

CAUSES OF DEPRESSION AND SUICIDE

Grades, money, parents, boyfriends and girlfriends, hopelessness, and loneliness—these were listed by collegians in a survey that attempted to determine the presence of depression and suicidal thoughts or attempts.

Counseling psychologists at Auburn University and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte studied answers to questionnaires completed by 962 college students from three diverse, unidentified colleges and universities. The results were startling. According to the researchers, "more than 80% of those surveyed indicated they had experienced depression since coming to college; 32% had experienced suicidal ideation; 4.5% had attempted suicide; and 1% had attempted suicide while they were students." While the attempted suicide rate may be considered low, the authors explain, "it is clear that students do experience feelings of depression and thoughts of suicide and may in fact make an attempt."

The evidence points to loneliness (cited by 67%) and hopelessness (cited by 55%) as the major causes of suicidal behavior. Parental problems and boyfriend/girlfriend problems (both cited by 41%) appeared "to contribute equally to depression, suicidal thoughts, and suicidal behavior." The psychologists found that especially problems with parents figured significantly in causing depression in suicidal students. Money was the least cited as a cause of depression.

Suicide doesn't just happen, the researchers conclude. Because it "is carried out for a number of identifiable reasons . . . college counselors need to provide workshops in the areas of loneliness and parental relationships as a means of assisting students to deal with these areas of concern."

Leave it to a high-tech/low-touch age to substitute loneliness workshops for friendship. (*Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 1987, Vol. 18, No. 2)

PROFILE OF A TEEN SUICIDE

While teenagers are committing suicide at the rate of one every hundred minutes, there's at least one team of researchers who believe that the great majority of teenagers are highly unlikely to ever kill themselves, and that those who do "are not the all-American kids who are just under stress, as described by the media." Dr. Madelyn S. Gould and Dr. David Shaffer, both of Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons, say they're far enough along in their work to have identified two personality types at highest risk.

At the top are kids given to "violent-aggressive outbursts" and rapid mood changes. "These are the kids who have difficulties at school," says Shaffer, "and have been problem children most of their lives."

Next on the high-risk scale are those teens "who are extremely anxious by nature, frequently functioning under considerable pressure. But Shaffer points out, however, that "the pressure is not coming from their parents or their peers as is generally believed. It extends from their own abnormal levels of anxiety, from their need to get things absolutely right because they are such intense perfectionists."

Yet neither violent-aggressive outbursts nor high anxiety are, by themselves or even together, enough to accurately predict a suicide attempt. "What seems to be very important," says Shaffer, "is whether the individual has had a close encounter with suicide or attempted suicide through a parent, a sibling, or a very close friend." What Gould and Shaffer ultimately want to know is "whether the very high rate of suicides or suicide attempts is related to a genetic mechanism or imitation and learning."

The article offers two preventive strategies for parents and other influential adults. First, listen. Engage in dialogue. Provide enough time and enough times for kids to get used to talking to you about things that matter to them. Second, "suicide-proof" them. That is, tell them about your failures, your disappointments, times when you were devastated but still survived. Knowing you aren't perfect but are still alive may just help them stay alive, too. (*McCall's*, October 1987)

Suicide Warning Signs

- Preoccupation with themes of death or expressing suicidal thoughts
- Giving away prized possessions, making a will or other "final arrangements"
- Changes in sleeping patterns—too much or too little
- Sudden and extreme changes in eating habits, losing or gaining weight
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- or other major behavioral changes
- Changes in school performance, lowered grades, cutting classes, dropping out of activities
- Personality changes, such as nervousness, outbursts of anger or apathy about appearance and health
- Use of drugs or alcohol
- Recent suicide of friend or relative
- Previous suicide attempts

"In the next thirty minutes, thirty-four young people under eighteen years of age will attempt suicide in the United States. Every day an average of eighteen young Americans die by their own hands. What can we do about it?"