

Essay about teenage suicide

[Science](#)



Why is there a sudden increase in teenage suicides?

At first glance, most people assume that in the affluent Bay Area where teenagers seem to have all they need and more, teenagesuicidewould not be an issue worth exploring. But lurking beneath the surface is an ugly and troubling trend where teenagers are taking their lives at an alarming rate. Suicides amongst teenagers have certainly been occurring for as long as they have been keeping statistics, but in the last 3 years the Bay Area has seen teenage suicides rising at an unprecedented rate. So what is to blame for teenagers feeling that they have no hope or alternatives other than suicide?

Research points to the fact that teenagers are growing up in a far different world than even kids from a decade ago. Teenagers today are facing numerous environmental, social, and financial obstacles that are pushing them to make the unthinkable choice of taking their own lives. The overall environment that teenagers are growing up in today has changed dramatically in recent years. One change that has occurred is in respect to the overall acceptance of one's sexual orientation. Most High Schools today have either informal or formal support groups for gay teenagers. Every T. V show aimed at the teenage audience either has gay characters or plots that freely discuss the conflicts that come from being gay. These factors are giving gay teenagers an outlet to feel comfortable to express their sexual orientation and "come out of the closet". I have a neighbor in her 30's who is gay and she told me that she didn't "come out of the closet" until early 20's because there were no support groups or forum that she felt would have supported her. She went on to explain to me that while she is happy that gay teenagers

today have more acceptance level than he did, but also has some concerns. “ While there are many people who are accepting of the gay community, there are just as many that don’t and it takes a high level of maturity in order to handle these conflicts and I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t have handled them very well as a teenager”. Hatzenbuehler conducted a study, reviewing different statistics on suicides comparing the differences between heterosexuals and homosexuals. “ The study found that lesbian/gay/bisexual youth were five times more likely to have attempted suicide in the last 12 months than heterosexual youth.

Nearly 20% of the lesbian and gay youth had attempted suicide, as had 22% of bisexual youth, compared to only four percent of their heterosexual peers” (Hatzenbuehler). So the environment teenagers are growing up in today seems to support the gay community and encourages our teenagers to be themselves and true to their sexual orientation. But on the other hand, studies point to the gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth not being fully able to handle the conflicts that arise and resort to suicide. A good example of this mixed message our gay teenagers face in our own state.

California is known for being liberal and accepting of gays. But look at the controversy of Proposition 8 which is trying to make gay marriage legal but can’t get passed in California. On the surface, it looks like California is the ideal environment, but if our own State will not accept the gay community, then what message does this send a 14 year old who has openly expressed his or her sexual orientation. “ Strategic analysis of the student information and the environmental index led Hatzenbuehler to conclude that

lesbian/gay/bisexual youths' risk of attempting suicide greatly increased in a negative environment.

They were 20% more likely to have attempted suicide in a negative social environment than in a positive one" (Hatzenbuehler). Ideally, we would hope that a gay teenager would grow up in a positive social environment but even if their family and high school is progressive enough to provide this, there are far too many other negative influences that he or she will encounter. Another environmental factor that plays into the teenager's minds is the media's unstable and confusing message about the world teenagers live in and see.

The media plays a pivotal role in the viewpoint and even the actions of teenagers today but the message they are hearing is confusing and at times undermines parents. "Youngsters are being inundated with encouragement to do negative things and even take their own lives - in their music, books, and movies...Let's hear no more of wondering why the suicide rate has skyrocketed. The answer is clearly that it is being encouraged" (Lagone 68). Today, it is almost impossible to turn on the TV to a popular teenage show and see good role models.

When the character has family problems, one rarely sees them approach a trusted adult or consult with a therapist. In a few episodes I have seen, it ends showing the character hanging him or her in classroom at school. Additionally, the media does not show other solutions that teenagers can take to deal with problems. Actors, characters in books, and especially song lyrics suggest that suicide is the only way to deal with problems. Also, the media is responsible for the coverage and wide exposure of the post 9/11 era.

