

## Youth Depression and Suicide

### Not My Child...or is it?

Would you notice if your daughter's grades slipped in her best subject?  
*Definitely.*

Would you notice if your son no longer hung out with his friends?  
*Probably.*

Would you notice if your teen lost interest in her favorite activities?  
*Maybe.*

At what point does your radar as a parent let you know that your child might be facing a problem more serious than having an occasional bad day? Have you noticed that your child:

- Is persistently sad;
- Withdraws from family and friends;
- Loses interest in activities that were once enjoyed;
- Is increasingly irritable, restless or agitated;
- Frequently complains about physical symptoms, such as headaches and stomachaches;
- Has exhibited changes in their eating and sleeping habits;
- Lacks enthusiasm or motivation;
- Has a decreased energy level or is chronically fatigued;
- Plays with excessive aggression toward self or others, or focuses on sad themes during play;
- Experiences feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt;
- Is indecisive, lacks concentration or is forgetful;
- Exhibits anger and rage or overreacts to criticism;
- Has recurring thoughts of death or ending their own life;
- Is abusing substances

No parent wants to think that something could be wrong with their child—that their child needs help. But statistics tell us the painful truth—there are kids around the country, and in our community, who are in real pain and are not getting the help they need to overcome that pain. Statistics, unfortunately, also tell us it isn't always someone else's child.

Nationally, suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15 to 24 year-olds. More teenagers and young adults die from suicide than all medical illnesses combined. Every day, 14 young people between the ages of 15 to 24 complete suicide— nearly one every hour and a half. **Untreated depression is the number one cause of suicide.**

And although these are national statistics, the local statistics for Fairfax County, our own backyard, are no less startling. According to the 2001 *Communities that Care* Survey of 8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders in the County, over one-third of the youth acknowledged feeling sad or hopeless for days or weeks at a time during the last 12 months; nearly one out of five reported that they had seriously considered suicide in the past year; over 8% indicated that they had attempted suicide in the past year, **and a majority of those had tried more than once.**

Just think about your high school down the street. One student out of three has felt sad or hopeless for days or weeks at a time. Almost 20% have seriously considered ending their own life. It's not just one or two students, but scores of kids—kids from households that may be just like yours.

What will it take for us to not only recognize the warning signs but to recognize that our children may need help? Will suicide and depression claim the life of our neighbor, our child's friend, or someone we love? There are many organizations and support networks that you as a parent can tap into to help your child, but it begins with the intimate knowledge that only you as a parent have of your son or daughter.

Recent advertisements on TV say that talking to your child is the best prevention against drugs, alcohol and smoking. Seeing your child with an open mind and an open heart is the best way to know if your child needs help. Sometimes you have to see things that you don't want to see. But it is better now than later.

Having recently become a parent, I wonder if my daughter and I will always be as close as we are now. Not quite a year old, she cannot verbally communicate with me, yet I am in tune to virtually her every need. Ten years from now, when she can vocalize her feelings will I be able to say the same thing? Will I actually hear and listen to what she's trying to tell me? Will I notice the changes in her behavior that I need to notice? I pray that the answers to all these questions are yes. I just need to keep my eyes wide open, no matter what I see or how painful it might be.

**Jennifer Heffron**, is the Co-Chair of the Fairfax Partnership for Youth's Community Taskforce on Youth Suicide and Depression and is also the Senior Director of Affiliate Outreach for the National Mental Health Association

For more information about depression and suicide please consult...

**American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry**

[www.aacap.org](http://www.aacap.org)

**American Association of Suicidology**

[www.suicidology.org](http://www.suicidology.org)

**American Foundation for Suicide Prevention**

[www.afsp.org](http://www.afsp.org)

**Families for Depression Awareness**

[www.familyaware.org](http://www.familyaware.org)

**Kristin Brooks Hope Center**

[www.hopeline.com](http://www.hopeline.com)

**National Mental Health Association**

[www.nmha.org](http://www.nmha.org) or [www.mpoweryouth.org](http://www.mpoweryouth.org)

**U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration**

[www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)

### **Five Tips if You Suspect Your Child is Contemplating Suicide**

**1. Talk with your child as soon as possible.** Talk in a calm and considerate manner about the specific things you have seen or felt that caused you to worry about his or her health. Voice your concern in a supportive and careful way by:

- Using "I" statements. For example, "I'm worried about your safety," or, "It makes me afraid to hear you talk about suicide."
- Avoid "You" statements that sound critical.
- Avoid giving simple solutions.

**2. Get help from a mental health professional immediately.** Consider contacting the school psychologist at your child's school, or your primary care physician who can provide you a referral to a mental health professional. You can also call the Fairfax-Falls Church Community Services Board at 703.481.4230, or their 24-hour emergency services line at 703.573.5679.

**3. Contact a crisis center.** If you suspect your child cannot wait for an appointment with a mental health professional call CrisisLink at 703.527.4077. For other crisis centers in your area call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1.800.273.TALK or 1.800.SUICIDE.

**4. Check out support groups.** Local hospitals, schools, community centers or faith centers often offer such opportunities. Sharing and hearing from other young people going through similar problems can really help.

**5. Educate yourself.** Learn about the warning signs for depression and suicide. Websites are a great way to do this quickly and easily.