



SCOPE Tip of the Week Member Newsletter

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Understanding Suicide

Suicide isn't a new concept. The idea of ending one's life has been around for a long time. There are many reasons why college students consider suicide. In this brief article, I will set out to cover a few of them.

Depression can be like a stifling, all-encompassing blanket settling over a person. It prevents them from seeing the world clearly – like Sylvia Plath's character Esther in *The Bell Jar*. The world inside the bell jar is stagnant and full of haze; from this vantage point a person with depression sees the world through this filter. It is a place from which they feel disconnected. They are often acutely aware of this disconnection, but powerless to do something to change it. They have little energy and little belief that the future will be any different from the past. To borrow another image from *The Bell Jar*, the lead character sees life as a series of telephone poles and wires stretching forward in a sameness that becomes oppressive.

Hopelessness goes hand in hand with depression. Hopelessness is a vote of no confidence in a better tomorrow. The student becomes lethargic and sad, losing any promise or excitement that there may be a way out of their current feelings of sadness, loneliness and isolation. Hopelessness often accompanies depression and is a critical risk factor in understanding why some students commit suicide. Their logic traps them in a feedback loop that goes something like this, "Why bother anymore? I've tried to get better before. What's different now? If anything, I feel even worse. If I am going to just keep feeling this way, killing myself seems like a way to end this pain."

Pain is an essential element of why people commit suicide. For those unfamiliar with students who experience suicidal thoughts and plans, the desire to escape the pain is their central motive. They can't go another day, fighting against the oppressive weight of their sorrow. Imagine as hot, muggy, and humid a day as you can. See yourself standing next to a beautiful pool of cool water. Imagine it gets even hotter outside. You jump in, right? A person who commits suicide completes the act to escape their pain in the same way. You might not have sought out the pool of water if not for the oppressive heat. A student considering suicide needs hope and reassurance that they can live life free of pain.

Trauma and loss can also be the cause of a college student's suicide. Sometimes the pain of living after losing someone so important to you becomes all you can think about. Trauma and loss can be powerful motivators to end one's life. They feed on the hopelessness for a better future and the terror that every day will be one that contains the same unbearable amount of pain that today holds.

Attention seeking can be another reason a college student completes a suicide. Perhaps the intent of the suicide act was not death? Perhaps she took pills in front of other students or jumped off a building that she thought wasn't high enough to end her life. The attention a student seeks is typically related to feelings of hopelessness (an irrational fear that they will feel like this forever) or a desire to have others understand that they are in pain; it is a cry for help, so to speak. The danger with attention seeking behavior is it often gets taken too far or an unforeseen variable brings the student closer to death than they may have wished. It could be a cut that goes too deep or a car crash is more serious than they imagined. In the end, whatever the motive or intention of the student, a suicide has still occurred.

Substance Abuse and risk taking behavior can also lead to suicide in either an intentional or accidental manner. Students engage in risk-taking behaviors that put their lives in danger. Sometimes, not wanting to live enough in a dangerous situation is all it takes to complete a suicide. A student could consume alcohol and pills without a care for their interactions or consequences or ride a motorcycle late at night and flip the headlights off on a dark stretch of road. Again, students are in pain and feel hopeless for a better future. Recognizing these signs, especially in combination, can help us to engage this student in the hopes of accurately assessing and preventing the suicide.

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