

## **Teen Suicide: Practicing Prevention and Pastoral Care as the Body of Christ**

Hope is faith holding out its hand in the dark.  
~ George Iles



It is our prayer that no young person ever be in an emotional or mental place where suicide is their only option, or even *an* option for coping with what is going on in their life. Sadly, however, some young people feel so broken and their pain is so powerful that they do plan and attempt to end their life. As the body of Christ, we can offer teens resources and safe spaces as we embrace them as the beloved children of God that they are. And, we can offer each other hope in the midst of the immense grief and questions that come after someone does commit suicide. We are able to offer this hope because we are people who believe that nothing in life or in death can ever separate us from God's unconditional love and grace.

## Statistics of Teen Suicide<sup>1</sup>

19.3 percent of high school students have seriously considered killing themselves  
14.5 percent of high school students made actual plans for committing suicide  
900,000 youth planned their suicides during an episode of major depression

According to the Center for Disease Control, suicide is the third leading cause of death for youth ages 15 to 24 and the fourth leading cause of death for youth ages 10 to 14 years old.

## Taking Life Seriously

This is as simple as making sure all of your young people have an adult in their life that they can always talk to no matter what. This person may be a parent, coach, pastor, youth leader, or teacher. Whomever it is, ensure each youth can identify a trustworthy adult and knows how to get in contact with them at any time.

For some young people, youth group may be the only place they feel safe if they are bullied or do not feel comfortable at school. Thus, it is important to create a covenant within your youth group each year stating that you all will respect the image of God in each other and be trust worthy when it comes to the pain and brokenness in each other's lives. Having safe space is vitally important to teens and can greatly impact their outlook on life, especially during hard times, periods of grief, and the pressures of adolescence.

You may also teach your young people what to do if someone comes to them and says they are suicidal or the young person senses they may become suicidal. In addition to getting in touch with an adult they trust, they may follow the YOU CARE method as taught by The Trevor Project.<sup>2</sup>

**YOU:** You are never alone. You are not responsible for anyone who chooses to take their own life. As friends, family and loved ones, all you can do is listen, support and assist the person in getting the help they need.

**Connect** the person to resources and a supportive, trusted adult.

**Accept** and listen to the person's feelings and take them seriously.

**Respond** if a person has a plan to attempt suicide and tell someone you trust.

**Empower** the person to get help and to call The Trevor Lifeline or any suicide hotline.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL)

<sup>2</sup> The Trevor Project: Saving Young Lives [www.thetrevorproject.org](http://www.thetrevorproject.org)

## **Sacred Space**

In the tragic event that a young person in your congregation commits suicide, here are suggested ways to care for families and young people in the immediate days after the loss. Above all, it is important to remember that the immediate aftermath is often filled with questions, guilt, and anger, so ensure that your ways of communal processing give space for such honesty and emotions. This is also no time for judgment or religious clichés, but time to openly grieve in the midst of shock and pain.

~Designate a block of time where youth may come by the youth room or another familiar place to hang out and process together.

~Have a candlelight vigil at the church and invite everyone to come light a candle in memory of the young person and as a sign of hope and support for their family. If your church has candles from such services as Christmas Eve, those would be good to use so all attendees may hold a candle. If you do not have access to those, you may easily purchase votive or tea light size candles and have attendees come forward to light them as they enter.

~Have additional office hours time throughout the week for youth who may prefer to process and discuss the situation and their feelings more privately. Hosting office hours at the local coffee or ice cream shop is a good way to have a comforting venue feel while still having a private conversation.

~Gather as the youth group at the church kitchen or someone's home to create meals for the family as a sign of care. This is both a practical way for everyone to feel like they are doing something to help, and also a good way to have processing conversations together that do not feel as structured.

During discussions, ensure that young people know it is okay to be angry and question why another person would commit suicide. Allow them to speak their feelings freely and ensure that it is not a time of judgment about the deceased person or mental illnesses. Encourage them to continue to share their feelings with trusted adults as they grieve. Listen to the ways in which they would like to remember the person-perhaps by making a collage for the youth room, offering to speak at the church vigil, planting a tree in their memory, or creating a memorial group on Facebook. Ask them what they need as they grieve and assist them in getting helpful support that meets them where they are in their grief process.

If certain young people were especially close to the deceased person, offer them the information for a local professional counselor with whom they could speak regularly and privately in the coming weeks. Counselors in your area are some of the most helpful resources when searching for support groups for family members and friends. Consult a trusted counselor or mental health professional for a list of resources in your area that you may share with young people and their families.

