

Teenage Suicide

In the recent past there has been considerable local coverage in the media about teenage suicide. This subject is of course of considerable concern because as a society we need to look carefully at what our children are doing. They are our future. If they happen to be killing themselves our future does not look too good! In this article I will address this issue of youth suicide by firstly citing some facts and figures, secondly by looking at some explanations of why, and thirdly providing some form of possible action.

FACTS AND FIGURES

The Department of Employment, Education and Training (Youth Bureau), has recently completed an extensive study into youth suicide in Australia. Some of the findings were:

- * It is estimated that for every completed suicide there is one hundred attempts.
- * 11.7% of your Australian males and 9.7% of your Australian females have had suicidal ideas.
- * Girls attempt suicides far more often than boys.
- * In the past it was believed that those who attempted suicide and those who completed it were two quite different populations. Now however, this is not believed to be the case, and that people who make a suicide attempt have a considerably higher risk of dying eventually by their own hand than those who have not attempted suicide.
- * It does not seem appropriate to divide suicidal attempts into the groupings of 'serious' or 'non-serious'. These are reflective of self-destructive behaviour which is either life threatening, or non-life threatening.

- * About 40 to 50 percent of your people who have completed suicide were found to have made at least one previous attempt.
- * Suicide now accounts for one in seven deaths among males aged 15 to 19 years. In 1966, it was one in twenty.
- * The rate of completed suicide is five times greater in boys than girls.
- * In 1986 there was one adolescent suicide every 70 hours.
- * Such increases in adolescent suicide are also occurring in the United States and other European and Asian countries. In England and Wales the rates are noticeably lower. In 1984 in Japan, the suicide rate for under 19 year olds was 2 1/2 times greater than England and Wales.
- * Males in Australia most commonly use firearms to kill themselves. Females mostly use poisoning.

WHY THESE FACTS AND FIGURES OCCUR

There are two ways one can look at an explanation for why the youth suicide ratio is what it is. One can look at the social or cultural forces that may precipitate suicidal behaviour. Alternatively, there are the individual or intra-psychic explanations of why an individual should take his own life.

Social Factors - For an outline of these, one is again referred to the very good document by Gail Mason, titled 'Youth Suicide'. Some of the things that her research showed related to the incidence of suicide were social and emotional isolation, low socio-economic status, the nuclear family, media coverage of suicide, alcohol abuse unemployment, poverty and homelessness.

Individual or Psychological Factors - The social factors outlined above must be viewed in combination with the individual factors for a realistic picture to be formed. It would seem that suicidal

behaviour is the result of the interaction between these two different levels of human functioning.

When addressing the psychological reasons for suicide, one begins to delve into the area of the desire to live and the desire to die. To be or not to be. The first person to look at this from a truly psychological point of view was Sigmund Freud, who wrote about the:

- * Life Instinct vs. Death Instinct
- * Libido vs. Mortido
- * Eros vs. Thanatos

Each of us has what can be seen as a dark side, an evil side or a destructive side. All humans have an innate desire to destroy themselves, others and/or the environment. On the other hand, we all have a good side, a life side and a constructive side. We all have a desire to create, produce and foster life in others, ourselves and our environment.

Each of us spend our lives oscillating between these two opposing forces, swinging from one side to the other. Life is a constant battle between these two instincts. In some of us the Life Instinct or Libido predominates most of the time. In others the death instinct or Mortido remains more powerful. In the suicidal, it is obviously the Death instinct predominates. In fact the desire to destroy has become so pronounced that the desire to live almost disappears entirely. Perhaps at the point of a serious suicide attempt the Libido is non-existent.

HOW CAN THE LIFE INSTINCT BE DEVELOPED

Fortunately, Transactional Analysis provides us with a direct course of action to take when an individual has little or no desire to live. This of course, is what Goulding and Goulding (1979) originally called the no-suicide contract or NSC. In more recent times (White, 1991), I have added to this theory of the NSC, particularly in terms of using the NSC as a way of harnessing the life instinct. An example of this is no-suicide contracting with those who are terminally ill, where the illness has a psychological component. With some illnesses the 'will to live' can play a big part. The NSC can be used with such people as a way to foster such a will and hence counter the death instinct.

In addition, those who are suicidal, particularly our youth, can be assisted with the NSC. The no-suicide contract is a definite statement of a person's commitment to keep themselves alive. Such a statement allows the somewhat nebulous and esoteric concept of the Life Instinct to be made far more concrete and down to earth. This can further be achieved with the use of no-suicide contract cards (White, 1991). Such cards allow the person to have an actual thing, which can be seen to represent the 'will to live'. With teenagers (and indeed adults) this is most important when destructive impulses or the death instinct is predominating.

In conclusion, I believe we must address the notion of teenage suicide with considerable energy. As mentioned before, they are our future. In this paper, I have wished to clarify some of the facts and figures about this topic, some of the causes, and possible things that can be done. In addition, it seems that Transactional Analysis has a great deal to offer in this area and to a large extent this has not been tapped yet. I hope for the sake of our future, this alters.

References

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