

# SUICIDE OBSESSION

*Learn the 13  
warning signs of  
suicide and a  
step-by-step plan  
for rescuing  
suicidal kids*

BY J. BRENT BILL

I shouldn't have opened the door.

The smell that seeped out from underneath it should've been warning enough. I'd never smelled anything like it. It smelled so sweet. And so awful. I should've known something was terribly wrong.

It was. I opened the bedroom door to tell Greg, my best friend, goodbye. But he was still asleep. It looked like he'd been drinking again. Red wine was splashed all over one side of his face and clothes. "Spilt wine and summer humidity," I thought. "That's what that smell is."

I decided to look for the bottle, wake him and tell him to clean himself up. As I walked closer, I noticed the

wine seemed awfully thick. And it had other stuff in it. That should've slowed me down—made me stop and wonder what it was.

It wasn't wine that was spilled all over Greg. It was Greg spilled all over him. He was lying on his bed with the right side of his head blown off. What I had thought was cheap red wine was really a sticky-looking red, gray, gooey mess of blood, brain tissue and other body fluids. That's what caused the smell.

Directly opposite his head was a hole in the wall, the final resting place of the bullet that sped from the barrel of the .38, snuffing out Greg's life.

It's hard to remember what happened next. Everything's a blur of frantic phone calls, police officers, paramedics standing around talking in low, bored tones. I saw what was left of my friend Greg carried carelessly down the stairs inside a body bag leaking blood all over the carpet. And I saw curious neighbors standing silently watching on their lawns. And tears. Lots of tears.

### **A COMMON HORROR**

I found out later that Greg's death wasn't that unusual. People kill themselves every day. Even teenagers. Especially teenagers. They do it with guns, razor blades, pills, gas, rope and anything else they can find. But I never thought anyone I knew would kill himself. Certainly not my best friend.

Later, as a youth group leader, I had kids come to me feeling suicidal. I'm glad to say there weren't lots of them, but there were enough to alarm me. Suicide is now the second leading cause of death for young people. Auto accidents are #1. In 1990, there were more than 5,000 suicides reported—a jump from 2,000 in 1986. And one-third of U.S. teenagers say they've considered suicide, according to a Gallup Poll.

Eighty percent of suicide victims are male. Two-thirds are white. According to the Teens in Action Suicide Awareness campaign, 80 percent of the young people who threaten or commit suicide exhibit clinical depression symptoms.

But a recent study of suicides by two New York researchers found many teenage suicides could be traced to incidental problems, such as receiving a bad re-

port card or wrecking the family car.

Right now, you probably have kids in your group who are considering suicide as a way out of their problems and pain. And you may not know about it until it's too late. On the surface, suicidal kids often seem happy. But they may have a gun loaded or pills ready, waiting for the "right" time.

### **A HOST OF WARNING SIGNS**

Kids considering suicide will often send out signals. Greg did. I just didn't know what they were at the time. In isolation, these signs may not mean much. But if you notice many of them at the same time, sound the alarm. Learn these signs now and maybe you'll save a teenager's life.

**1. A change in appetite**—If a teenager who eats like a horse begins eating like a bird, beware. Likewise, watch out for the person who suddenly starts scarfing everything in sight.

**2. Interrupted sleep patterns**—Have you noticed a usually alert young person falling asleep in the middle of youth group—even when your activities are compelling? Don't blow it off. And pay attention when parents tell you they've found their daughter awake at all hours of the night "just thinking."

**3. Avoidance of friends, normal activities and behaviors**—Watch for "groupie" kids who suddenly start isolating themselves. And take note if your most avid movie buff suddenly stops going to the multiplex.

**4. Angry outbursts or fearfulness**—Beware if an even-tempered group member blows his top for no apparent reason or reacts to normal situations with fear.

**5. A tendency to withdraw or be uncommunicative**—Are you having a hard time getting a usually talkative teenager to participate in group discussions? Abnormally silent kids are often locked in a vicious internal struggle.