## Liturgical Elements

As you prepare a service of remembrance, vigil, or memorial service, here are suggested liturgical elements to include that may be meaningful to people of all ages in the wake of teen suicide.

- ~Moment of silence
- ~Lighting candles
- ~Favorite Scriptures, songs, prayers, or poems per family request
- ~Guestbook of attendees to be given to family
- ~Offering taken for family or organization of their choice
- ~Scriptural References:
  - 2 Corinthians 5:17
  - Deuteronomy 33:27
  - Hebrews 13:20-21
  - Isaiah 40:28-31; 66:13
  - John 14:27
  - Matthew 11:28
  - Psalms 23; 27:1, 4-9a, 13-14; 46:1
  - Revelation 1:17-18; 14:3; 21:6
  - Romans 6:3-5; 8:38-39; 14:8; 15:13

### ~Affirmations of Faith and Creeds

#### *The Heidelberg Catechism*<sup>3</sup>

**Question 1.** What is thy only comfort in life and death? **Answer:** That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ; who, with his precious blood, has fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, and therefore, by his Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto him.

#### *A Declaration of Faith*<sup>4</sup>

In the death of Jesus Christ God's way in the world seemed finally defeated. But death was no match for God. The resurrection of Jesus was God's victory over death. Death often seems to prove that life is not worth living, that our best efforts and deepest affections go for nothing.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Heidelberg Catechism* written by Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus, 1563

<sup>4</sup> *A Declaration of Faith*, completed by Presbyterian Church US, 1977 and adopted by PC (USA) in 1985

We do not yet see the end of death. But Christ has been raised from the dead, transformed and yet the same person. In his resurrection is the promise of ours. We are convinced that the life God wills for each of us is stronger than the death that destroys us. The glory of that life exceeds our imagination but we know we shall be with Christ. So we treat death as a broken power. Its ultimate defeat is certain. In the face of death we grieve. Yet in hope we celebrate life. No life ends so tragically that its meaning and value are destroyed. Nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

*A Brief Statement of Faith*<sup>5</sup>

In a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in church and culture, to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace. In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives, even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth, praying, Come, Lord Jesus! With believers in every time and place, we rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.

~Musical Selections:

*Abide with Me*  
*All Creatures of Our God and King*  
*Amazing Grace*  
*Christ, Whose Glory Fills the Skies*  
*For All the Saints*  
*God is Here*  
*God of Compassion, in Mercy Befriend Us*  
*God of Grace and God of Glory*  
*God of the Sparrow*  
*Great is Thy Faithfulness*  
*I Danced in the Morning*  
*In Our Living*  
*It is Well With My Soul*  
*My Shepherd Will Supply My Need*  
*O God Our Help in Ages Past*  
*O Lord of Life, Where'er They Be*  
*There is a Balm in Gilead*

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<sup>5</sup> *A Brief Statement of Faith*, completed in 1983 and adopted by PC (USA) in 1991

## **Recommended Resources**

Being aware gives us the power to make a change.

~ Lea Belair

American Academy of Pediatrics

[www.aap.org/advocacy/childhealthmonth/prevteensuicide.htm](http://www.aap.org/advocacy/childhealthmonth/prevteensuicide.htm)

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention [www.asfp.org](http://www.asfp.org)

It Gets Better [www.itgetsbetter.org](http://www.itgetsbetter.org)

Out of the Darkness [www.outofthedarkness.org](http://www.outofthedarkness.org)

Suicide Prevention Resource Center [www.sprc.org](http://www.sprc.org)

Teen Suicide Statistics and Facts [www.teensuicidestatistics.com](http://www.teensuicidestatistics.com)

The Trevor Project [www.thetrevorproject.org](http://www.thetrevorproject.org)

Youth Suicide Prevention Program [www.yspp.org](http://www.yspp.org)

*A&E -- Investigative Reports: Teenage Suicide: The Silent Threat*

*Coping with Teen Suicide*

by James M. Murphy MD

*Fire in My Heart, Ice in My Veins: A Journal for Teenagers Experiencing a Loss*

by Enid Samuel Traisman

*Grieving a Suicide: A Loved One's Search for Comfort, Answers & Hope*

by Albert Y. Hsu

*Living When a Young Friend Commits Suicide*

by Earl A. Grollman

*Out of the Darkness: Teens Talk About Suicide*

by Marion Crook

*Prayers for Bobby: A Mother's Coming to Terms with the Suicide of Her Gay Son*  
by Leroy Arons

*The Power to Prevent Suicide: A Guide for Teens Helping Teens*  
by Richard E. Nelson Ph.D., Judith C. Galas and Bev Cobain R.N.C.

