we'll go through this presentation and make sure that you have clarity on what the right answers are.

The truth

So, let's start with some truth. Here are some of the statistics suicide is the second leading cause of death for young people between the ages of 10 and 34. And that's according to the Centers for Disease Control and suicide is also the second leading cause of death for college age youth, between the ages of 12 and 18. More teenagers and young adults die from suicide than from cancer, heart disease, AIDS birth defects, stroke, pneumonia, influenza and chronic lung disease combined.

So it's a big deal. It's something that we need to pay attention to. So, every two years there is a survey conducted by the CDC or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. And it includes a national, state and local school-based representative sample of 9th through 12th grade students. And really the purpose of the survey it's to monitor priority health risk behaviors that continue to be leading causes of death and disability and social problems among our youth in the US, and so suicide is included in that survey.

And so when students were asked a series of questions, the results were really striking. So some of those questions revealed that one in five, 9th through 12th graders who were about almost 19%, seriously considered attempting suicide in that previous year. One in six, or about 15.5% seriously made a plan and about how they would go about attempting suicide. And one in 11 or nearly 9% made an attempt.

So what's really interesting about some of these numbers is that if we also added in individuals in grades seven and eight, these numbers not only would be much higher but also these don't necessarily include individuals that required medical attention, or these are our kids that we may or may not have known about. So depending on whether the suicide attempt resulted in an injury that needed attention by a doctor or a nurse, kids often don't tell anyone.

So the fact that they revealed this on a survey anonymously is pretty interesting and it leaves us to wonder, how do we know, was that my child? Four out of five teens who made suicide attempts gave warnings. The question is, were those warnings geared toward us as parents? Kids are often very selective about who those warning signs are targeted to and otherwise they're relatively secretive.

So, whether or not we were privy to that is a mystery. When individuals give warning signs, they don't often come with banners and flags and flashing lights.

So we will talk a bit about today about what are the warning signs, what are the things that we can look for to create greater awareness in the event that this might be one of our children.

Could it be my teen?

And as I said, could this be your child? Could it be my child? That's the question? And so, here's the thing, suicide doesn't typically have a sudden onset. There are a number of different factors and stressors that contribute to a young person feeling anxious or unhappy that may increase the possibility of a suicide attempt. So we need to kind of think about these different factors and it's a culmination of many factors that may place our child at greater risk.

And remember, risk does not equate to actuality. When you think about like your risk for heart disease or colon cancer or anything else, risk factors are just that, they make you more likely, but they don't tell us that you will absolutely have that heart attack or end up with that diagnosis. And we often are trying to tease out many things of like, are what I'm seeing factors of typical adolescents or is this something else? There's also factors that tell us that boys or girls may be at higher risk. We know that boys died by suicide three times at greater numbers than girls.

Although girls attempt suicide double the amount of boys. It doesn't mean that girls are any less serious. What it tells us is that boys are choosing more lethal means there are cultural considerations to take into account. We also need to think about social factors, is your child, do they make friends easily? Do they tend to isolate? Are they alone? Like how do they relate to their same age peers?

Then we have to factor in LGBTQ indicators and issues that, again, that's a complexity in and of itself. We also, individuals that tend to have perfectionistic personalities and high attention to detail tend to be at greater risk. They're putting a lot of pressure on themselves and holding themselves to greater standards than they might experience from others. Self-esteem, self-worth, individuals' learning abilities and successes at school tend to also play a role.

We also know that there are other factors of when individuals are struggling with all of the things that come along with being a teenagers. Teens are engaging in self-injurious or self-mutilation, self-harm behaviors, things like headbanging or cutting, burning, biting, erasing, and the list goes on. And these are intentional infliction of harm towards oneself as a coping

mechanism for the immense pain and anguish that they're experiencing emotionally or physically.

And it's often used as a coping mechanism so that they don't become suicidal or to avoid that. However, sometimes that coping mechanism reaches its effectiveness limit. And so, the intention is not to die, but sometimes we need to make sure that A, accidents don't happen but B, that it doesn't reach a point where then they're looking for other alternatives.