**6. Frequent physical complaints or chronic fatigue**—Is she always sick to her stomach or battling a headache? Does he look like he's constantly dragging, too tired to live?

**7. Drug or alcohol abuse**—Enough said.

**8. Self-abusive behavior**—Watch for unusual cuts or bruises on kids' arms, wrists, necks and heads. You're looking for signs of abuse by razor blade, rope or blunt instrument.

**9. A preoccupation with death**—Listen for questions such as "I wonder what it'd be like to be dead?"

**10. Irrational or bizarre behavior**—It might be hard to spot bizarre behavior in teenagers, since their everyday actions often seem irrational to adults. But when a teenager does something like give away her entire cassette collection to a friend, start asking questions.

**11. An overwhelming sense of guilt or shame**—Does he feel the weight of the world on his shoulders? Does she seem embarrassed about some deep, dark secret?

**12. Feelings of complete despair**—Listen for comments and questions such as "Nothing will ever get better," "What's the use?" and "Why go on living?"

**13. Attempted suicide**—This is the most obvious, and serious, symptom.

### **A STEP-BY-STEP EARLY WARNING PLAN**

If you suspect a group member is considering suicide, do something immediately. Don't wait around to see if he or she is serious. Talk of suicide is always serious. Here's what you can do:

**1. Get the person talking**—Encourage him to talk about his feelings. Don't be afraid to ask her if she's thought about suicide. Asking won't encourage someone to do something he or she wasn't already planning to do.

**2. Assess the danger**—Determine how close the person is to actually doing something. Is he simply contemplating suicide as an option or does he know how he'll do it? If she's planning to overdose on pills, does she know how many it'll take?

**3. Don't moralize**—Yes, suicide has moral and spiritual ramifications. But now's not the time to discuss theology. Don't throw around a lot of answers. What the young person needs is someone who really cares. Listen, don't lecture.

**4. Don't minimize feelings**—Whatever's causing this malaise is serious to him. It is, to her, as bad as it seems. Don't say things such as "It'll be okay."

She won't believe you, mainly because she doesn't see how things can ever be okay. Let him know it's okay to have suicidal *feelings*. Feelings are neither right nor wrong. They're just feelings.

**5. Take action**—If the danger is imminent, contact a suicide hotline or trained counselor. Do it right away.

Don't worry about breaking a confidence. It's more important to save a life than keep a confidence.

Then make a covenant with the person. Let her know how much you care and what it'd do to you if she killed herself.

Say: "Your friendship is valuable to

me. And I believe in you and your future. So I want you to promise me whenever you feel like killing yourself you'll call or come and talk to me first. It's not enough to leave a message on my answering machine. You must talk to me. Since we're friends, will you promise me you'll do this?"

Meanwhile, seek professional help and notify the young person's parents right away.

### **A SOLID HOPE**

Just a few weeks ago a former group member called and asked if she could visit my wife and me. When she arrived, she seemed happy and had lots of news to share with us. She'd just been hired for a job at a local university, was dating a solid guy, had bought a new car and had moved into a nice apartment.

This was the same fearful high school girl who came into my office one day a few years ago and told me she was ready to kill herself.

Thanks to the lessons I've learned—and put into practice—she was now sitting in my living room talking about a life full of dreams. When she left, she looked at me and quietly said, "Thanks."

As I watched her drive away, I pulled my wife close and said in a choking voice, "No, thank you."

(Note: Public television's acclaimed series on teenage life, *Degrassi High*, will air a special episode on suicide on June 8, 1991, at 7:30 p.m. EST.) ☐

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### **SUICIDE HOTLINE NUMBERS**

● **National Teen Suicide Hotline**—Call for information and help, 24 hours, 800-621-4000.

● **Covenant House**—Call for counseling in times of crisis, 24 hours, 800-999-9999.

● **Boys Town National Hotline**—Call for counseling and referrals on a broad spectrum of problems, including suicide, 800-448-1833.