

insights

April
2017

April is the Cruellest Month

It is widely believed that suicide rates peak during the dark, dreary months of winter, and in particular, around the December holidays. In fact, data collected around the world consistently shows that suicide rates peak in the spring. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, the overall suicide rate in the United States has risen by 24% for all age groups (except adults over 75) from 1999 to 2014. It is especially important, therefore, that parents and school professionals stay alert to possible increases in depression and suicidality in students at this time of year.

The latest information from the Centers for Disease Control is that 17% of students in grades 9-12 have seriously considered suicide in the previous 12 months (22.4% of females and 11.6% of males). Suicide is the third leading cause of death among 10-14 year-olds, and the second leading cause of death for those aged 15-34 years. Males still commit suicide at a rate 3.6 times higher than females, but the suicide rate for females has been steeply rising. Researchers also found an alarming increase among girls 10 to 14, whose suicide rate, although low, has tripled from 1999 to 2014.

While there is no definitive evidence to explain why suicide rates increase in spring, there are a few prevailing theories. One theory is that depressed individuals attribute their low mood at least in part to seasonal factors, and become even more despondent if they do not feel better when spring arrives. Another theory is that depressed people observe others perking up in spring, and become more depressed when comparing themselves to others who are bouncing back from the winter doldrums. Yet another possibility is that during winter months severely depressed people are too lethargic and apathetic to muster the energy to make and carry out a suicide plan, while spring brings enough of a lift in mood to enable action.

School professionals can enhance the safety of students by remaining vigilant during this time of year and readily speaking with parents and school counselors if they observe any of the possible warning signs of depression or suicide:

- Talking About Dying (pay attention to students' writing and art work)
- Recent or severe Loss (death, divorce, a broken relationship, a major disappointment)
- Change in Personality (sad, withdrawn from friends/family, loss of interest in most activities, irritable, anxious, tired, indecisive, apathetic)
- Change in Behavior (e.g. can't concentrate in school), including a Change in Sleep Patterns (insomnia, often with early waking, or oversleeping, nightmares) or a Change in Eating Habits (loss of appetite and weight, or overeating)
- Acting impulsively or erratically
- Low self-esteem (worthlessness, shame, guilt, self-hatred, "everyone would be better off without me")
- No hope for the future ("things will never get better")

Particularly at risk are youngsters with a history of depression or other psychiatric disorder and/or a prior suicide attempt; who abuse substances; are being bullied; are struggling with sexual orientation or gender identity in an unsupportive environment; who have a history of abuse; with a family history of suicide or exposure to others who've committed suicide; with poor relationships; or with access to lethal means, such as firearms or pills. ■

Resource:

Teen Suicide is Preventable <http://www.apa.org/research/action/suicide.aspx>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

Crisis Text Line: Text "HOME" to 741741

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