

How to stem youth suicide? Talk to your kids

Anne Saker – January 28, 2018

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Just as parents worry about this year's flu epidemic, experts are warning of a far more serious health issue among young people in Greater Cincinnati and Ohio: the "contagion" of suicide.

In Massillon, in Stark County, officials of the Perry Local School District said five current students and a recent high school graduate have died of suicide in this school year. A cluster so close together geographically and chronologically is unusual. But local caregivers say the youth-suicide outbreak of the past two years across Greater Cincinnati also can be considered contagion.

"We don't have real clear numbers of this, but what we do know is that there did seem to be an uptick across the map," said Dr. Michael Sorter, who directs the Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center.

For people 18 and younger, suicide is the second-leading cause of death after accidents. In 2016 and 2017, Hamilton County suicides by people 18 and younger ran into double digits for the first time since recordkeeping began nearly 20 years ago.

The most searing of the deaths was a year ago when 8-year-old Gabriel Taye of Westwood took his own life, apparently after repeated bullying at school.

Here are facts about suicide contagion and what parents and other adults can do to stop the spread.

What is suicide contagion?

The term means exposure to suicide or suicidal behaviors within a family, a circle of friends or classmates or through media reports that can result in an increase in suicide and suicidal behaviors. While rare, contagions have occurred across the country, often on college campuses.

How can suicide be contagious?

Influenza is a virus that makes even a healthy person sick. Suicide isn't a virus, so its contagion works differently: Those at risk already have mental-health problems such as depression or bipolar disorder. Nancy Eigel-Miller, executive director of 1N5, a Cincinnati mental-health nonprofit, said, "People are not committing suicide because someone else is. They have to be struggling with a mental health condition before they find themselves in that situation" of contagion.

What fuels suicide contagion?

Before the smartphone, experts blamed news coverage that glamorized suicide, which communicated to vulnerable young people that suicide is an option. "The press needs to be really responsible," said Eigel-Miller. "The school needs to be really responsible, that they don't glorify it, that they don't make into something that a child can identify as a choice."

While most news organizations have gotten smarter about covering suicide, access to the internet can hurt and help young people with mental health problems.

"Kids who are depressed, kids who are contemplating suicide spend a lot of time on their phones and a lot of time on the internet," said Dr. Philip Lichtenstein, medical

director of the Children's Home of Cincinnati. "But there's a mixed bag. For every video or website or discussion about how to go about killing yourself, there are 10 with equal credence and credibility talking about why not to do it."

What can parents do?

Sorter and other experts praised efforts by 1N5, the nonprofit Mind-Peace and other groups to boost mental-health care in schools. But no little better antidote than a parent breaking the silence.

"A lot of people will say: 'We don't want to talk about it because that will cause suicide to happen,'" Eigel-Miller said. "That's not how it works. If someone is struggling with a mental health condition, you need to have the conversation."

Sorter said parents can take the incidence of suicide to "talk to your kid about it. How are you doing? How does this affect you? Ask the question. Be direct – ever had similar thoughts? ... It's important to say to your child: If you had pain in your stomach or chronic headaches, I want to know. If you're not feeling well, we can get you help. If we can deliver kids to the help that they need, a lot of good things can happen."

What to look for; help available

Warning signs of suicide

People who are wrestling with thoughts of suicide give off indicators. Here are a few things to watch for, and if you see them, ask if help is needed immediately.

- Talking to others or posting on social media about suicide, about wanting to die or about feeling hopeless or trapped or a burden to others.

- Looking for ways to die — gathering medication, sharp objects, firearms, or looking online for methods.

- Expressing unbearable emotional pain.

- Visiting or calling people to "say goodbye."

- Giving away prized possessions.

- Suddenly becoming calm or cheerful after a long period of depression.

Resources for youth and adolescent mental health care

- Talbert House's 24-hour hotline line: 513-281-2273

- Talbert House's 24-hour text line: Send the phrase 4hope to 839863

- The state of Ohio has a 24-hour text line: Send the phrase 4hope to 741741

- Mental Health Association of Northern Kentucky and Southwest Ohio: 859-431-1077

- Mental Health Access Point mobile crisis line: 513-558-8888

- Mindpeace, at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, 513803-0844 ■ SEAS the Day, dana@seasthedayfoundation.org, 513-212-6631

- Mental Health Recovery Services of Warren & Clinton Counties: 877695-6333