

Stress and Teen-age Suicide

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Traffic accidents, homicides, and suicides are the main causes of teen-age death in the United States today. And not necessarily in the above order. Many in the medical and psychiatric fields believe suicide is the #1 killer—that a lot of accidents and homicides among the young are really suicides in disguise.

According to a Grand Rapids Press article of October 22, 1983, “Teen Suicide”, “more than 5,600 young men and women under the age of 25 took their lives in 1981, the most recent year with figures available.”

In an earlier January 1, 1979 Grand Rapids Press article, “Teen Age Suicide: In Search of an Answer”, the author Randy Shipps wrote:

- “nearly 5,000 Americans under age 24 committed suicide in 1977.”
 - “An additional 100,000 tried to do so.”
 - “200,000 to 300,000 more contemplated it.”
 - “This means that 10 to 15% of America’s young people had contemplated it.”
- “The suicide rate among the young has nearly tripled in the last two decades.”

In “A Cry for Help”, an article written for Family Circle Magazine by Dr. Mary Giffin and Carol Felsenthal, a study of 7,000 high school students showed that one in five had severe feelings of failure, alienation, loneliness, low self-esteem, and suicidal thoughts.

According to these writers an average of 18 youngsters kill themselves every day and about 57 children and adolescents attempt suicide every hour.

These are sobering statistics, people. The young teen-agers who commit suicide and attempt to commit suicide come from every stratum of society. They live in the rich upper classes of society, in the affluent middle classes of society and in the poverty stricken lower classes of society. The victims include girls as well as boys. Some have had religious upbringings and others have not. They include whites, blacks and people of other races.

Suicide is, of course, a violation of the sixth commandment: “Thou shalt not kill”. To kill oneself is as much a breaking of the sixth commandment as to kill someone else. Perhaps even more so. A person who murders another person is alive to be sorry for his sin and to repent of it. This is hardly possible when one takes his own life. Whether this implies that a suicide is, through this very act of self-murder, condemned to eternal destruction is best left to the Lord’s judgment. It is, however, something that anyone contemplating suicide should consider carefully before taking this final step of self-destruction.

In Scripture in the six specific instances where suicide was actually achieved, none of them were God fearing people. The six I have in mind are Abimelech, the son of Gideon; Saul and his armour bearer (we know little about the life of Saul’s armour bearer so it’s difficult to make a determination in this case); Ahithophel, David’s counselor; Zimri, the sixth king of the ten tribes; and Judas Iscariot. In one case we have recorded for us an attempted suicide—the Philippian jailor. Though he was indeed a child of God, he was unconverted at the time he contemplated the taking of his own life. God powerfully prevented him from committing this rash deed.

I think it unlikely that a child of God would actually take his or her own life. But there may be extenuating circumstances in which a child of God may be mentally incompetent and irresponsible to such an extent that he or she accomplishes his or her own death. I believe, therefore, it is best to leave this matter to God.

Those who have made it their life’s work to study the problem of suicide are very much

concerned about the rapid increases in the past couple of decades in teen-age suicide.

Although people have been destroying themselves since the beginning of time, it's the escalating frequency in our modern age that is causing rising concern.

Medical men and psychiatrists are searching for the reasons why teenagers and young adults are turning more and more to suicide as a way out of difficulties.

One of the primary causes has to do with stress. In our competitive society today, young people often feel pressured to excel, to get good grades, to earn that scholarship in order to go to college.

Not only is their stress in the school situation but also in the home. "Family life also has been in disarray, with the high divorce rate and the added pressure when both parents work. Teenagers see a situation in which roughly half of all first marriages end in divorce." (U.S. News and World Report, April 2, 1984)

Sometimes it's family problems such as parents quarreling and fighting, or a brother or sister who refuses to honor and respect a parent. Stress can also result when parents openly criticize those in authority.

Tension and stressful situations also occur when young people begin to date. In our modern society young people are allowed and even encouraged to date before they are mature enough to date. They have their wild flings and disastrous break-ups and aren't mature enough to cope. They become depressed.

The need to make career decisions can cause tension. The media is enamored with the rich in society and the possibility of getting rich. Careers for young women and executive positions for young men are held before the eyes of young people in all their "dazzling brightness". Besides this, larger numbers of young people are competing for these high paying jobs and thus, not everyone is successful. The urge, the desire, the compulsion to get ahead in the world, have real potential for stress.

Furthermore, stress can be a direct result of the death of a loved one: of a parent, a brother or sister, a girlfriend or a boyfriend.

Another factor that often leads to suicide is the increased "incidence of drugs and alcohol abuse and promiscuity in schools which adds to the confusion and chaos of young people and hurts their self-esteem." (U.S. News, April 2, 1984)

Stress and tension are realities for everyone. Yet it's something one learns to accept and deal with as he/she becomes older and more experienced. This age and experience teen-agers just don't have. Anxiety builds up and suicide begins to appeal more and more as the way out.

Stress is, no doubt, a contributing factor to many suicides. However, let us recognize that most, if not all, stress and anxiety is a result of sin. As parents it's important that we recognize this.

What's needed to avert suicidal tendencies in our children and young people are a strong commitment to the Reformed faith and strong, caring and loving families.

Sociologist Steven Stack of Penn State University hits the nail right on the head. He says that "a decline in religious values among the young makes them less resilient in facing life's difficulties. Religious activities clearly help to prevent suicide, yet this is a period in which it is harder to be religious."

Young people, "commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in Him and He shall bring it to pass". Psalm 37:5. Pray when you are anxious and when you despair for your Father in heaven is ever ready to hear and answer your prayers. Don't be surprised when you face stressful situations—rather expect them. Paul understands stress when he writes in II Corinthians 4:8-10, "We are

troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our lives.” Stress is common to everyone. Don't fool yourself into thinking that you are the only one in the whole world with problems. One of the common denominators of all mankind is that each experience stress.

Face your difficulties head on with the Bible in your hand. Suicide is not an option for a child of God.

Parents, make yourself available to your teen-agers. Learn to become good listeners. Hear out your teen-age sons and daughters. Oftentimes we are impatient with them and not very understanding. The obvious result is that our young people have, in many instances, developed a lack of trust. They are afraid to discuss their problems with us because they are afraid of an outburst from us. We need to be more caring and more loving. We have to be careful not to play down what are to the developing teen-ager most serious problems. With an impatient wave of the hand we can so easily discourage needful and healthy communication. We have a tendency to make ourselves so busy that we don't have time for the precious gift that God has given us—our families. Fellow parents, let us be constant in prayer beseeching our Father in heaven for an abundance of wisdom and grace.

Stress, young people, is common in the world of men since the day Adam fell. Adam never once experienced stress in the state of rectitude. But the instant he ate of the forbidden fruit he found out what stress was all about. He and Eve, his wife, no longer looked forward to walking and talking with the Lord in the garden. They tried to hide from Him instead. Since that day, sinful man has had to experience the stress brought about by sinful thoughts and actions.

Suicide should not be once named among us. Young people, or anyone for that matter who might be considering this final step, suicide is not the solution.

Live each day as unto the Lord. Strengthen yourself in the Lord when troubles overwhelm you. Be spiritually minded and mindless about the material things of the earth that moth and rust corrupt and thieves break through to steal. Remember that God is always in the midst of His people and ever ready to help in time of trouble. That is His promise to you. Take Him at His Word.

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