

Teens in crisis

# Recognize suicide warning signs

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This is the second in a series on teens in crisis. Reporter Maxine Share uncovers the tell-tale signs of a youth contemplating suicide.

By MAXINE SHARE

Barbie started a fire in her room — purposely.

Two days later, the 14-year-old tried to kill herself.

In a separate incident, 16-year-old Tina broke down and cried in front of her mother. She'd never done that before.

The next day, she was in an emergency department having her stomach pumped.

Before these teenagers attempted suicide, each tried to communicate her despair. A parent familiar with symptoms of suicidal behavior may have received the message.

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But what symptoms should parents look for to determine if their teenager is experiencing more than just a "mood?" How should they react if they believe their child is suicidal?

The key may lie in knowing your child, because guidelines for assessing the seriousness of adolescents' depression are only that: guidelines. The adolescent may display all or none of the symptoms.

"It is the relative change that is important," according to Dr. Bob Simmons, coordinator of psychiatric emergency services at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto. "You have to know your youngster in terms of what is normal behavior for them," he says.

He attributes teenage suicide attempts to "parents not being in tune with what their adolescent is going through."

**Too late**

Eileen Blake, a volunteer with Telecare, a York Region crisis phone line adds, "Parents have to learn to take teenage depression seriously," and learn the signs of suicidal behavior.

Unfortunately, she says, "these things usually dawn on parents when it's too late."

It is the teenager's peers who are often the first to learn their friend is having suicidal thoughts.

"I often get clients from their friends," says Markham District High School guidance counsellor Carol Drake. "They'll say 'Mary's talking about dying, but we promised we wouldn't tell.' Confidentiality is very important to teenagers," she says.

**Tell an adult**

"I tell them, 'If your friend committed suicide, how would you feel? Would you rather have a dead friend you didn't tell on or a live friend who was a bit mad at you?'"

"Tell an adult who (you) trust has the good sense to deal with the situation," she says. "You cannot carry that person by yourself."

Dr. Simmons adds "peers can only do so much. They usually are struggling with very similar problems, and it's hard for one drowning person to save another."

While teens are likely to tell a friend if they are having suicidal thoughts, parents may be left in the dark. Knowing what to look for can prevent disaster.



The triangle on its apex represents a teenager in aware of the signals given off by a teen contemplating a suicide attempt. She is surrounded by parents and peers, who can help her work out a serious problem if they are

Mrs. Drake says she hasn't "lost a kid to suicide," in her 18-year career. "They've been found just by a whisker," or "I've clued in," she says. But to what?

**Consistent unhappiness**

"Some of it is instinct... If you know a person well, you get a feeling for what sort of state isn't normal for them."

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**One common sign guidance counsellor Carol Drake looks for is "consistent unhappiness over a period of time which is out of character for the child. A second indication is his or her perception of the future. If they are really serious about committing suicide, they don't see themselves with any future at all," says Mrs. Drake. "They have come to a point where they really don't want to live."**

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**No future plans**

"They have come to a point where they really don't want to live at all... and they can't imagine themselves beyond a month," says Mrs. Drake, "as adults," as parents, or with a career.

If she suspects a student is suicidal, she'll ask, "What do you want to take in school next year." She says they may respond with "Oh, I don't know. Maybe I won't be around."

Or, "they'll say 'I'm not ever going to be an adult anyway. I don't want to be 25 years old. I don't think I want to live that long.'"

However, she admits, "You can't always tell (if a teen is contemplating suicide) by outward personality."

**False front**

Dr. Simmons from Sick Chil-

dren's Hospital disagrees. "They may try to keep up a false front, but I would guess parents would get a sense of it if they were tuned in. They'll say, 'That doesn't seem like him either.'"

Barbie will vouch for that.

She says she thought her erratic behavior communicated her unhappiness to her mother: "I became a real bitch. I'd swear at her, come home late, slam the door and lock myself in the room. But she just reacted by punishing me. Never did she ask, 'What's wrong.'"