So, these are just a sampling of things to think about when we're looking at our children and the many different stressors they're faced. I don't know about you but I don't think I would want to go back to being a teenager today. They have a lot to navigate. The good news is, is that children and teens today are incredibly resilient but they have a lot to get through. It's not easy, if we thought we had it hard, it's even more difficult today.

Suicide is complex

Suicide is a really complex issue and it's never just one thing. So, when I mentioned that we can't just look at one particular factor and that it doesn't just have a sudden onset. It's generally something that is occurring over a period of time and there's many different factors. We take into account and we look at this culmination of what was their early childhood development like, did they meet their milestones on time?

Was there a history of any type of abuse, neglect, potential for molestation? What was the home environment like? Did they experience any type of significant stressors in the home? Were their basic needs being met? We're looking at things like, what was the community environment like? Were they exposed to violence? Exposed to or witnessed to individuals using drugs and or alcohol?

What's the family's health and mental health history? What was their own health and mental health history and current health and mental health experience? Children who experienced feelings of worthlessness, shame, overwhelming guilt, self-hatred tend to be at greater risk for low self-esteem, depression, lack of engagement or ability to connect with peers. There are socioeconomic factors.

And then, other stressors just, the ability to navigate everyday life in school. Dealing with bullying, cyber bullying, and so forth. My own son, my 14 year old son, who's in eighth grade ready to go to high school has a great network of friends who he's quite close with who out of the blue started kind of for no reason, cyber bullying him. And just because it was fun. And to me, my immediate thought is, well, those aren't friends, but he doesn't see it that way.

And when I read through, I monitor his phone usage, I monitor the texts. I look at everything and that I don't overdo it but I also have a fine balance, there really was no precipitant for it other than it seemed like a good idea at the time and they all jumped on the bandwagon but it impacted him significantly. My son was already an individual who lives with depression and has for several years diagnosed depression.

So, this is where the complexities come in. Those boys don't know that, but I know that, I know the impact and the toll that it took and it was a big deal. So we look at the complexity of relationships and why being a teen is so hard. Kids are fascinating.

And it's not to say that this group of kids that they're not a good group of kids, they are, but what they saw as maybe innocent joking around really wasn't, they crossed the line. And the impact that it has on my son, big deal but it's all about perception.

What should I look for?

So, what do you look for? How do you know? There are warning signs, there are things to take into consideration. Potential warning signs are when your child is starting to withdraw from family, from friends. And let's be very clear when we're teasing out, what's typical adolescents versus, what is a little bit more significant? That's a challenge.

So in adolescents, finding your identity, looking for independence, separating from family is normal but you're looking at things that stand out to you as different or atypical from who your child is overall. And so when I looked at my own son, he actually started spending more time with my husband and I, that's what stood out. And not that I was complaining at all, but for a boy that couldn't stand to be in the same room with us most days suddenly wanted to spend a lot of time with us and that made me pause and say like, what's going on, what's up? This isn't like you.

And doing it in a delicate enough way to say like, it's not that I don't want this, but I also know that you generally prefer to be doing other things than to hang out and watch TV with mom and dad. Looking for those changes in mood or behavior that are uncharacteristic, that stand out to you, that make you question, even if it's just kind of eating at the back of your mind, you can't put your finger on it.

Does your child seem anxious or sad? Is it all the time? Is it just in certain settings? Are they avoiding things? Are you noticing or hearing about a difficulty in functioning and in one or more areas? Is it school? Is it with their friends? Do they have a job? What does that look like? Are they pulling back or giving up activities, extracurriculars, things that they really like?

Whether it's quitting the school basketball team, or deciding that that job that they had to have they don't want to do that anymore. What does that look like? When my son's depression first started at the age of 11, out of the blue, he wanted to give up all of the activities that he really enjoyed.

So one day he said he wanted to quit karate. He didn't want to play soccer anymore. He wanted to quit playing the trumpet. And it really made us pause and ask like, what's going on? You love all those things. He's a very outgoing kid, pretty boisterous. And it was kind of teasing out like, do you just have too many activities? We can pair it back, but why give up everything? That was a clue. We also noticed that he didn't want to go to school. He complained of stomach aches on the regular.

And initially it was like, all right, do we need to go to the doctor, what's happening? And he fought us and it was very difficult to get him to go to school. And then I was like, I don't know that there's a stomach ache going on. Like, I'm wondering if it's something else and whatever it is, it's okay, we just can't help you if we don't understand what's happening, you need to be honest with us.

