

Struggle Together:

Talking with our Youth about Suicide

■ by Karen Krygsheld, MSW, LCSW



No matter what year it is, suicide rises as a hot topic in high schools throughout the country, and for good reason as it is the second leading cause of death in youth. Recently Netflix came out with a series titled "13 Reasons Why" which has sparked much conversation and controversy on the topic. Perhaps a teen in your life has recently experienced the loss of a friend or classmate.

Maybe your child has expressed some thought of suicide. Or perhaps you want to proactively engage him in conversation regarding the topic. Although this is a challenging topic to consider, it does not have to be difficult to talk about with the youth in your life.

3 tips for starting the conversation with your youth:

1. Start with some understanding of the topic

Common misconceptions include that talking about suicide will give a person the idea, or that kids who attempt suicide are just looking for attention. Asking about suicide will not give a non-suicidal person any ideas. It may, however, give your teen the opportunity to express what has been going on. Often teens attempt suicide because they face a situation that they don't feel capable of handling. Some examples could be a situation at school, emotions that he can't process, or family circumstances she isn't able to control. The idea that a suicide attempt is seeking attention may be misconstrued from the truth that suicide can be a cry for help. It can be a way of saying "I don't know what to do, so I'm going to take a risk and afterwards either I will have help or I won't have this issue anymore." It is important not to add shame to the level of pain our youth feel by downplaying their concerns or their efforts to cope.

2. Listen and validate

From the time we hold our newborn babies, many of us become natural born problem solvers. Crying as an infant? Change a diaper, give a bottle, rock the baby until all problems are gone. Problems with bullies in grade school? Share a few stories of your own childhood, send snacks to share with the kids on the bus, bring in the school counselor for back up. But suicide? Some problems we don't know how to approach. The best way to

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start is to listen. Reflect back what the child is saying with an occasional summary of what you've heard in your own words. Ask some open-ended questions regarding her feelings or the situation. Although teens may shy away from direct conversations when they feel cornered, it is possible to use our communication skills and body language to show them we are listening and trying to understand.

3. Clarify

While your main objective is to listen rather than talk or problem-solve, it's also important to gather some information without interrogating. It is valuable to learn how often your child feels this way, as well as if she has a plan of how she would commit suicide or means to carry out that plan. If your child has intent to commit suicide, a plan and means to carry out that plan it is time to reach out for help. Depending on how serious the situation is, this may mean hospitalization or working with a counselor.



Struggling Together—You, Your Child, and God

With these skills to assist us, how do we address this topic as Christian parents? Thoughts on suicide vary from the act being an unpardonable sin to suicide indicating an inability to depend on or be grateful to God. The Bible indicates that believers cannot be separated from God in life or death (Romans 8:32) and most scholars agree in a lack of evidence that suicide cannot be forgiven. As for the idea that suicide indicates a lack of faith in God, in our youth and adult lives we are constantly in the process of learning and seeking God. Even those with strong faith encounter difficult circumstances or cope with mental health concerns.

The youth I counsel regarding suicide often have a common denominator: A perception that the issue they face is too large for them and they fear facing it alone. These conversations are a perfect opportunity for us to show the love of God in a willingness to love unconditionally and share life with our teens. A parent willing to listen and empathize will have a strong impact on his child. Although suicide is a very real and scary issue for us as parents, it is also an invaluable opportunity for us to partner with our children in their darkest times just as God walks with us through our darkest times. ■



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