

Study reveals 'huffing' household chemicals connected to teen suicide

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With suicide as the third leading cause of death among adolescents in the United States, a new University of Denver (DU) study reveals inhaling or “huffing” vapors of common household goods, such as glue or nail polish, are associated with increased suicidal thoughts and attempts.

Of the study’s participants, 33 percent reported having inhaled volatile solvents, 25 percent had attempted suicide, and 58 percent reported suicidal thoughts.

Stacey Freedenthal and Jeffrey M. Jenson of DU’s Graduate School of Social Work joined researchers from Chapel Hill and the University of Pittsburgh in a study of 723 incarcerated youth. “Inhalant Use and Suicidality among Incarcerated Youth” appeared in the September 2007 issue of the academic journal Drug and Alcohol Dependence. The study was the first work to categorize both levels of severity of inhalant use and gender in relation to suicidal ideas and suicide attempts.

The investigators found a significant increase in suicidal thoughts and attempts with higher use of volatile solvents. Researchers did not determine which problem came first, the huffing or the suicidal behavior, but showed that the two are undeniably connected, even when accounting for numerous other factors. Freedenthal warns parents to be aware of the possibility of suicidal thoughts in children who have been caught inhaling household chemicals.

“Inhalant use has many serious, physiological consequences, including

death,” says Freedenthal. “Now we are learning ever more strongly that they are also linked to suicidal thoughts and behaviors.”

The study found the correlation between huffing and suicidality greater in girls than boys. More than 80 percent of girls who abused inhalants revealed a history of suicide attempts, while less than 60 percent of boys showed the same history. The study also indicated that suicidal thoughts were much higher for girls than boys. Suicidal thoughts and attempts were considered two separate constructs, since thoughts do not always lead to attempts, and attempts are not always preceded by much thought.

The study involved 723 participants incarcerated by the Missouri Division of Youth Services, 629 boys and 94 girls at an average age of 15. Participants were asked if they huffed any of the 35 common household substances, such as paint, paint thinner, shoe polish, spot remover, floor polish, kerosene, gasoline, antifreeze, permanent markers, nail polish remover, mothballs, waxes, lighter fluid, and others.

Source: University of Denver

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