And so eventually he shared, he was scared that either we would think differently or that there would be some consequences but we needed to make it a safe place for him to let us know that there was more to that story and it wasn't a stomach ache. For some kids, there may be excessive sleeping and it's not just getting up late in the morning or staying up late, but is it that they can't sleep because they can't turn their mind off in the evening? Or is it, that they're napping all through the afternoon.

It's hard, they're missing things because they're falling asleep. What does that look like? Are they not eating? Is their appetite decreased? What's going on? Any new or increased drug or alcohol use? Decline in personal hygiene or self care.

And again, with teenagers, sometimes it's a little hard because that's questionable and that's normal but when it's kind of crossing lines and especially when it's out of the realm of what you know to be typical for your child.

Worsening signs

And then as things get worse, are you noticing things where now your child has this preoccupation with death or suicide? Either they're talking about it, they're writing about it. You notice that they're watching more YouTube videos. They're posting about suicide, listening to music that's more negative in nature.

Do they seem hopeless or worthless? What's happening there? Do they have a lack of interest in their future? No longer thinking about what they want to do as they get older,

whether college or trade or something else is in their future. Do they seem to be more secretive as opposed to just like within the realm of normal need for privacy as they get older but is it more secretive?

Giving away things that are really important to them? Risk-taking behavior without care or regard to their safety? Are they really moody and again different from just sort of teenager angst than moodiness but is it over the top?

And on the flip side, maybe for someone who had been depressed for an extended period of time is suddenly now seems at peace, calm, maybe even improve mood. This may be a young person who has made a decision, is at peace with the idea that they're going to end their life. Maybe they're now preparing to say goodbye. This should be a red flag.

If you are concerned...

So if you're concerned for any reason, you know as parents, we're kind of programmed, our radar is up. We've got to reach out but it's important to be in a good space to do that. So collect your thoughts before you reach out because emotions run high and sometimes get the best of us. If you have a partner, a spouse, someone to help support you in that conversation, bring them in, talk to your teen in a quiet private place.

And remain as calm as you can, caring, compassionate, genuine. Look, you're going to be nervous. It is not an easy conversation. And it's okay if you're cheerful, if your voice is quivering, show your emotions. You don't need to hide that or protect your children from your emotions but express your concern and let them know what you've seen. Just as I shared with my son just a week ago, I said, look, I appreciate that you want to hang out with dad at night, but I'm really concerned that something's up.

This isn't like you to not be playing video games or not be doing certain things. And it shouldn't come with judgment but it's really more with caring curiosity. And your child may not be like ready to like spill everything right away. So give them some time, be okay with some silence and let them know, reassure them that it's okay, whatever they say that you've got them. They can tell you anything.

Always ask

But trust your gut, ask openly. If you have any, even the tiniest speck of reason to believe that your child may be thinking about suicide, and even if it's not crossing your mind but you feel like you'd be better asking, ask. There is no harm in asking, but ask directly, ask with confidence and with care. Are you thinking of killing yourself? Do you want to die? Are you considering suicide? We need to ask directly because any other way our children will feel

like we don't actually want the answer or are prepared to handle the answer. But trust me, it's a relief when somebody asks them and cares enough to want the answer. So ask them, but be prepared. And if they say yes, I've thought about it. Then you have some more questions to ask. Have you thought about how you would end your life? If they say yes, then ask further, have you gone so far as to collect the things or do you have what you would need to carry that plan out? If they say yes. So, do you have a timeline in mind? Do you know when you would end your life? And if they say yes, I'm thinking about it, in the next week or so. Look, with each yes answer, the situation becomes more intense. The moment they say yes they've thought about it, we're now in crisis mode. It's just a matter of how quickly do we have to act. It's all incredibly serious. But how quickly do you need to get them to help depends on, do they have a plan? Do they have access to the things they need to carry that plan out? And if they have a timeline in the next 24 to 48 hours, we know we need to get them help, like right now, today.

If your teen is suicidal

So if your teen is suicidal, perhaps they don't have a plan, but they know that they just don't know where they fit. They feel like life isn't worth living. They feel hopeless. Please don't leave them alone. Their safety is utmost importance. Perhaps they even have thought about how they would take their life. It's about kind of identifying.