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Teenagers today have grown up their whole lives witnessing more terrorist activity and coverage of war than perhaps any teenager group in history. This media exposure has resulted in young adults feeling they are a part of an unstable and unpredictable world. For example, “ Dr. Ian Cook, an associate professor of psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences at UCLA’s David Geffen school of medicine, who was not involved in the study, said stresses of modern life, particularly worries in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, might have a role” (Gellene).

While it is too soon to be absolutely certain there is a connection of the post 9/11 teenager and a spike in teenage suicides, one can see that the media’s coverage of a unpredictable and chaotic world is sending confusing messages to teenagers and perhaps guiding them to suicide as their solution. Another environmental factor facing teens today is the increased usage and acceptance of prescription drugs. When one imagines someone abusing drugs, marijuana or cocaine initially comes to mind. However, the newest form of drug abuse comes from those that are prescribed by doctors and 100% legal.

Prescription drugs are very prevalent in society today and very easy for teens to get from their doctors. However, these “ legal drugs” are now being held responsible for either assisting or causing teens to commit suicide. Denise Gellene comments, “ One possibility is that the increase in suicides might be tied to a concurrent increase in abuse of prescription pain pills, such as Oxycontin. Studies have shown that people who abuse prescription drugs are at greater risk for suicide” (Gellene). Many of the prescription pills alter the way your brain functions, causing depression, which is a leading

cause of suicide. Prescription drugs mixed with alcohol become even more lethal. Alcohol has always been very common in the daily lives of teenagers these days. The adolescent brain is not fully developed; therefore, many teens often become dependent on alcohol. Alcoholism is another leading cause of depression, which often leads to suicide. Firearms are another contributing influence to suicide. “ Because firearms are used in more than half of teen suicides, it is important to realize that easy access to a firearm and ammunition can contribute to a teenage death by suicide” (Teen Suicide).

Parents leave their gun around the house like there is no importance. Weapons are becoming more accessible to teenagers because of the lackadaisical attitude parents have towards these firearms. The accessibility and convenience that teenagers have on retrieving prescription drugs, alcohol, and firearms significantly impact whether or not a teen would commit suicide. Just as teenagers today are the first post 9/11 group, they are also the first decade of “ Facebook” teenagers that are growing up in a far different social world than ever before.

As discussed earlier, gay teenagers are facing obstacles today that they are not equipped to handle, and the same holds true for teenagers that have access to the internet. Social networks such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and Formspring allow teens to say what they think over an online chat or even anonymously. This enables teens to escape the face-to-face confrontations and degrade others via the web, and even pretend to be someone they are not. Unfortunately this happened to a girl named Megan. Megan Meier was a 13 year old from Missouri who struck up an

online friendship on the popular social networking site MySpace with a person she believed was a new boy in her hometown. In reality, the “ friend” was a group of individuals, including adults, who were intent on humiliating the poor girl because of a friendship with another child that had gone awry. Megan was very upset when she found out the truth, then later committed suicide once the friendship had terminated. The horrifying case stunned the community and caused state government officials to pass some of the harshest cyber bullying laws in the country” (Rubin).

This situation has happened to numerous teenagers all over America. The rapid paced technology has its benefits, but there are substantial problems, as well, such as cyberbullying. Teenagers have found many different ways to abuse the technology offered. One common mistake made by teens are sending revealing photos of themselves through text messaging. This is commonly known as “ sexting”. Stephanie Sajor covers the horrifying story of how Hope Witsell was a victim of bullying because of her choice to send risque pictures.

Sajor reported, “ Hope Witsell was 13 years old when she committed suicide in September of 2009. She was a target of severe bullying at school, CNN reports, ‘ Witsell took part in ‘ sexting’ by sending a picture of her breasts to a boyfriend. This picture went viral and she was humiliated. Her friend mentioned, ‘ We had to make like a wall, we had people surrounding her, and she had to be in the middle because people would come by and try to hit her and push her into a locker or something’” (Sajor). Numerous teens, like Witsell, are so horrified with the consequences of their mistake and feel suicide is the only answer.

