

# A LINE ON LIFE

10/29/87

## Teenage Suicide \*

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It is very difficult to deal with suicide. It is even harder to understand when an adolescent commits suicide. *"Why would they commit suicide, when they have their whole lives ahead of them?"*

The greatest number of suicides occur among people in their 40s, and the rate remains high through the 60s and over. However, the rate of suicide has recently increased among adolescents and young adults. In fact, the frequency of suicides among those 15-24 in the United States has *tripled* in the past 20 years. Each year, some 250,000 young people in this age range attempt suicide, and more than 5,000 of them succeed.

College students are twice as likely to kill themselves as are non-students of the same age. This is not only true in the United States. It is typical of India, Japan, and European countries as well. There are several possible reasons why college students are more likely to be depressed enough to attempt (and succeed in) committing suicide:

- They are living away from home and have to cope with new problems.
- They are trying to get "perfect" grades when the competition is much greater than it was in high school.
- They are unsure about their career and life goals.
- They lack the social support of old friends and have anxiety about developing new ones.

When the records of college students who committed suicide were examined, researchers found that they were moodier, drove themselves harder, and were more depressed than their non-suicidal classmates. They had also given repeated warnings of their suicidal intent to others. The major precipitating events for suicidal students seem to be worry about academic work, worry about physical health, or difficulties in relationships with others. However, it is hard to be sure if these factors cause the suicides, or if they are merely symptoms of depression. For example, worry about health is frequently a symptom of depression.

On the average, suicidal college students have higher records of academic achievement. In contrast, most adolescents who commit suicide typically have exceptionally *poor* high school records. The outstanding characteristic of these suicidal adolescents is **social isolation**. They describe themselves as loners. They tend to be dropouts or have behavior problems in school. Most have parents who are divorced or separated. A large number have alcoholic parents, and 25% were not living at home at the time of their suicide attempt.

Another factor linked to suicide among young people is **drug abuse**. One psychological study found that half of the people under 30 who committed suicide showed evidence of heavy drug use. It is not clear whether the drug abuse *caused* depression that led to suicide — or the drugs were an attempt to cope with the depression (and they killed themselves when the drugs did not help). However, in many cases, the drug abuse appears to have preceded the psychological problems.

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**When people suffer from emotional distress they cannot resolve,  
those who have no social support are more likely to consider suicide.**

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If people in emotional distress see no solution to their problems other than death, suicide is truly an attempt to end their life. However, only the rare suicide attempt involves a real wish to die. More likely, the suicidal people seek to impress others with the seriousness of their problems. Essentially, the suicide attempt is a **cry for help**. The person does not really want to die but seeks to communicate feelings of despair and to change the behavior of other people. This is likely to be the case for the woman who takes an overdose of sleeping pills when her lover threatens to leave. A college student may do the same when pressured by his parents to achieve beyond his abilities.

These attempts should not be treated lightly. Although the person may not wish to die, those who attempt suicide are experiencing so much turmoil and stress that their thinking is far from clear. They are not sure if they want to live or they want to die. They want to do both at the same time, usually one more than the other. Since the best predictor of a future suicide is a prior attempt, all suicide attempts should be taken seriously.

*"What can we do if someone threatens suicide?"* The main thing is to provide them with the social support they may be missing. Listen to them and take them and their problems seriously. If possible, make them aware of alternative remedies to their situation other than death. You do not need to avoid the topic of suicide, but you can help them to view suicide as one choice among other, better alternatives. One of these alternatives may be to get professional help.

Many people hesitate to *"jump in"* to try to help a suicidal person. Their main worry seems to be, *"What if I fail and the person still commits suicide?"* To deal with this — do as you would ask the potentially suicidal person to do — consider the alternatives involved. If you don't make some attempt to help, that person will probably commit suicide anyway. It may sound like a cliché, but *"where there is life, there is hope."*

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\* Adapted from Atkinson, Atkinson, Smith & Hilgard, *Introduction to Psychology*, Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1987, pages 504-505.