

Suicide Risk among Teens: A Hard Topic to Tackle

Although we as parents are reticent to think and talk about it, teen depression and suicide are significant and growing problems in our country. Prolonged feelings of stress, sadness, isolation and confusion—along with raging hormones—can leave youth feeling sad and hopeless for long periods of time.

In Milton, about 25% of our high school students reported, in the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), having depressive symptoms, and 12% indicated that they had considered suicide in the past year. While these statistics are lower than the U.S., it is still a big concern that we should take seriously. After all, suicide is the third leading cause of death among adolescents.

There are certain groups more at risk than others. Girls are at much higher risk of contemplating taking their lives, but boys are much more successful at completing suicide because of the methods they tend to use (mostly firearms). Additionally, a recent national survey (YRBS 2015) finds that 40 percent of young people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or questioning have seriously considered suicide in the past year. One in four young people who identified as LGBTQ attempted suicide, compared to 6 percent of their heterosexual peers. Bisexual boys were at most risk.

Our homes, schools and communities must all take responsibility for preventing suicides and addressing the contributing factors. Here are some things we can do:

- Be aware that frequent social media use can contribute to depression, according to a recent study. Encourage personal interactions and consider limiting access to that smartphone.
- Engage your child in conversation. If they indicate, or demonstrate, that they are feeling sad and hopeless for long periods of time, take this seriously. Seek out professional help.
- If your child is questioning their sexuality, in addition to promoting open conversation, consider getting them into a support group or an appointment with an empathetic counselor who can help them navigate their confusion, anxiety and isolation
- If you live with a depressed child, it is important to restrict access to suicide methods, including firearms, ropes and medications. Suicide attempts are often made in the moment. Making the decision more difficult to carry out can help save a life.

If you are a parent who is concerned about their child's mental health, do not feel ashamed or alone. The problem is common, yet serious. Feel free to speak with a counselor at your child's school, who can help direct you to the resources you need to get your child help. In addition, there are many suicide hotlines that provide anonymous assistance. One of them is the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255).