

# Teens and Suicide: Recognizing the Signs and Sharing Hope



by JULIE LOWE

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Sam was a freshman in high school. He was an average student who played football and worked at his parents' furniture store on the weekends. Sam had friends, yet still felt stressed and disconnected. He battled a constant sense of being behind—in football, in schoolwork, and in keeping up with what his friends were doing on social media. It seemed to him that while his friends had fun, exciting lives, he did not. The pressure he felt to measure up in school, in sports, and with friends was overwhelming. The more he tried to keep up and fit in, the more isolated he felt. He didn't know how to express his growing sadness. Everyone around him seemed happy, but his life felt meaningless. What was the point?

Sam's parents noticed something was wrong. The changes seemed minor—he was quieter than usual, more lethargic, and less engaged at the furniture store. When they asked him if anything was wrong, Sam just shrugged and said he was tired. His parents chalked it up to midterms and his busy schedule.

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Sam's growing sadness, however, began to morph into despair, and he started ruminating about how much he wanted to stop "doing life." At first, the idea of suicide was a distant possibility, but it gave him comfort to think there was a way out. This led Sam to casually search the internet for ways to end his life. Then, over a period of months, his interest in suicide grew and he began to make detailed plans. Eventually, he decided to hang himself in the shed in the backyard.

As his mom dropped some laundry on his bed one morning, she saw his suicide note and rushed to the shed. She found him in time, still breathing.

Sadly, Sam's story is all too familiar. He is one of a growing number of young people who attempt to end their lives. In 2018, suicide was the second leading cause of death for young people between the ages of ten and twenty-four in the U.S., resulting in the loss of 6,807 lives.<sup>1</sup> A recent article in *USA Today* cites statistics that show that between 2006 and 2016 youth and teen suicide rates increased 70% for white youth and 77% for African American teens.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, we are facing a crisis. An increasing number of adolescents feel unable to manage the pressures and angst in their lives. They feel overwhelmed by hopelessness, with no sustaining sense of purpose. After a while, suicide is seen as their only means of escape. They need to know that life—their life—has meaning, and is worth living.

As both a mother and a counselor of children and families, this trend is of great concern to me. And though the Bible does not address suicide at great length, it has much to say about the meaning and purpose of our lives. It gives us ample reasons for hope, even when we feel overwhelmed by pain, suffering, and loss. Our problems and failures do not have the final say. That belongs to God, who can and does redeem all that has been broken.

The intent of this article is to help you to understand what makes modern teens vulnerable to suicide; recognize the warning signs; offer

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1. National Institute of Mental Health, "Suicide," updated January 2021, [https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide.shtml#part\\_154968](https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide.shtml#part_154968).

2. Jayne O'Donnell and Anne Saker, "Teen Suicide Is Soaring," *USA Today*, March 19, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2018/03/19/teen-suicide-soaring-do-spotty-mental-health-and-addiction-treatment-share-blame/428148002>.

suggestions for how to help teens who are struggling; and most importantly, show how faith in God can make all the difference. I am directing this mostly to parents, who see these problems close-up, but it is for anyone mentoring young people—youth leaders, counselors, and friends.

### **What Makes Teens Vulnerable to Suicide?**

Adolescence is a hard time of life. Who would want to go back to that age? I'm guessing hardly anybody. It's a time of social awkwardness, stress, and peer pressure. And though it is common for teens to experience anxiety and even depression, most of them get through it. But some teens become despairing, even suicidal. What, then, are some of the influences that might lead young people in this direction? Here are a few.

An increasing number of adolescents feel unable to manage the pressures and angst in their lives.

*Painful life events and problems.* Some young people are faced with experiences that are shocking, harmful, threatening, and have a traumatic effect on them. These experiences might be natural disasters (floods, wildfires, tornados). Or they could be manmade calamities such as house fires; car accidents; violent crimes; terrorism; child abuse or molestation; loss of someone significant; severe family violence; family conflict or divorce; addiction; bullying; or persistent, ongoing stress. Teens can also be affected by family pressures to succeed academically or by chronic medical or psychiatric conditions.

*Exposure to suicide.* When young people are exposed to the suicidal behavior of others, it can impact them significantly. Suicide clusters (suicides that tend to occur one after the other) desensitize teens to the idea of taking one's life. When suicide is normalized in this way, it loses some of its stigma and young people are more likely to begin to consider it for themselves.<sup>3</sup>

*Peer influence.* The most powerful influences are often those we accept without question. Kids' attraction to their peer group is one of them. Teens easily look to their friends for identity, for the rules on how to dress,

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3. Hanna Rosin, "The Silicon Valley Suicides," *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 2015.

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