

Researcher identifies factors to help parents and professionals recognize teens in distress

October 4 2012

Suicide is the third-leading cause of death for teens, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Now, a University of Missouri public health expert has identified factors that will help parents, medical professionals and educators recognize teens at risk for self injury and suicide.

"For many young people, suicide represents an escape from unbearable situations—problems that seem impossible to solve or [negative emotions](#) that feel overwhelming," said Lindsay Taliaferro, an assistant professor of health sciences at MU. "Adults can help these teens dissect their problems, help them develop healthful coping strategies, and facilitate access to [mental health care](#) so their problems don't seem insurmountable."

Taliaferro analyzed data from the 2007 Minnesota Student Survey to pinpoint factors associated with self injury. More than 60,000 Minnesota [high school students](#) completed the survey that assessed their [health behaviors](#). Of those who completed the survey, more than 4,000 teens (roughly the same size as the student bodies at two large high schools) reported injuring themselves in the past year. Nearly half of those who reported self injury also had attempted suicide.

"Of the teens who engaged in non-suicidal self injury, hopelessness was a prominent factor that differentiated those who attempted suicide from those who did not have a history of [suicide attempts](#)," Taliaferro said.

Parents, teachers and medical professionals sometimes avoid talking to teens about [self harm](#) because they aren't sure how to help, Taliaferro said.

"Adults don't need to solve all the teens' problems, but they should let the teens know they have safe persons they can talk to," Taliaferro said. "Sometimes just talking about their feelings allows young people to articulate what they're going through and to feel understood, which can provide comfort."

Taliaferro recommends that parents strengthen connections with their teens and help foster connections between their children and other positive adult influences.

"One of the most important protective factors against teens engaging in self injury was parent connectedness, and, for females, connections with other prosocial adults also were associated with reduced likelihood of engaging in [self injury](#)," Taliaferro said. "Parents are extremely valuable influences in their children's lives."

Although parents play influential roles in teens' lives, Taliaferro said mental health professionals are the best resources for troubled teens. Medical professionals, such as primary care physicians, can also serve crucial roles by identifying teens who self injure and referring them to community support systems and mental health specialists before their behaviors escalate, Taliaferro said.

The Department of Health Sciences is part of the MU School of Health Professions. Taliaferro's study, "Factors Distinguishing Youth Who Report Self-Injurious Behavior: A Population-Based Sample," was published in *Academic Pediatrics*. She collaborated with researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, the University of Minnesota and the Pennsylvania State University.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

Citation: Keresearcher identifies factors to help parents and professionals recognize teens in distress (2012, October 4) retrieved 8 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-10-esearcher-factors-parents-professionals-teens.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.