*When a Friend Dies: A Book for Teens About Grieving & Healing*  
by Marilyn E. Gootman

*When Nothing Matters Anymore: A Survival Guide for Depressed Teens*  
by Bev Coba

## Supplemental Resource "B"

### Teen Suicide and Self-Injury Recommended Resources and Agencies to Provide Information, Assistance, Education

#### Available Resources

Congregational Ministries Publishing (CMP) - IN formed Series – Adolescent Human Development Resources: [Self-injury: Finding Hope in the Midst of Despair \(LESSON PLAN\)](#), [Bullying: How Faith Communities Can Respond \(ARTICLE\)](#)

Masters, Ashley-Anne, "Teen Suicide: Practicing Prevention and Pastoral Care as the Body of Christ" *Quicksheets: Fast and Fabulous Youth Ministry Resources (online resource)*. General Assembly Mission Council, Office of Ministries with Youth, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Louisville, KY; 2012

"Comfort My People: A Policy Statement on Serious Mental Illness with Study Guide" Copyright © 2008 The Office of the General Assembly Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Developed and published by the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy of the General Assembly Mission Council

Bettis-Gee, Martha, "Suicide: Prevention and Care: How can we be helpful to suicide survivors?" Copyright © 2009 [www.thethoughtfulchristian.com](http://www.thethoughtfulchristian.com) (downloadable with a modest cost; free to subscribers of TTC).

Garrett, Greg, "Understanding Teenage Depression: Identifying and treating depression and loving teens affected by it." Copyright © 2009 [www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com](http://www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com) (downloadable resource, written for Parents of Teens and adults who work with teens).

Washburn, Sue, "Teens and Cutting: What parents and friends can do about teen who cut themselves intentionally." Copyright ©2011 [www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com](http://www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com) (downloadable resource, written for Parents of Teens and others who work with teens).

Bettis-Gee, Martha, "Bullying: Sticks, Stones and Emails, and Texts: Some facts about bullying and suggestions for what to do." Copyright ©2009 [www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com](http://www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com) (downloadable resource, written for Parents of Teens and others who work with teens). \*Bullying is listed, consistently, as an influence, on young people who attempt and /or who ended their life.

"Honest Talk About Suicide" Copyright © 2001 Congregational Ministries Publishing (corresponding video by the same title – VHS).



"In Formed: Adolescent Human Development Series" <http://www.informedteens.org>  
Pending resources related to this topic include: Suicide, Suicide Prevention, Self Injury, Bullying. Approximate release date: Spring 2012. Will update this document and website resources upon publication by Congregational Ministries Publishing.

### **Recommended Agencies Working for the Prevention of Suicide**

Suicide Prevention Resource Center [www.sprc.org/](http://www.sprc.org/)  
Information on government *suicide prevention* efforts, news, events and links to important *prevention* publications.

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention [www.afsp.org](http://www.afsp.org)  
The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, a 501(c)(3) organization, has been at the forefront of a wide range of suicide prevention initiatives in 2011 -- each designed to reduce loss of life from suicide. **\*Distribute AFSP's new educational film for high school students and college age students to teach them about adolescent depression and the importance of getting help. The program also contains a film and materials to train teachers, guidance counselors and other school personnel about suicide prevention.**

### **World Suicide Prevention Day: September 10; annually observed; Sponsored by the World Health Organization (WHO)**

World Suicide Prevention Day gives organizations, government agencies and individuals a chance to promote awareness about suicide, mental illnesses associated with suicide, as well as suicide prevention. Organizations such as the International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP) and World Health Organization (WHO) play a key role in promoting this event.

Events and activities for World Suicide Prevention Day include:

- The launch of new government initiatives to prevent suicide.
- Conferences, open days, educational seminars or public lectures.
- Media programs promoting suicide awareness and prevention.
- Memorial services or candlelight ceremonies to remember those who died from suicide.
- Organizing cultural or spiritual events, fairs or exhibitions.
- Launches of publications about suicide awareness and prevention.
- Training courses about suicide and depression awareness.

Many of these initiatives are celebrated in various countries worldwide. Some of these events and activities are held at a local level, while others are nation-wide. Many communities around the world reaffirm their commitment to suicide prevention on World Suicide Prevention Day.

