



FAMOUS PEOPLE AND THEIR MENTAL HEALTH



Halle Berry

The actress admitted to trying to end her life after the end of her marriage.

What Are the Warning Signs of Teenage Suicide?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports a rise in visits to the emergency room for suspected suicide attempts among teenage girls. How can you tell if your daughter is struggling? Here, a local expert offers insight.

By Stacey Winconek

Today's teens face a slew of stressors that generations before them did not — such as a global pandemic that shut the world down for over a year; changed the way kids socialize and learn and continues to impact them today.

Experts have already noted the mental health fallout from the pandemic, and according to new findings from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, it's impacting teens and tweens, particularly girls, in serious ways.

The CDC reports that emergency room visits for attempted suicides among girls were up 50.6% from January to March 2021 compared to the same period in 2019. The rate rose 3.7% for boys.

Kristyn Gregory, medical director for behavioral health at Blue Cross Blue Shield and Blue Care Network, is no stranger to these statistics. In her current position (she was in private practice in Macomb County previously), she sees the bigger picture of what's happening with today's youth.

"In the bigger picture, we definitely have seen this increase amongst ER visits and amongst a lot of inpatient facilities being full and really just an uptick in this," she says. "When we look across the whole state and across the nation, it's been a significant increase," among all children, but particularly girls.

Hormonal changes and cyberbullying can both be culprits. "We know that girls think about and attempt suicide about twice as often as boys, to begin with," she says. However, boys die by suicide four times more often as girls because they use

more lethal methods such as hanging or firearms, while girls use drugs and cutting themselves in a non-lethal manner.

"A lot of times we see it after a stressful life event — problems at school, problems with friends, a breakup with a boyfriend or girlfriend, death of a loved one, divorce, major family conflict. We also see it in groups that have less access to mental health care or have suffered more losses during the pandemic," she says, including people of color.

Think your tween or teen is struggling? Here, Gregory offers signs to look for; plus advice on how to address any mental health concerns with your child.

Signs of suicidal ideation

Parents know their children better than anyone, and after being home together more during the pandemic, you may be even more in tune with your kid. Keep an eye out for any changes in your tween or teen, Gregory says.

These include changes in behavior; eating and sleeping habits — more or less, school performance, avoiding friends and social activities. Excessive worry and anxiety, disruptive and hyperactive behavior — these are all signs, she notes.

"Sometimes we can see frank aggression in kids that have depression and anxiety and it's because they don't know how to put what they are feeling into words," she says.

Additional signs include frequent nightmares, substance abuse or experimentation, suicidal vocalization (saying things like, "I wish I wasn't around anymore"), and self-

harm gestures such as cutting.

Starting a conversation

"There's some hesitancy with parents that if they talk about it, it will happen," Gregory says of suicide.

It's actually the exact opposite.

"If we talk to our kids and have an honest conversation about mental health, we actually can reduce the suicide rate overall," she says.

Ask how their day is going and how they are feeling. Consider saying, "What was one great thing that happened today? What was one not great thing that happened today? Tell me how you felt."

Keep your ears open and really listen to your child instead of trying to come up with solutions. Have a long pause when you ask your child what's going on or what they might be feeling.

Don't be afraid to reduce stigma. If you've seen a therapist when you have had a hard time, share that with your child.

"It's OK to not be OK. That's what I tell my kids. It's OK to not feel OK all the time. Nobody is happy and spitting rainbows 24/7," she adds.

Seeking help is not a sign of weakness. "It's no different than taking a child to the doctor if they hurt their arm. If they are having pain somewhere physically, I would take them to the doctor to get them checked out," she says. "It's the same with mental health. Our bodies are all connected from the brain on up and brain is the control center, and if the control center is hurting, then that can have all kinds of effects."

BAD DAY OR SOMETHING MORE?

Teens, particularly teenage girls, display a range of emotions daily, so it can sometimes be difficult for parents to tell whether their child is struggling or just having "one of those days." Even if you think it's the latter, pay attention. It truly could be something more — and may lead to deadly consequences.

In this installment of *Opening Minds, Ending Stigma*, we dive into the topic of suicide among teenagers, particularly adolescent girls, who have visited emergency rooms at increased rates in early 2021. A local expert offers insight and advice on what to do if you suspect your teen is struggling.

We hope you'll find the information helpful and share this article with friends and family. You never know — you just might save someone's life.



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