

Let's talk about it: Breaking the silence on youth suicide

By Laura Jones

Content Warning: The subject of this article may prove triggering to some individuals. This article contains discussion about youth self-harm and suicide.

Suicide is a topic that people avoid - and yet, suicide is the second leading cause of death of youth aged 10-24 in Canada (CMHA, 2016). People avoid discussing suicide for a variety of reasons, including associated stigma and the feeling of shame that comes with harbouring these thoughts (CMHA, 2016). This article will review the warning signs of suicide, discuss ways to help youth dealing with suicidal thoughts, and provide a list of references for youth in crisis.

Suicide warning signs

Suicide is not a sudden impulse decision - instead, it is likely to be a long and thought out process (CMHA, 2016). The idea that suicide is a random act is a myth that needs to be dispelled. The Canadian Mental Health Association reports that 8 out of 10 youth who commit suicide demonstrate warning signs (CMHA, 2016). They also state that many suicidal youths do not necessarily want to die, but rather do not know if they want to continue living (CMHA, 2016). Signs of suicidal ideation and consideration can be subtle but can be better noticed if discussed.

The following is a list of warning signs for professionals and paraprofessionals working with youth.

Signs of Suicidal thoughts in Youth

1. Discussion or jokes revolving around suicide (Smith, Segal, 2017).
2. Comments or jokes about how a youth would be better off dead (Smith, Segal, 2017).
3. Romanization of death (Smith, Segal, 2017).
4. Changes in behaviour (CMHA, 2016).
5. A lack of interest in things the person was once interested in (CMHA, 2016).
6. Expressed feelings of hopelessness (CMHA, 2016).
7. Mood swings (CMHA, 2016)
8. Expressed feeling that they are a burden (ASFP, 2017)
9. Substance abuse, of drugs or alcohol (ASFP, 2017).
10. Reckless behaviour (ASFP, 2017).
11. Donating or throwing out possessions (ASFP, 2017).
12. Depression (ASFP, 2017).
13. Saying goodbye to their friends and family. (Smith, Segal, 2017).

How to help

Suicide is a daunting topic, but there are ways in which adults can help youth who are at risk. The following list will provide suggestions to help youth dealing with suicidal thoughts.

1. Be aware of the risks and warning signs (Psychology Benefits, 2013).
2. Talk to youth about suicide in an open and non-judgemental way (Psychology Benefits, 2013).
3. If you have concerns, discuss them openly with teens (Psychology Benefits, 2013).
4. Listen, do not lecture (Segal, Smith, 2017).
5. If you suspect a teen may be dealing with thoughts of suicide, reach out to a third party to try and get them talking to someone (Segal, Smith, 2017).
6. Accept that sometimes you need to help a youth get professional help (Segal, Smith, 2017).
7. Educate yourself on mental health disorders and medication such as SSRI's (selective, serotonin reuptake inhibitors) (Segal, Smith, 2017).
8. Place suicide hotline numbers and outreach services in visible and accessible places.

Resources for Youths in Crisis

- **Kids Help Phone** - Anonymous 24/7 mental health counselling for Canadian kids and teens.- <https://www.kidshelpphone.ca/teens/home/splash.aspx>
- **Now Matters Now** - links to online and telephone call and text hotlines for youth experiencing suicidal thoughts.- <http://www.nowmattersnow.org/help-line>
- **Suicide hotlines by Canadian province** - <http://suicideprevention.ca/need-help/>
- **Suicide hotlines by country** - <http://www.yourlifecounts.org/need-help/crisis-lines>
- **The Trevor Project** - anonymous counselling for LGBT youth experiencing suicidal thoughts -<http://www.thetrevorproject.org/>
- **Youth Chat** - Online and anonymous chat support for teens experiencing suicidal thoughts -<http://youthinbc.com/>



Trevor Project logo, retrieved from http://www.thetrevorproject.org/page/-/files/resources/newTTP_ORANGE.png/

Conclusion

Suicide is a difficult subject to bring into conversation, but it does not have to be. As adults, we owe it to ourselves and to youths to create open and honest dialogues surrounding suicide. We need to discard the idea that talking about suicide causes suicide. Instead, start thinking that you are providing resources that could help a youth make a decision that saves their life. While the conversation around suicide is never going to be pleasant, it can save a life, and that is worth the discomfort.

References

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