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### Awareness can help fight teen depression

After raising three children and practicing pediatrics for more than three decades, I continue to be surprised, upset and bewildered by adolescent problems. After discussing recent suicides in the region with colleagues, I took the opportunity to review our local situation and compare ours with national statistics. The North Shore experience is not unique; too many teens are intentionally harming themselves. Suicide is the third leading cause of death in children ages 10 to 19 in United States. A quarter of high school students questioned in a survey said they had thought about suicide, and one in six actually had a plan. It is frightening that almost one in 10 children have made an attempt, because it is estimated that, of those, one in 50 actually succeeded.

Even though it is often a preventable occurrence, many of us are haunted by adolescent suicidal experiences that affect our friends, relatives and communities. We need to make parents and the caring community more aware of the issue, debunk many of the myths, and develop individual and communal strategies to intervene effectively.

#### Who is at risk?

Adolescent females think about suicide with twice the frequency of their male counterparts and attempt it four times as often. Males, however, are five times more likely to complete an attempt. Issues that may indicate potential suicide risk include depression, a breakup with a significant other, family disruption, alcohol use, school problems and isolation. Native American males have a high suicide rate, as do depressed gay and bisexual youth. Since suicide attempts involving a firearm are potentially more lethal, teens with firearm access are also at higher risk.

#### What do you look for?

Look for signs of depression including early morning awakening, changes in sleeping or eating patterns, or withdrawal from friends and family. Are there sudden mood changes accompanied by unexplained violent or rebellious

behavior? Is there a sudden lack of interest in appearance and personal hygiene, deterioration in schoolwork, or involvement with drugs and alcohol? Any significant change in personality should be of concern, as well as an unusual interest in death or darkly humorous comments related to suicide or death.

Is it safe to discuss concerns with teens? Many well-intentioned parents, caregivers, and medical and educational professionals are afraid that talking with teens about stressful issues, including suicide, may make the problem worse. Nothing could be further from the truth. Knowledge is a powerful tool. At risk teens learn that they are not alone and that there are resources they can access. In addition, a troubled teen is likely to seek help from a peer. Educating adolescents about the stressors teens often encounter can make peer support a more effective means for accessing early, effective intervention.

### **What can be done?**

Awareness of the problem and a willingness to confront this very difficult issue are the keys to success. Parents should assess their family situation to ensure that they are providing the nurturing, stimulating, and structured environment required for optimal growth and development. Parents and professionals must be vigilant, noting significant unexplained changes in adolescent personalities and behavior, and seek resources and help if they are uncomfortable with their observations.

Depression and suicidal thoughts are illnesses, not weaknesses. Although I'm fairly certain that most parents have said, "Snap out of it" to a child from time to time, that approach isn't particularly comforting and is not likely to prompt a depressed adolescent to open up to even the best-intentioned adult. Ask teens about their feelings and be prepared to listen -- not to judge. Let them know you love them, and no matter what the issue, you are there to help. Even ask if they are thinking about suicide. An adolescent contemplating the concept may experience relief at being understood.

Once a parent or caregiver suspects adolescent suicidal tendencies, it is time to act. Make certain that they do not have access to guns or other weapons and that they have limited access to prescription and over the counter medications. Seek professional help from your physician, school guidance counselor, or other trusted advisor. They may provide numerous options including counseling, medication, or, in extreme circumstances hospitalization.

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