## Supplemental Resource “C”

### Adolescent Suicide Quick Reference Resource

#### Is There A Simple Indicator?

Is it possible to identify adolescents at risk for suicide and help them? This is a simple question with a complicated answer. Years of scientific research have focused on this question without definitive results (Berman, Jobes, and Silverman, 2006). It's also incredibly important for people working with young people at risk for suicide. The inability to think through one's actions is a trait of [adolescence](#) - it's pretty much par for the course developmentally. So, for those who care about youth suicide prevention, the implications of this developmental trait are significant for you. While there is no clear profile of the suicidal adolescent, epidemiological studies have identified variables correlated with suicide risk. Combined with natural adolescent tendencies that lean toward a lack of consequential thinking and action the warning signs and behaviors are:

#### Warning Signs or Behaviors That Should Lead to Concern

- [Depression](#)
- Anti-social behaviors, [rage](#) and aggressiveness
- Alcohol and [substance abuse](#)
- Suicidal ideation
- Impulsivity
- Hopelessness
- [Loneliness](#)
- Family problems
- Interpersonal loss
- Family history of suicide
- Stressful or anticipated stressful events

#### Groups of Adolescents at Higher Risk for Self Injury and/or Suicide Attempt

- Racial Ethnic young women in a predominantly different culture than their own

- Young men struggling with sexual identity
- Young people who self identify or who are identified by peers as Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, or Transgendered.
- Young people struggling with severe mental illness (e.g. schizophrenia, bi-bolar / manic behaviors).
- Native American young men (most research leans toward Native American young men who struggle with an additional substance abuse such as alcohol).
- Young people who are seen as outcasts and verbally or publicly “featured” (bullied) for being so.
- Young people who struggle with a different physical shape (body type) than “the norm” (obese, small in stature, etc.)

Furthermore, studies have shown that girls make more suicide attempts but boys are more likely to commit suicide. And, most adolescent suicide takes place at home with means, pills or firearms, found in their own homes.

### **Bullying, Aggravation and Despair In an Age of Technological Communication and Useage**

A number of articles and studies have focused on the connection between bullying (generally peer to peer), physical and verbal aggravation and despair as being a significant link to teenagers, who have either committed suicide or attempted to commit suicide, or who have engaged in extreme self injury (cutting, excessive piercing). There are variables to watch for regarding teens and bullying and social networking, texting, email:

- Status postings with depressed, desperate or provocative words and/or thoughts.
- Text based conversations that link to anger, aggression, a feeling of dismissal
- Photos or videos posted without consent of the photographed or filmed person
- Sleep that is interrupted by constant texting, calls, or status updates

### **Recommended related articles (Psychology Today)**

- [What's sleep got to do with it?](#)
- [Promoting hope through social media](#)
- [Impulsivity and teen suicide](#)
- [Teen Suicide: Can It Always Be Stopped?](#)
- [Words of Wisdom Wednesday: Society, Suicide & Stigmas](#)

## **Finding Help For Your Teen or Yourself**

Recommended therapists and mental health professionals are critical if you become aware of any of the listed risk factors playing a dominant role in your teen's behaviors, conversations or electronic postings. In talking with a number of LMFT staff, chaplains, physicians and suicide prevention specialists most recommended finding a therapist who specializes in adolescent psychology and/or medicine; specifically in the treatment of depression or age related mental health. The periodical, professional journal, Psychology Today has an excellent, online, easy to use function called "Find a Therapist". Simply choose the menu button with the title "Find a Therapist" and follow the prompts to find the specific state and type of therapist. Or, contact your primary care physician or school guidance counselor to find a recommended adolescent care giver. [Find a Therapist](#)

## **Prevention**

What can be done to prevent adolescent suicide?

- Adults can restrict access to lethal means such as guns and pills
- Teach help seeking behavior
- Teach positive coping skills
- Increase access to telephone counseling and drop-in centers
- Educate teens, teachers, counselors, and parents to the warning signs
- Link schools with community services

Teaching positive coping skills and help seeking behavior should start with elementary aged children. It is the responsibility of parents and teachers. Because children are congregated in schools, schools are the natural place to deliver health information.

**If you are worried that someone you know is at risk for suicide, GET HELP IMMEDIATELY.** If you are a teen, tell trusted adults like a parent, teacher, youth director, minister, adult friend, school counselor, or family doctor. If you are a parent, seek professional help through your doctor, church, or local mental health community. If these alternatives are not available to you, contact a suicide hotline in your area. Here are some places to start: **SuicideHotlines.com and Suicidepreventionlifeline.org.**

National Suicide Hotlines USA  
United States of America  
Toll-Free / 24 hours a day / 7 days a week  
1-800-SUICIDE  
1-800-273-TALK  
1-800-799-4889 (Deaf Hotline)

Special Thanks To:

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