Adding to the new social world teens are growing up in is the growing lack of communication between teenagers and their parents. With issues facing teens today that have never been explored, parents have no experience and do not know how to approach many of these issues or even how to cope with it themselves. Experience definitely helps in parenting, but today parents have little or no experience on how to deal with Facebook or prescription drugs or gay children because many of these issues either did not exist or were not as prevalent when they were teenagers themselves.

In an article in the Mayo News, Anton McNulty states, "The Coroner explained that in the majority of teenage-suicide cases, the parents had no idea their child had any problems, and she urged parents to communicate more with their children. Dr. Fitzgerald said that in many cases, teenagers find it difficult to deal with rejection and think the only way out is to end their life" (McNulty). Because parents have never dealt with these different forms of bullying because of the new technology, it is hard for them to sympathize with their teens. The simple solution is communication.

Teens need to talk to their parents about how they feel and what is going on in their lives. Another factor adding to the surge of teenagers committing suicide is the increasing parental pressure to succeed in the classroom. Teenagers are at home listening to parents having to figure out how they are going to pay for college. Teenagers are feeling the same pressures as their parents when it comes to dealing with tough financial obstacles that exist with most families today. Because of the major shift in our economy, teens are directly impacted by the stresses of their parents' financial situation whereas "parents, too, may be at fault, although unintentionally.

Understressed themselves, perhaps because of divorce or unemployment, they often find themselves unable to help troubled children. They may be unaware or even embarrassed that their children are considering suicide. Perhaps they simply do not know where to get help" (Langone 54). Several parents are so preoccupied with finding a new job or dealing with divorce papers and attorneys that their teen's problems become second priority.

These teens do not know who to turn to any more and resort to suicide. When parents are hit hard by the economy, many times they burden their children with the pressures of excelling in school. Mothers and fathers are expecting their children to receive scholarships for college thus, live in a prosperous financial standing when they are adults, as well. The stresses teenagers endure today are incomprehensible for parents. Teens undergo trouble with boyfriends, dealing with teachers, worrying about college, and pleasing parents, just to list a few.

John Langone analyzes these changes as he agrees, " It is true that students have always been stressed; stress is to be expected from any endeavor that makes demands, sets deadlines, and establishes a goal that requires work to reach. Yesterday, many students concentrated on learning for its own sake; today, the emphasis is on specialization, quite often for positions in high-tech industry, a business that is fiercely competitive and full of glamorous tales of bright young electronics wizards who are millionaires before they reach the age of thirty" (58).

The constant stresses of this idealistic future of becoming the successful CEO burden our teenagers with the worries and pressures with an unrealistic vision. The tough economic conditions of today weigh on teenagers and puts

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added pressure on them to excel in school like never before. This has resulted in GPA's increasing so fast that even a perfect 4.0 Grade Point Average has become the norm and in no way guarantees a teenager acceptance into a prestigious university or an academic scholarship. To use a cliché, times have changed and the stresses of the past were easier, for the most part, to deal with" (Langone 58). When looking at the environmental changes as well as the social and financial factors that effect teenagers today, it certainly explains why suicide among teenagers is on the rise. We are in a period of time that has never been experienced and therefore it is difficult to pinpoint an answer on how to put an end or at least slow down this trend. One answer that can help is to go back to the fundamental idea of better communication.

Peers need to communicate with each other better. Parents and teachers need to communicate more effectively about their children. Children need to communicate with their parents and draw from their knowledge. The media needs to communicate positive stories and not just report the negative aspects of our world. Pharmaceutical companies need to communicate the side effects of their products. Social networking sites need to better monitor their content. This is a simple solution to a very complex problem, but it is a start.

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