The World is Too Much With Us: Social Media and Increased Teen Suicide

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers
William Wordsworth, 1802 (1)

As a mental health clinician working within our local hospital, I am confronted every day with teens who are suicidal. Regardless of the years of experience that any of us may have in working with this population, there is constant surprise at the volume of cases and shock when repeated attempts are made. When suicide completion occurs, we are left to reflect on our own efforts and to wonder whether we as individuals, and as a collective society, have done enough. With these thoughts in mind I am compelled to share my experiences and concerns.

Within today's culture, there is a trend towards increased suicidal behaviour among our youth. While effective intervention has to focus on understanding the internal thoughts and feelings of the individual involved, consideration for the larger social context in which they are embedded is essential. Involving family members not only enhances our insight, but provides an opportunity to address potential areas of tension and conflict while engaging in safety planning. What remains less available, within traditional counselling interventions, is access to other social forces and, in particular, the critical influence of peer relations within the adolescent's world. Hospitalized teens may benefit from the sanctuary of time away from the pressure of their lives, and some may have the capacity to engage in supported self-reflection. They will, however, return to the environments that contributed to their hopelessness and to the potential continuation of habits of self-destruction. Typical suicidal assessments explore common risk factors, such as substance use and mood disorders, as well as, exposure to completed suicides within family relations and peers. This later consideration is based on the well documented reality of the contagent nature of suicide. The more an individual is exposed to attempted and completed suicides, particularly within meaningful relations, the higher the risk for their own suicidal thoughts will be.

The 'Contagion Affect' alone may account for an alarming trend that is emerging and providing practice-based evidence that should be of high concern. Many contemporary teens are revealing their common habit of significant engagement in social media sites that are used to connect them with other suicidal teens. Having interviewed patient after patient who have described entrenchment in this shared activity, many questions arise regarding the impact of social-media use and increased adolescent suicide in the culture of our time. It feels important to explore the nature and attraction of social media in the lives of teens and why connecting with a common interest in suicidal ideation is so dangerous.

The Attraction and Addiction of Social Media for Adolescence

From a developmental perspective, the age of adolescence is marked by a shift in attachment from parental caregivers to same age peers. There are volumes of developmental psychology texts describing the inherent pressure on teens to become autonomous, within a separate identity from their parents, and yet establish some sense of self-esteem through inclusion with and acceptance from peers. Struggling to understand who they are and how they can fit-in to their evolving and expanding world, while undergoing hormonal upheaval, provides a dramatic metamorphous that is often overwhelming to even the most secure personality. It is the age of the 'Fish Bowl Affect' as teens become more self-conscious and absorbed in existential questions such as; Why am I here? What is life all about? and, Will I have what it takes to be happy and successful with my life? In addition, we cannot underestimate the powerful emotions that emerge related to sexual identity and whether a teen will, not only be accepted for who they are by their peers, but, be attractive to desirable partners.

While past generations have shared in the experience of this tumultuous age, the advent of social-media technology places intensified opportunities for positive and negative feedback, related to acceptance and identity formation, directly (and literally!) in the hands of contemporary teens. Today's youth are networked together in immediate connections with one another, fulfilling their developmental need for attachment and inclusion. There is, however, an inherent risk that, like Narcissus of Greek mythology, adolescents can be increasingly drawn to stare at their own reflection, in the pool of their glowing screen, compelled towards further self-absorption.

From a mental health perspective, increased dependence on screen-time raises several issues of concern. Basic health needs are met through proper sleep hygiene and exercise, particularly outside in nature. Further adverse consequences occur when marginalized individuals rely on Internet connections to meet their social needs. Teens are particularly vulnerable to the seduction of social-media sites that offer pseudo-relationships through cyberspace networks. With a click of the finger they can access apparent social relationships and connections to others, while drawing attention towards themselves, as they post their own comments and pictures. In his

recent novel, <u>The Big Disconnect: The Story of Technology and Loneliness</u> *(2)*, author Giles Slade (2012) presents a historical account of humans evolving towards a dependence on machines to fulfill our needs. He argues that we are increasingly moving away from involvement in natural social relations, towards technologically mediated interactions that do not meet real human needs. He concludes with an encouragement to spend more direct physical time together with those we care for, and to do so as much as possible, in the green outdoors (again!).

