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Warning signs of suicide

VERY FEW YOUTH MINISTRIES have escaped the wake of devastation that a teen suicide has left in their community. In recent years suicide has risen to be the third leading cause of death for 15-to-24-year-olds. The following are some “red flags” that a student may be suicidal:

- Verbal expressions of thoughts of suicide, despair or hopelessness
- Giving away valued possessions
- Self-destructive behavior like self-cutting, but not all cutters are suicidal
- Suddenly becoming cheerful after prolonged depression
- Breaking up with a boyfriend or girlfriend
- Withdrawal, moodiness or prolonged depression
- Failing grades or declining quality in schoolwork
- Acting reckless or engaging in risky activities
- Increased alcohol and drug use

Life Hurts, God Heals

Megan Hutchinson is a high school minister at Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California. Megan has worked with students for over a decade. Megan says, “If you think a student could be suicidal, you must act *now*.” Megan explains that the average suicidal episode lasts around 30 days, so if you are able to stand by that

student through this period of time, you will likely have helped save his or her life!

Many professionals use the S.L.A.P.P. acronym when assessing the severity of a potential suicide. I’ve used this every time I am suspicious of someone threatening to take his or her own life:

How SPECIFIC is the plan? “Yeah, my dad’s guns and ammo are in the cabinet and I’m doing it Friday night out by the ravine” is more urgent than “I dunno, there are lots of ways it could be done.”

How LETHAL is the method? A gun represents much greater urgency than a drug overdose. Although both are potentially lethal, there is a smaller window of opportunity to intervene when a gun is involved.

How AVAILABLE is the method? “I’m jumping off the bridge this Friday” is less urgent than, “I’m holding the gun as we speak.”

What is the PROXIMITY of help? “I’m in my room and my parents are downstairs watching TV” is more hopeful than “I’m at our summer cottage and there’s no one around for miles.”

Have you had PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS? “This is my fourth time trying to kill myself” is different than, “This is my first time.” While both must be taken with extreme sincerity, it’s more likely the parent/guardian is aware if previous attempts were made.

RESOURCE

Secret Survivors: Real-Life Stories to Give You Hope for Healing by Jen Hower and Megan Hutchinson (Zondervan) is written for teens. However, it is helpful to anyone working with students. *Secret Survivors* tells the compelling, true stories of people who have lived through painful secrets. As teenagers read stories about rape, addiction, cutting, abuse, abortion, and more, they’ll identify with the universal pain in each story and find the strength to share their own story and start healing.



VINCE BERESFORD (vince.beresford@vanguard.edu) is campus pastor at Vanguard University in Southern California and is also a trainer/speaker for the With HOPE Foundation that equips and empowers students and parents on how to identify and help those struggling with depression and suicide.