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Teens At-Risk for Depression/Self-Injury/ Suicide

I. Warning Signs of Adolescent Depression:

- 1. Change in academic performance**
- 2. Truancy/Delinquency**
- 3. Loss of interest in activities**
- 4. Withdrawal from family and friends**
- 5. Teen appears lonely, isolated, lacking a sense of belonging, disconnected**
- 6. Drug and Alcohol use or abuse**
- 7. Disobedience-lying behavior-rebellious against authority**
- 8. Difficulty concentrating**
- 9. Self-destructive behavior (i.e. reckless driving, driving under the influence)**
- 10. Self-mutilation-often done in isolation/secretly (i.e. scratching, cutting, carving body, self-piercings)**
- 11. Increased sexual activity**
- 12. Running away**
- 13. Grief**
- 14. Feeling guilt, shame and making self-derogatory comments**
- 15. Feeling helpless, hopeless, pessimistic about future**
- 16. Chronic boredom when teen is alone**
- 17. Neglect of personal appearances (i.e. not bathing, washing hair)**
- 18. Overwhelming pressure to succeed, perfectionist**
- 19. Fear of loss of control**
- 20. Family history of past depression/suicide, personal past history of depression/suicide**
- 21. Confusion/anxiety about sexual development or orientation**

II. Symptoms of Clinical Depression

- 1. Feeling sad, helpless, hopeless**
- 2. Changes in eating habits, resulting in losing or gaining weight**
- 3. Changes in sleep: chronic insomnia, sleeping all the time, inability to fall asleep and stay asleep**
- 4. Inability to sit still: hand-wringing; or slow body movements, slow speech**
- 5. Fatigue**
- 6. Difficulty concentrating**
- 7. Feeling anxious, irritable, fearful**
- 8. Poor self-esteem**
- 9. Headaches/ stomach aches; somatic problems**
- 10. Difficulty making decisions**

III. Warning Signs of NSSI(Non-Suicidal Self-Injury):

1. **Self-Injury:** Self-harm: scratching, cutting, carving body, breaking bones, head banging, self-piercing of nose, ears, tongue
2. Wearing long sleeves all the time, refusal to wear shorts, sleeveless tops, bathing suits to hide cuts and scars on body

IV. Warning Signs of Teen Suicide:

1. **Suicide:** Teen feels helpless, hopeless, pessimistic about future, and entrapped (seeing no way out)
2. **Suicidal Ideation:** having thoughts of suicide without physical action
3. **Dropping hints, giving away prized possessions, writing a “will,” saying “good-bye”**
4. Expressing a “wish to die,” wishing he/she was never born
5. **Suicidal Threat-** making threat of suicide, or physical actions taken that indicate self-harm but does not indicate conscious intent
6. **Suicidal Gesture-** Actions taken that indicate they are thinking about, or *planning to attempt suicide*; yet it is an action taken that, in itself, does not cause death.
(It is often a form of *communication* of the teen’s despair, rather than a conscious intent to kill oneself. Examples are: self-injury, a small overdose of pills, etc.)
7. **Suicide Attempt-** Physical action taken with the conscious intent of suicide that does *not* result in their death.
8. Pre-occupation with thoughts of suicide and death
9. Past suicide attempts, family history of suicide
10. Teen feels overwhelmed, confused, unable to cope with problems and their situation
11. Irrational thinking-suicide is “the right answer” to teen’s problems
12. Extreme changes in mood
13. Themes of death and suicide in writings and drawings at home or school

V. Risk Factors +Triggers for Teen Depression, Self-Injury, Suicide:

1. Changes in teen’s peer relationships**
2. Fight with parents/ friends**
3. Parent is disappointed in the teen, resulting in teen feeling “bad” about self**
4. Separation/ Divorce **
5. Parents put teen “in the middle” of each parent during separation and divorce**
6. Ongoing parental conflict.***
7. Break-up of a love relationship***
8. Having an alcoholic/addicted parent**
9. Single parent family***
10. Teen is estrangement from 2nd parent in divorce**
11. Insecure attachment to mother***
12. Personal rejection from love interest***
13. Teen is harassed at school by peers over their appearance, sexuality, stature, etc.