It is difficult and ill-advised to argue these concerns with teens if we want to support them towards a healthy change. They will not only dismiss criticism of social media as naive and prehistoric, but will also defend their habits and feel threatened if we approach them from a position of authority. Clearly, older generations struggle to understand the world in which they live, as our personal experience is so different from theirs. The attachment that many youth feel towards their technology devices has for them replaced the security blanky they just recently discarded. The challenge that professional helpers face, will be to address their dependence by appealing to their sense of health, while enlisting the support of caregivers around them to offer support. For many suicidal youth, they have given up on their own future wellbeing for a variety of personal reasons and are often disconnected from the healthy support that may be around them.

What is it about our age of informational technology that has left our youth so vulnerable? Clearly, times have changed and we have moved from a society that focussed on the protection of children, within what was known as a 'Nuclear Family', towards what psychologist David Elkind *(3)*, back in 1994, labeled as the new "Permeable Family". This description seems even more prophetic in considering the manner in which youth today are constantly exposed to ever increasing amounts of Internet material that can be damaging in many ways. The layers of protection in which most children were once embedded are gone, and now as Wordsworth feared the world has become even more "too much with us", entering directly into our homes and then into our minds and hearts through technology. The eventual cost of this permeable existence may be difficult to predict and research slow to prove, but the example of suicide contagent among cyberworld connected youth may provide insight.

From personal experience, I have been consistently meeting emotionally troubled youth who are describing the use of social-media sites that they use to post their own suicidal thoughts and to connect with other like minded peers. In addition, these often depressed and marginalized youth are doing so while alone, isolated in their rooms at night, while their naive families are unaware and asleep. The result is increased isolation and poor sleep hygiene, along with identification with other ill youth, who they feel an intense social connection and bond with.

The phenomena of illness promoting cyber subcultures is well documented in other self-destructive behavioural habits, such as self-mutilation and eating disorders. Individuals can easily search for and find those who dwell on and describe their own self-destructive behaviour, and in many cases actively encourage others to follow their example *(5)*. While it is true that the Internet can offer sites that support health and discourage self-destruction, studies have shown

(4) that these sites receive less visits in comparison to those that promote self-harm. It is speculation at this time whether it is our natural human condition towards morbid fascination or other potential social reinforcements that are acting on these youth to encourage this behaviour. It is clear, however, that it is happening at a much larger scale than most adults are aware. Personal examples include a 15 year old female who was proud to anounce that she had "100 followers on her Tumblr site", who followed her suicide related pictures and comments, and a 16 year old male who described, like many others, using Facebook messaging to engage his cyber-friends in supporting him when he felt suicidal. It is concerning to realize that suicidality is being used as the common ground for relationship building and that posting messages regarding one's suicidal thoughts would offer needy youth immediate social connections. Clearly this attention can be reinforcing for this behaviour and that the majority of youth involved in the activity have no conscious awareness of the dangerous slippery slope they are on.

Intervening in Suicide Promoting Social Media Use

Counselors who attempt to intervene with youth, who are using social media to engage in suicide related posting, face significant challenges. Regardless of the theoretical approach that is used, the ability to encourage behavioural change in the lives of adolescence will be dependent on their reception to the particular helping professional. While we cannot change who we are, and there is no guarantee of a comfortable fit, familiarity with client-centered techniques to foster engagement remains the tried-and-true course of action in forming a therapeutic alliance. When we can present our genuine, empathic and accepting selves, rather than a more distant and judgmental authority, we may be able to encourage youth to work with us towards change. Sensitivity towards this reality supports the use of a cautionary and tentative manner that will not alienate the already troubled and often hopeless suicidal youth. Awareness of the dangers of social networking may provide a meaningful exploration within discussions, but the receptiveness of the youth themslef remains the indicator for how this subject should be approached.