So if you've thought about it, do you have access to those things? If it's okay with you, like, I'd like to make sure you're safe. Can you give me the things you've collected? So, it's not about strong arming them, demanding, doing anything to coerce them away from the pills, the rope, the weapon, the whatever it is. It's about cooperatively having them turn that stuff over to you so that together you can keep them safe.

It's about staying calm, even though inside you're probably freaking out because it's a freak out moment, but you need to show them that you can be strong and supportive for them. And then it's about re. So you're in a lot of pain. I don't know if I totally get it, but I'm here for you and we're going to get through this together. If your child has a therapist, call the therapist, find out, can you get in today, tomorrow, it's urgent.

If your child's in imminent risk, has a plan, plans to act on it, pretty soon today, tomorrow then you go to the emergency room. You call a mobile crisis unit. You call a crisis hotline and call 911 if you must. If they are feeling hopeless, they don't have a timeline but you're concerned about their safety, you still, you call a hotline. You call mobile crisis, you get an assessment but you have a little more time on your side but don't leave them alone.

It's not helpful

It's not helpful to go into lecture mode. I'm certainly guilty of it, as parents, I don't know what we're thinking, but we do it. It's not our job, nor is it even remotely helpful for us to start to lecture our kids on why their life is worth living or you know why we need them here. It is not helpful to judge them, shame them, scold them, punish them, threaten them. It doesn't do any good.

Maybe it makes us feel better, I'm not sure that that does either. It may only make things worse. We don't want to diminish or dismiss or ignore what's going on for them. I don't know why you're so upset, your life is so good. What do you have to be in so much pain about? Look, you don't have to understand. All you have to do is validate that they are in lot of pain and that you support them, period.

We don't want them to feel like their problems are insignificant. We don't want to squash it. And we definitely do not want to tell them like, what would the family think? Don't tell anyone, how can you show your face at school again? This is not something that they keep a secret. If they need to talk to people, they talk to people.

It's up to them. You take guidance from them but you get them help, doing nothing is not an option. Even if they say, please leave me alone. I don't want to do anything, I'll be fine. Not an option.

What to say

So things to say and not to say, again, validate, you're not alone. No matter what you're feeling, this won't last forever. I'm here for you and I love you, no matter what you tell me. I can tell you're having a hard time. I don't fully understand yet, but I still love you. You're not alone. Our goal is not to minimize anything.

There is hope

It's okay for our kids to struggle. It's okay for us to struggle. Accepting help is not a weakness. And here's the thing like treatment, therapy whatever that looks like, it's not one size fits all. So if you have tried one thing, you have tried one thing. One therapist, one medication, one whatever, if it didn't work, it's not the be-all and end-all, there are many, many, many other options.

Keep talking to providers, find somebody else, keep working till you find what works. And just keep reinforcing that you're there for them. This is not the time to hover but really to support, to wrap your arms around them and say like, I'm going to take my cues from you

but I'm not going to leave your side, like you let me know. I'm going to check in on you, I'm here for you and have a plan. When things get bad, here's what I want you to do. Like, here are the numbers you can call.

Here's your go-to safety people. This is what we do. And allow time to heal, space to talk, room to listen let them know that this is, it doesn't get better overnight, but it does get better. It absolutely gets better.

Seeking help

Seek help, there's so much help available to you. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, the Crisis Text Line. I happen to volunteer for the Crisis Text Line. And in most situations, individuals that text in who are suicidal, it does not result in hospitalization or immediate, it doesn't result in police showing up at your house.

What it does result in is somebody's intense, vulnerable moment being brought down to a cool calm so that they can think more clearly and to have a plan and get the support and help that they need.

Resources

There are tons of national and local resources available to you. And as parents there's more information you can do to make sure that you're supported as well and keep that conversation open.

So make sure that you not only take care of you because you matter, but when you matter then your kids will feel like they matter and together you'll get through this. Find your community, find your network. It takes a village and together we'll all get through this.

Thank you

I hope this was helpful for you. Thank you so much for taking this time, the space to listen, to learn and to be there for your kids. We hope you join us again for future webinars.

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