14. Recent move**
15. Death of family, friend, or pet***
16. Having a family member who committed suicide-teen could believe that suicide is the way that their family deals with problems*
17. Failing a test*
18. Being fired from a job*
19. Teen feels alone in the world**
20. Teen has eating disorder**
21. Physical and sexual abuse

VI. How to “ask” about Self Injury:

“Have you ever hurt yourself on purpose in any way? Tell me about it?”

VII. How to “ask” about suicide?

[Be gentle and non-judgmental. Go slowly. Don't act burdened, angry, or disappointed.]

1. How do you rate your mood on a Depression Scale from 1-10?
2. Do you ever HURT YOURSELF ON PURPOSE in any way?
[If “yes,” why, what, where?]
3. Do you ever wish you weren't alive?
4. Do you ever wish you were never born?
5. Do you ever wish you were dead?
6. Do you ever think of suicide?
[If “yes,” ask the following:]
7. Do you ever think of how you would do it?
8. Do you have the means and the opportunity to do it? Have you made plans to act on these thoughts?
9. Have you ever tried to kill yourself in your whole life? (If “yes,” then how, where and when?).
10. Have you ever told anyone about this? How did they respond? If not, why not?
Who is your current support system?
11. Do you feel safe right now?
12. Can you sign contract for safety right now?

VIII. Warning signs of Acute Danger of Suicide:

1. Teen has feelings of entrapment, helplessness, hopelessness, and despair
2. Teen experienced a recent loss or stressful situation
3. Teen has given away his/her prize possessions
4. Teen has written will or suicide note to say good-bye
5. Teen has poor coping skills
6. Teen has history of substance abuse
7. Teen has history of previous suicide attempts
8. Teen has expressed a wish to die, or a wish to escape the pain they feel
9. Teen has history on NSSI (non-suicidal self-injury)
10. Family history of suicide

11. Teen is unwilling to sign a suicide contract

If teen has the following:

12. Teen has a *plan* for suicide: (method/time/place)
13. Teen has expressed imminent intent to hurt self
14. Teen has ACCESS to the planned means to commit suicide, or lethal weapons
15. Teen cannot contract for safety
16. -He should not be left alone, and be taken to an Emergency Room as soon as possible for psychiatric evaluation.

*If you see any these warning signs->ASK about Suicide

*Asking about suicide does NOT put the idea in someone's head. It is already there.

*A suicidal teen will feel relief when they talk about it.

*Often, teen doesn't want to die, but wants the pain to stop.

IX. Treatment Recommendations

1. Evaluation at crisis center or local hospital.
2. This should be followed by psychotherapy. Often teens benefit from a combination of Individual and Group psychotherapy as well as family therapy. CBT (Cognitive Behavior Therapy) and DBT (Dialectical Behavioral Therapy) are the most effective treatments of choice.
3. A psychiatric medication evaluation by a psychiatrist is ALWAYS necessary.
4. Parents SHOULD SUPPORT and FOLLOW the treatment recommendations

*Parents should NOT DENY the problem!

*Do not "enable" teens to hurt themselves by making "excuses" for behavior.

*Address parental and teen DENIAL when it exists.

*It is in the spring when we see the highest rates of adolescent depression, suicide, and self-injury.

{***Most of the school shootings by teens have occurred in the SPRING}

Joan Goodman LCSW-C, BCD; is Founder and President of the Adolescent Self Injury Foundation, (ASIF, Inc.) A 501C3 non-profit organization, their mission is to raise awareness in the world of the complex problem of adolescent self-injury. It is a website that promotes hope and recovery by offering information and tips to follow for struggling teens and parents.

To date, the website www.adolescentselfinjuryfoundation.com has had over 120,000 visitors from 9 countries.