What was 'wrong' had been building for years.

**Started fire**

Barbie says she was sexually abused by her stepfather from ages 10 to 13.

"I didn't tell my mom because I didn't want to hurt her," she says. "But how could she not have known something was wrong with me?"

Days before she attempted suicide, Barbie visited her mother (at 14 years of age, she had moved out on her own). It was then she started a fire in her bedroom. "It wasn't my room anymore and I was just so angry." Luckily, the fire was put out before there was any significant damage.

Tina had a similar experience.

**No room**

When her parents separated, she moved out on her own. But she was unable to cope with the isolation and financial pressures of living alone. When her mother refused to let her move in with her, Tina became hysterical.

off her back," says her mother, "but she'd been upset since her dad and I broke up and that day, she just cried and cried."

"He (her husband) didn't want anyone else living with us in the apartment (there were two younger children with them in a two bedroom apartment).

"I knew she was upset," says her mother, still visibly upset nine years after Tina survived an overdose, "but I never dreamed she'd do that."

The young girl was saved after she phoned to say goodbye to her mother, who recalls, "It fright-

ened me, something in her voice. I went over (to her apartment) right away."

Dr. Simmons says Barbie and Tina's experiences are typical in many ways. First, their personalities and behavior changed dramatically, and second, their states of mind had evolved over time.

**Years of problems**

"In our experience, these are youngsters who have had problems for many years. It's not something that suddenly comes up," he says.

Dr. Simmons suggests parents may have difficulty discussing these problems with their teen because they may harbor false notions about the child/parent relationship.

He explains: "a mother may say 'I want to be a friend to my daughter,' he says, "but the daughter doesn't need a friend, she needs a parent."

"There has to be a gap," says Dr. Simmons, "but that doesn't mean there can't be communica-

tion over that separation."

He warns teenagers "experiencing pain may have a problem in their ability to communicate with others," and the onus is on the parent to get that child to talk.

**"When a love relationship ends, don't say, 'Oh well, there are more fish in the sea.' To make light of it really intensifies the pain," says counsellor Brian Cunningham.**

"Talking makes it feel better," he says. "Sharing the pain makes it easier to carry."

He admits that may be easier in theory than in practice, and recommends parents try different tactics to encourage communication.

"If your daughter is moping around and you ask what's bothering her, she may respond, 'Nothing,'" and apparently resent the imposition.

"...but if you feel something IS wrong, and you know, for example, that she's been dating, you could say, 'I haven't seen so-and-so around for sometime. That often-times opens up the door and often the floodgates,'" he says.

**Other clues**

And he cautions parents to regard their teenagers' problems seriously. "To make light of it really intensifies the pain," he says. "When a love relationship ends, don't say 'Oh well, there are more fish in the sea.'"

In addition to behavioral changes, experts concede teenagers may offer other clues if they are contemplating suicide.

Brian Cunningham, a therapist with Markham-Stouffville Family Life Centre, says the adolescent may bequeath his organs to science, become disruptive or apathetic, lose interest in school and in close friends, and alter his sleeping patterns. And he may put his life in order by drawing up a will or giving away his prize possessions, he says.

Of all the symptoms, the latter concerns experts most.

**Cherished possessions**

"When they give away things they have always cherished, says Mrs. Drake from Markham High, "that would worry me greatly."

Dr. Simmons doesn't mince words: "If he's already giving away his stereo, you've already missed the boat."

But he says "these are the exceptions; the small group of attempters who are successful. The breakdown in awareness (and) communication has come much earlier on."

However, Mr. Cunningham cautions this and other symptoms "are just clues... to increase sensitivity to the fact that perhaps something is going on in someone's life."

When even health care professionals cannot positively interpret the significance of adolescent behavior, what is a parent to do?

If you suspect your child is suicidal, advises Markham High's Carol Drake, "run, don't walk, to someone who can help you."

**Next week:**

**Help for suicidal teens; what it is, how it works and where to find it.**