



Trend Alert!

TEEN SUICIDE: WARNING SIGNS AND CRIES FOR HELP

By Walt Mueller

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It's an epic Olympic moment. It happened during the 1992 Olympics when Britain's Derek Redmond was sprinting around the track in the four-hundred-meter run. As Redmond sped around the backstretch, his right hamstring tore. How did you and I know he was hurt? He showed us. He stopped running, limped a few steps, and fell to the ground. His face contorted in response to the physical pain he was feeling. He grabbed his leg and rolled around on the ground. Those who were in close proximity heard him scream out in agony. We knew he was hurt because he told us not in words but through his actions. His physical pain was obvious to anyone who was watching.

Teenagers who attempt suicide give signs. It is estimated that about 80 percent of those who take their life communicate their intention to someone prior to the act. While they may not always communicate their pain and intentions with verbal clarity, the signs are there. But they may never be heard unless we know what to watch for.

Here are five categories of signs and cries that teens may give before attempting or committing suicide. Carefully read through the descriptions of these signs, realizing that they will usually appear in some combination in a teenager's life.

Emotional cries

Teenagers, by nature, can be moody. But not all of their moody behavior should be written off as just a part of the adolescent stage. There are several unusual and extreme emotional cries for help that can clue us in to our teenagers' struggles with hopelessness, depression, and suicidal feelings.

The first emotional cry can be heard in the classical signs of depression (*found on page 2*). If these symptoms continue for two or more weeks, then it is time to seek help.



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Common Signs and Symptoms of Adolescent Depression

- PERSISTENT SADNESS, TEARS, CRYING
- FLUCTUATION BETWEEN SILENT APATHY AND EXCITED TALKATIVENESS
- AN INABILITY TO CONCENTRATE
- PERSISTENT BOREDOM
- FATIGUE
- FEELINGS OF GUILT
- A MAJOR CHANGE IN EATING AND/OR SLEEPING PATTERNS
- WITHDRAWAL FROM FRIENDS AND FAMILY
- TALK ABOUT RUNNING AWAY FROM HOME
- COMPLAINING ABOUT HEADACHES AND STOMACHACHES
- SEVERE WEIGHT GAIN OR LOSS
- INSOMNIA OR OVERSLEEPING
- DECREASING GRADES AND AN UNWILLINGNESS TO WORK IN SCHOOL
- TRUANCY
- RAPID MOOD SWINGS
- LACK OF INTEREST IN REGULAR ACTIVITIES (SPORTS, CHURCH, MUSIC LESSONS, YOUTH GROUP, ETC.)
- PESSIMISM ABOUT THE FUTURE
- EXPRESSIONS OF HELPLESSNESS, WORTHLESSNESS, HOPELESSNESS
- AGGRESSIVE AND REBELLIOUS BEHAVIOR
- PREOCCUPATION WITH DEATH OR SUICIDE

Withdrawal from normal activities is a second emotional cry. When teenagers suddenly separate themselves from friends, family, objects, and activities that are normally a large part of their life, trouble may be brewing. Depressed and suicidal teens may want to spend more time than usual alone or in their room.

The calm before the storm occurs when a teen's spirits improve suddenly and dramatically after a period of deep and extended depression. Psychologists say that this is a very dangerous time since the teen's "peace" may actually exist because the decision has been made to take their life. They are excited because they feel like they have finally found the solution to their problems and the pain will soon be over. Parents should be very cautious when a teen who has a history of depression appears to be dramatically and suddenly improved.

Physical cries

Sometimes an observant eye is all it takes to tell that a teen is depressed or suicidal. Here are some physical cries that you might hear as a result of being aware of your teen's physical demeanor and day-to-day habits.

Physical complaints are sometimes heard from teens who experience depression and suicidal thoughts. Stomachaches, headaches, and constant fatigue are a common occurrence among teens who are finding adolescence and the pressure of their life too much to handle.

A neglect of physical appearance, characterized by sloppiness and poor personal hygiene, could be a way of saying, "Why should I bother? Nobody cares about me anyway." Teens who feel worthless sometimes begin to look worthless.

A change in normal eating and sleeping habits is also a sign of trouble. Suicidal teens will sometimes sleep more, eat less, and even develop one of the disordered eating patterns already discussed.

Finally, body language that shows an inability to concentrate can be a sign that a child is preoccupied with problems and depression. Slouching, staring off into space, and constant daydreaming may occur when the pain of what is going on inside drowns out an awareness of what might be happening in the same room.

Behavioral cries

Teens who struggle with depression and suicide sometimes decide to become involved in some strange and frightening new behaviors.

Accident proneness can become a conscious or unconscious attention-getting device for teens who desperately want someone to notice them. Teens who feel shut off from others find the attention they receive after an accident to be a form of immediate reinforcement. These cries for attention can also be cries for help.

