

**TARGET MENTAL HEALTH
... and the facts are ...**

**This series of articles will run weekly on the
TARGET and Mental Health International websites**

2000-2010

THE DEADLY DECADE

Suicide: Special Burden of the Young.

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Suicide is the third leading cause of death among young people 15-24 years of age. In North America, suicides outnumber homicides. Despite this jarring fact, a Canadian parliamentary motion making suicide prevention a national priority has moved tortuously slowly through the channels of government with still nothing to show for it.

Government officials in Canada might wish to inject some urgency into its task by considering this analogy of the tragic challenge at hand:

- In Canada, the number of kids who take their own lives is equivalent to a jumbo jet filled with teenagers crashing into the ground once a year - year in and year out – killing every kid on board.

Suicide has global reach. Mental illness and substance abuse are its truest companions. Perhaps as much as global warming or the threat of terrorism, suicide poses real risk to human liberty and rights of citizenship and opportunity.

Blinded by Stereotypes

Depression is the root cause of nine of every ten suicides. Suicide is not an expression of the weak. It is a choice of the desperate. This brings us to a theme we must embrace – prevention.

Mental Health International has re-released guidelines for working parents to prevent suicide among their adolescent children. It is available at www.mentalhealthinternational.ca. These guidelines start with the proposition that parents must be honest with themselves: do they – do we – harbor stereotypes of mental illness which may blind us to the distress we would otherwise detect in our own children?

A question we must not dodge. A question that we answer by way of research to learn how best to inform and educate our children – and ourselves - on how to avoid the risks of suicide. In the US, more soldiers now die from suicide than enemy fire. Americans lose more lives to suicide in any two year period than they lost in the entire Vietnam War.

Suicide is an especially deep ravine in human experience and the leading cause of violent death in the world.

Deadly Decade

If we project the casualties of suicide across the decade ending in 2010, it is conceivable that nearly three-quarters of a million people took their own lives in North America and Europe in that deadly decade. In suicide terms, the 21st century got off to a deadly start.

Completing suicide is a final act that tends to draw our attention away from the implications of attempted suicide. In Canada for example, there is an average of 10 suicides per day or 4000 a year but 17,500 Canadians were sent to hospital in 2010 for self-inflicted injuries.

Women try the most, men die the most

The highest concentration of suicide-related hospital admissions was among young women 15 to 19 years of age. Here we see an ironic twist. While 50% fewer men attempt suicide, men are three times more likely to die from suicide. Men die the most. Women try the most.

In the United States and Sweden, suicide rates actually declined since the 1980s except in the younger age group of 15 to 24 years. In Ireland, 40% of all deaths among young men 30 years of age and under are due to suicide. In Europe, 22/100,000 boys take their own lives; girls, 4.8/100,000.

The Brain and Behavior Research Foundation and the National Alliance for Research in Schizophrenia in the United States found “abundant evidence that suggests changes in one of the brains neurotransmission systems may occur among people who attempt suicide.”

Researchers are looking at one version of one gene in particular which appears to increase this risk” and are investigating treatment options for those who carry this vulnerable gene, using brain imaging technology to trace neural circuitry associated with suicidal ideation.

Family Risk

Notably, studies are now assessing the impact of suicide on family survivors including children. Parental suicides raise the risk that a child will follow, but not all do. What are the factors that make this life-and-death difference, what are the treatment options?

The team of Dr. Gustavo Turecki at the Douglas Institute for Mental Health, an affiliate of McGill University in Montreal, Canada, is a world leader in suicide prevention and breaking new ground in a field that demands greater public attention. The Parliament of Canada voted unanimously to make suicide prevention a national priority and the government is now consulting Canadians on what that would mean and how to take this resolution forward in a meaningful way.

One applauds this but we also note that it has been more around two years since the resolution was passed and another 4,000 Canadians have lost their lives. It will be in the interest of governments, business organizations and society broadly to unlock the mysteries of suicide in order to prevent it.

But slow-footed, tentative approaches will defeat such and the effort before it even begins in earnest. Meanwhile, we can understand what some of the steps are, taken in desperation, leading to a deadly end.

The list follows:

Ten Steps Toward Suicide (Developed by Mental Health International)

1. Emotional isolation
 - Malignant loss of self-esteem and usefulness
2. Peer pressure and exclusion
 - Deep sense of having lost acceptance, recognition, belonging
3. Void of joblessness
 - Deep sense of loss of identity, self-worth
4. Emptiness of depression
 - Pervasive loss of the energy and motivation to live
5. Impulse
 - Why not right now
6. Drugs/alcohol
 - Desperation peaks
7. Available means
 - Gun, rope, drugs, locale
8. Family history of suicide
 - Higher risk
9. Youth and children
 - Altered perceptions of death and dying; loss of place
10. Social disadvantage and grievance
 - The profound weariness of perpetual worry and seething.

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