

SIGNS OF SIGNS OF SUICIDE

BY BETT

*Could you spot the
three out of four
young people who've
considered suicide?*

Thirteen-year-old Angie laughs and jokes with several other junior highers in the group. She participates in lots of school sports and she belongs to oodles of extra-curricular clubs.

Jo, 14, has suddenly started coming to meetings dressed in a dirty T-shirt and jeans. Her hair is uncombed. She hangs out by herself in the back of the room.

No one wants to sit beside 12-year-old Ed because he doesn't keep his hands to himself. He disrupts the group with loud, rude comments. Sometimes his breath smells of beer.

What do these three junior highers have in common?

They're all possible candidates for suicide.

Suicide's Sad Facts

Adolescent suicide has tripled in the last 30 years. According to the Centers for Dis-

ease Control, suicide is a leading cause of death among adolescents, following accidents and homicides. And for every successful suicide, 50 to 150 kids attempt suicide. Girls try to take their lives more often than guys. But guys are more successful in completing the act.

There is no one cause of suicide, but authorities agree that all suicidal young people suffer from the three H's:

● **Helplessness**—Although Angie is an honor student and a talented musician, she felt helpless when she received her first D on her report card. Although Angie is smart, she's juggling too many activities. She often doesn't know when to study. And since Angie measures her worth by her achievements, her self-esteem plunged when her grade did.

● **Haplessness**—Suicidal kids may feel like everything's gone wrong and that they have only bad luck. For example, Jo feels hapless because Jack is harassing her verbally and physically at school. He doesn't



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pick on anyone else; just Jo. And she doesn't know why.

● **Hopelessness**—Ed's father is an alcoholic. So to get out of the house, Ed comes to junior high meetings at church. Ed receives a certain satisfaction from the attention he gets when he disrupts the group. At home, Ed feels hopeless. He doesn't see his dad's alcoholism getting any better.

Suicide's Symptoms

How can we recognize when a junior higher may be contemplating suicide? The most common warning sign is a suicide threat. Take those threats seriously! The first threat is usually a hidden threat: "You'd be better off without me."

Sudden changes in behavior can signal a suicide attempt. Jo, who used to dress well, now comes to meetings looking disheveled. Angie, who used to attend all the school events she could, has quit going out at all. And Ed has started coming to meetings

with bloodshot eyes, possibly signaling marijuana use.

Other signals include sudden changes in eating and sleeping behavior, dropping grades and a loss of interest in activities that were once important. Suicidal kids feel depressed and isolated. And if their depression suddenly lifts, a suicide attempt may be imminent.

Suicide Stoppers

What can you do if a junior higher exhibits any of these signs? First, don't ignore the problem and hope it'll go away. It won't. If a young person seems distressed, say: "I've noticed something is bothering you. Would you like to talk about it?" If the teenager talks about considering suicide, ask how, when and where he or she is thinking of doing it. You aren't condoning suicide by talking about it. Instead, you're allowing the junior higher to express his or her feelings.

Then help the junior higher find solutions other than suicide. For example, when Angie told Carolyn, her youth leader, that she was thinking of suicide, Carolyn helped her see other options.

"I don't want you to do this," Carolyn said. "Can I help with what's going on with you?" Then Carolyn suggested Angie talk to her parents.

Reluctantly, Angie agreed. Then after Angie and her parents talked, the family went to see a trained counselor. Now Angie is getting her life in order and is learning not to put so much pressure on herself.

A junior higher who exhibits signs of suicide is crying for help. He or she is often confused and may not realize suicide is a permanent, tragic "solution."

The rule is: Do something! Talk to kids who may be suicidal. Encourage them to get professional help. And you may save someone's life. ■

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