

*By Emma England*

### Breaking Trends to Stop Suicide

Have you ever been to the BOK Center in Tulsa? It holds approximately 19,000 people. Imagine it is packed full, every seat is occupied, all the way up to the nosebleeds. This amount of people is about how many people attempt suicide in just six days, and those numbers were pre-COVID. (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention) The pandemic has had a profound effect on mental health and suicide rates, especially among adolescents and young people, but there are many things that health professionals recommend to promote mental health and suicide prevention during these trying times.

The coronavirus pandemic has caused many problems in the world and the lives of young people. These problems vary from logistical issues to serious mental health struggles. Adolescents and young adults have struggled in everyday life throughout the pandemic in many ways. The most notable, and global, issue is not being able to attend in-person school. Whether it is college or high school, many students have difficulties learning outside of the classroom. Their home environments may not be suitable and productive for learning, and even if they are, some students need face-to-face instruction to truly understand a concept. Those who are lucky enough to be in-person for school face barriers such as masks and distancing. When teachers have masks on, as is necessary to be in school, some students struggle to understand what they are saying because they rely heavily on lip-reading when listening to a speaker. In many schools, contact tracing puts countless students in quarantine, isolating them from their peers and stunting their progress in class. Quarantined students get behind in school, often to the point that it is extremely difficult to catch up when they return to school. All of these difficulties lead to heightened

anxiety among students. Getting behind in class leads to hopelessness and an endless cycle of feeling like a failure. The combination of this anxiety and hopelessness leads to depression and other mental illnesses in many students. Sadly, mental illness and traumatic experiences, such as a pandemic, are two of the leading causes of suicide. (Czeisler)

Suicide rates increased throughout the pandemic, despite often being overshadowed by the death tolls of COVID-19. In August of 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published an article about mental health during the pandemic. The article stated, “COVID-19–related TSRD (trauma, stress-related disorders), initiation of or increase in substance use to cope with COVID-19–associated stress, and serious suicidal ideation in the previous 30 days were most commonly reported by persons aged 18–24 years...” (Czeisler) It is important to note that the age group mentioned here includes high schoolers and college students. The significance of this age is that when they are in lockdown or quarantine, they are often completely isolated, living alone. Isolation can negatively impact people, even during normal times. In addition to this, The Mental Health Foundation notes the following in an online publication: “...in the case of the SARS epidemic, stress scores for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) were reported by parents to be 4 times higher in children quarantined than those not quarantined...” (Millar et al.) These findings are estimated to be extremely similar in people quarantined during the COVID-19 pandemic. As 2020 wore on, health professionals began to publicize various ways to improve mental health and stability, even during isolated, difficult times.

Health professionals have suggested several strategies for combating mental illness and suicidal thoughts. One of the biggest things emphasized by both the CDC and the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) is simply having conversations. In an interview in October 2020, Dr. Stephen O’Connor with the NIMH said, “...by virtue of just having those

conversations-- and it doesn't have to be a mental health professional; it can be a family member. It can be a friend. It could be a spiritual leader.” O’Connor goes on to explain that discussing what suicidal thoughts truly mean is of the utmost importance. He states that “it [a suicidal thought] doesn't actually represent a desire to be dead.” Typically, suicidal thoughts are symbolic of a deeper personal issue that a person is dealing with, and having conversations is key in resolving those situations. During the early months of the pandemic, many struggled to find someone trusted to talk to, but eventually, telehealth communications became more accessible, allowing those who needed it to attend virtual therapy sessions. In concurrence with the health professionals, I believe that having conversations about mental health is crucial, but I also have learned some ways to maintain mental health and prevent suicidal thoughts in my own life.

One thing that I emphasize heavily in my own life is decreasing the amount of media or entertainment I consume that romanticizes suicide and self-harm as a valid way to resolve problems. What we watch and listen to in our daily lives is just as impactful as things that happen to us in real life. I also ensure that I refrain from using phrases such as “I would kill myself if that happened”. These phrases are trendy and often used, especially by adolescents and young people, but I believe that using words like this is part of the reason that suicide has become so heartbreakingly common. We all must be sensitive to what is coming out of our mouths because you never know how it might affect someone around you. If we all do our part to be kind and considerate, I strongly believe we can prevent suicide and better the lives of those around us.

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