Acting out or other melodramatic behavior is another common attention getter. I remember one girl who always acted like the world was coming to an end. When she felt that her friends were starting to ignore her, she would quickly step on stage and respond like a terrible actress to some new crisis that she had thought up. It didn't take long for her friends to catch on to her act. As her fantasy world came crashing down, she would move on to a new circle of friends that would respond in the way she wanted. Sadly, this was a cry to be noticed, loved, and cared for by a girl whose father had emotionally rejected her, leaving her depressed and feeling worthless.

A preoccupation with violence and unusually aggressive behavior are clear signs that something is wrong. Some suicidal teens will fight, yell, break things, and throw objects during increasingly frequent fits of rage. Some will be mesmerized by movie and television violence, renting and viewing violent films. Others will purchase or attempt to build weapons.

Self-destructive behavior and involvement in dangerous activities are signs that a teen may have little or no regard for their personal safety or life. Many suicidal teens will live life on the edge by driving fast, playing dangerous games with weapons, or playing chicken with their cars and bikes. Any sort of high-risk activity of this type merits attention.

Promiscuous sexual behavior is often an attempt to sedate strong feelings of failure and depression. Kids who see themselves as worthless, unloved, and rejected will look for acceptance and love through sexual intimacy.

Drug and alcohol abuse has already been discussed as a factor contributing to suicide. While their abuse appears to contribute to suicide by aggravating and exaggerating

depressed feelings and suicidal tendencies, their use can also point to the presence of depression and suicidal feelings.

Sudden rebellious and disrespectful behavior towards parents, teachers, and other authorities may indicate that a teen has decided to take their fate into their own hands rather than listen to the wisdom and advice of those they may have respected at one time.

A drop in grades and increased truancy are not uncommon when a teen is preoccupied with so many problems that they find it impossible or undesirable to care about schoolwork.

Preparing for death is a clear sign that a teen has decided to commit suicide. Many teens who have made the decision will begin to give away valued personal items to close friends or family members.

Teens who think about killing themselves will sometimes become preoccupied with death. They may write poetry or stories focusing on death or other morbid themes. Their musical tastes may change and lean toward an interest in music and media that portray and glamorize hopelessness and death. Their preoccupation with death may even lead them to dye their hair and dress in black.

Preparing for death is a clear sign that a teen has decided to commit suicide. Many teens who have made the decision will begin to give away valued personal items to close friends or family members. They will say good-bye and take care of other personal business. And they will acquire the means by which they intend to kill themselves (rope, guns, pills, etc.).

It seems strange that this last behavioral cry has to be mentioned, but the fact that many parents don't hear this loudest of all screams warrants its inclusion. A suicide attempt should not be brushed off lightly.

Your teen is crying for help and wants you to get involved in dealing with their issues and problems.

Situational cries

Researchers and counseling professionals have noted that there are numerous unpleasant life changes that affect teenagers more deeply than any other group of people because of the difficult developmental stage at which teens find themselves. These events might precipitate feelings of failure, loneliness, depression, and suicide. Life becomes even more difficult if more than one of these circumstances are experienced at the same time.

A teenager might commit suicide after losing friends and social status following a family move from one community to another. Other situations include a romantic breakup, death of a friend or loved one, unplanned pregnancy, getting bullied, divorce, or academic failure. Parents should be especially sensitive to the emotional needs of their teenagers during these times of personal crisis. Sometimes we falsely assume that they will be able to adapt to change as well as we can. Don't forget that we are adults, and they are still children.

Verbal cries

Parents who listen to their children might be alerted to suicidal intent by the words they hear from their children. A child who says things like "I won't be a problem for you much longer," "Nothing really matters anymore," "It's no use," "I won't see you again," or "I'd be better off dead" may have already decided their fate.

Some people have speculated that people who talk about suicide won't ever commit suicide. Don't believe it. It's only a myth. Most suicidal acts are preceded by some warning or cry. All of those cries and warnings should be taken seriously.

When Derek Redmond fell to the track in pain during the 1992 Summer Olympics, an amazing thing happened. As he stood up and began to hobble around the track in an effort to finish the race, his father came out of the stands, rushed past security guards, came to his son's side, and embraced him. With his son's head buried in his shoulder and the crowd cheering, Jim Redmond led his son around the track and to the finish line. It was learned later that when Jim Redmond came to his son's side, he told him, "We're going to finish this together."¹

When our children and teens cry out in pain during the difficult years of adolescence, we must listen, drop everything, rush to their sides, help them up, support them, and tell them that we will work with them to get them through the difficult race that lies ahead. . . *together*.

¹ Kenny Moore, "Ode to Joy," *Sports Illustrated*, 17 August 1992, 30.

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