In many ways suicide related cyber-behavoiur could be conceptualized as an addiction. Youth, however, are not likely to view it that way and will naturally resist controlling forces that attempt to block access to their habit. As in addiction counselling, <u>Motivational Interviewing</u> techniques, that explore the personal costs and benefits within "Stages of Change", can offer effective guidelines. A "Precontemplative" client requires encouragement to even consider how internet behaviour may relate to their suicidal ideation and a more psycho-educational exploration could be beneficial. A "Contemplative" client on the other hand, understands the influence that social media can have on them and can benefit from support to explore replacement activities for the habits that they have formed. In an ideal world, youth will be encouraged to take responsibility for their own health and well-being by developing habits and activities that are more life-enhancing. Encouraging them to become more physically active, preferably in communion with the great outdoors, nature and animals, along with developing healthy eating and sleeping habits can be offered, within consideration to their receptiveness. Dependence on electronic technologies to fill our needs is not only a concern in the area of social relationships, but also as

a disconnection from the natural world around us. <u>Green Therapy</u> promotes a reconnection with nature as a way to gain emotional and physical balance in this often unnatural world.

<u>Cognitive Behavioural Therapy</u> approaches can be effective with youth who are receptive to engaging in self-reflective dialogue. The common sense concepts inherent in this model provide a framework to explore how the things that we focus on will affect the way we feel and how this in turn influences the behaviours we do. Clearly the more time you spend thinking about and focussing on a particular subject the more familiar it becomes and the more it is on your mind. This concept is directly related to the reality of suicide contagent that was described earlier, as focusing on the suicide of others increases personal risk. Spending hours on end, emersed in the world of suicidal text conversations and visual images will lead to a higher probability of eventual suicidal behaviour. While there has been woafully few academic research studies into this phenomena, Zdanow and Wright (2012)*(4),* found conclusive evidence that those who engage in blogging about suicide are comparitivley more likely to engage in that behaviour.

Ideally, youth themselves will engage in the development of their own safety plan and make agreements to alter their social media habits. Regardless of their reception towards change, the inclusion of parents, or other support network individuals is essential. Caregivers are often naive of the impact of social media behaviours that teens engage in and are even less familiar with the content of sites that are used in the cyber-world. Adult education is needed to warn parents and other caregivers of the potential negative influences that may be contributing to their child's suicidal ideation. While the adolescent may not like it, parents and caregivers have to be aware of and monitor the use of social media sites, as best they can, to provide encouragement and support. Counselors can assist families to negotiate expectations, structures and routines around the use of electronic devices. As an example, making explicit the dangers of late night, free access, to social media as a risk to health, only from a sleep deprivation perspective, may be sufficient for families to develop limited time restrictions for their use. In the least, youth who have engaged in suicidal behaviours should have their use of social networking addressed and in some cases monitored for safety. It is always better to engage the youth in an open discussion of the dangers and in the development of agreements towards behavioural change. Often families will need ongoing facilitation of conversations to address these and other issues and to be able to develop their ability to do so in a non-confrontative or emotionally reactive manner.

As clinical counselors we should invest our efforts to advocate for change within our society in regard to the risks associated with uncensored access to the Internet and social-media sites. While freedom of expression and freedom to pursue personal interests are values worth defending, not at the cost of human lives. We are ethically bound to increase our understanding of the social dynamics of suicide contagent and to use our influence to educate others and promote increased social responsibility. Investment in research projects that can shed additional light on this subject is needed to provide the evidence to support policy changes and program development. In addition, all suicide assessments should include an exploration into the use of the Internet and social-media sites to consider the full impact of these behaviours on suicidal ideation.

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1.William Wordsworth, <u>The World is Too Much With Us,</u> circa 1802.
2.Giles Slade, <u>The Big Disconnect: The Story of Technology and Loneliness,</u> 2012.
3.David Elkind, <u>Ties That Stress: The New Family Imbalance,</u> 1994.
4.Zdanow C. and Wright B., The Representation of Self Injury and Suicide on Emo Social Networking Groups, <u>African Sociological Review, Vol. 16</u>, 2012.
5.Birbal R., Maharajh H. et el, Cybersuicide and the adolescent population: challenges of the future? <u>International Journal of Medical Health</u>, 2009.

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