

Youth Suicide: Breaking the Silence

by Ian Manion and Catherine Lee

It is frightening to think that children or youth can be in such emotional pain that they actually consider harming themselves or wish they were dead. And yet, about a quarter of young people aged 13 to 18 years of age have thought about killing themselves at some time in their relatively young lives.

Are some youth at greater risk?

Many things place youth at risk for suicidal thoughts and behaviours. These include poor physical health as well as behaviour problems and depression. Young people who are impulsive, who lack assertiveness, who have trouble managing their feelings, and who have limited problem-solving skills can be prone to unhealthy ways of coping with the challenges in their lives, including thinking about hurting themselves. Those who have experienced abuse (physical, sexual, emotional, bullying) are also at greater risk.

Many young people who become suicidal have also experienced some significant losses in their lives. This can be an actual loss such as the death of a family member, a cherished pet, the loss of regular contact with a family member through separation or divorce, or the end of a romantic relationship. It can also be a feeling that they have no friends, or losing status with their peer group because of recent events or failures. In all of these situations, the child or youth feels a great deal of emotional pain with few healthy ways of coping with it.

What are the warning signs?

There is no absolute way of determining who may be at risk for suicidal thoughts or behaviours, but there are a number of warning signs. The key is that the better you know someone, the better you will be able to determine when there is a problem. The following are some of the warning signs to look for:

☞ *significant change in mood during meetings or activities (more quiet and sad or more irritable and disruptive).*

☞ *being very down on themselves, feeling hopeless or helpless in the face of their current life challenges.*

☞ *a loss of interest in things they used to enjoy. This could show itself as reluctance to engage in certain Scouting activities that they enjoyed previously. The youth who starts missing meetings with no apparent reason may be struggling with some issues beyond their ability to cope.*

☞ *some youth will begin to pull away from their peers and isolate themselves. This might translate into a youth being more quiet and withdrawn (when he/she used to be an active and vocal participant).*

☞ *difficulty concentrating and problems with judgment and memory that were not there previously.*

☞ *some youth will start to talk about death either directly or indirectly. This may be in writing or as comments to peers.*

☞ *some youth will start to engage in very risky behaviour, putting themselves in potentially harmful situations.*

The importance of peers

Many youth keep such things to themselves rather than talk with someone else. About one third of youth experiencing thoughts of hurting themselves do not speak to anyone. Silence is the worst enemy in trying to prevent suicide. The most important kind of help is a person to talk to. Knowing that leaders are receptive and there to support them when in distress provides a safety net for youth who are trying to help their friends or learning to cope themselves.

What can be done to help?

Build a strong program

Risks can be decreased by anything that helps to strengthen a person's sense of hope, problem solving skills, communication skills, sense of feeling connected and belonging, as well as their sense of being supported. All of these are central goals of the Scout program. By giving youth a safe place where they can feel that they are part of something worthwhile, where

Offer them a
friendly shoulder



Photo: Lauri Cunningham

they are valued and capable of making a meaningful contribution, they can feel good about themselves and will be less likely to rely on unhealthy ways of coping.

Scouting provides physical outlets as well as the opportunity to develop skills in a variety of areas. The positive effects on a young person's self-esteem can be felt throughout the various parts of their lives (school, home, social network).

Respectful environment

Leaders play a central role for the youth in our programs. By providing a safe environment and by being attentive to a youth's need to open up and talk at times, a leader can truly be a lifeline for at-risk youth.

By fostering an environment where youth are respectful of each other, and where each member of a group feels valued, leaders help youth develop and foster self-esteem which is important in coping with challenges.

Maintain a sense of belonging

Reminders about meetings are helpful in maintaining regular attendance. If a young person starts missing meetings, make a point to call and let them know they are missed; tell them about upcoming activities and let them know you hope they will be there.

At the beginning of a new year, contact youth who will be continuing in the program to invite them to register.

Be a good role model

Leaders can provide a great example of optimism, resourcefulness and problem-solving. Offer an example of good coping. Show youth an appropriate example of expression of feelings. When you are feeling frustrated, discouraged, or irritable make sure that you do not become critical or disrespectful.

A listening ear

Unhappy youth are more likely to talk to their peers than directly to leaders. It is possible that leaders will hear about a problem through another youth. If a young person tells you of concerns about someone else, thank them and make a point of talking to the troubled individual. Let him/her know that you've noticed some changes lately and you are wondering if everything is okay. Leaders can also serve as an important bridge in connecting the young person to other services such as the Canadian Kids Help Phone or to mental health profession-

Important Messages Learned in Scouting

• Your ideas are important

By listening to young people and creating an environment that respects their views, we convey the message that each person has valuable ideas. Scouting can offer a place where young people have diverse opportunities to show peers and leaders what is important to them.

• Together we can solve problems

The Scouting program is designed to promote teamwork. Within colonies, packs, patrols, troops, and regions we draw on the hard work, good humour, wisdom and creativity of a large community.

• You make an important contribution to the program

As youth progress through the programs they are given greater responsibility for planning activities and conducting events. In a series of small steps they can take on increasing

responsibilities in helping their peers, leaders, and younger youth. This can be invaluable in building self-esteem.

• You are capable of learning new things

The badge system offers numerous ways for youth to showcase their talents. The wide range of badges that can be earned allows young people with diverse interests to be aware of and share their skills and interests.

• You are resourceful

Many of the activities in Scouting present new challenges. Young people may not know they have the skills to approach people in the community during fundraising, teach a game to younger people, finish a long hike, or get through a rainy camp. When they accomplish these things, they have an opportunity to become aware of their many skills and resources.

als. Let the young person know that other youth who have felt down and thought about hurting themselves have found help. X

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Further resources

Canadian Kids Help Phone
Phone: 1-800-668-6868
Internet: kidshelp.sympatico.ca

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