

# Depression, not other factors, at root of most suicides



THE RECENT suicides of four Luzerne County youths in one week, including a 16-year-old from Pittston Area High School, remind us of the most extreme

effects of adolescent bullying. Teenagers, usually under the influence of peer pressure, can be heartless in alienating other, less popular individuals and are completely ignorant of the emotional and psychological consequences of their actions.

Often, however, the deeper cause of teen suicide is overlooked. Depression – a chronic medical illness that causes a persistent feeling of sadness and hopelessness – is almost always at the root of suicide, especially among adolescents who have yet to develop the coping mechanisms that allow adults to navigate the day-to-day trials of life.

Having worked with adolescents for more than 30 years, first as a middle and high school teacher-coach and currently as a community college professor, I am acutely aware that depression and thoughts of suicide do not discriminate among young people. I have seen and counseled students in both public and private educational institutions who have struggled with these feelings. Sadly, some took their own lives. I grieve for those families who've lost a son or daughter to suicide and pray for those who are dealing with a teenager child who might be entertaining the thought of taking their own life.

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## COMMENTARY

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Depression can be environmental, genetic, biochemical or some combination of all three factors. Regardless, there often are no warning signs because adolescents are experts at masking their feelings and extremely guarded about their privacy. Environmental factors can originate at home or school. Some teens struggle with the unrealistic expectations or constant demands of parents and turn their anger inward instead of seeking solace from friends, who are most influential at this point in their lives.

Others might be bullied at school and refuse to seek help. To do so, in their minds, would worsen the bullying, or confirm feelings of their own inadequacy to handle the matter themselves. In cases of genetic and biochemical depression, the body fails to produce adequate levels of serotonin, the chemical that creates emotional equilibrium. Together with the natural hormonal imbalance of adolescence itself, the combination can be fatal.

Under these circumstances, parents and teachers need to look for the symptoms of depression, which include but are not limited to these: a loss of interest in friends and hobbies, excessive sleeping or a lack of sleep, excessive eating or a loss of appetite, "cutting" or self-mutilation, a dramatic

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### GET HELP FOR DEPRESSION

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- Call Help Line for crisis intervention (if, for instance, you're having suicidal thoughts) or for referrals to the area's mental health experts: 1-888-829-1341.
- Search online for area therapists by visiting [www.therapists.psychologytoday.com](http://www.therapists.psychologytoday.com).

change in dress and/or physical appearance and the inability to see any prospect of a brighter future.

Treatment for teen depression is long-term and can take various forms, many of which are covered by health insurance. The initial course is ongoing professional counseling to encourage the teen to communicate his or her feelings and eventually to develop personal insight that will allow the individual to establish coping mechanisms. In more serious cases, a psychiatric evaluation followed by in-patient or out-patient therapies, including medication, is necessary. The danger with medication is that there are some, such as Prozac, Zoloft and Effexor, that have potentially adverse effects in adolescents. Others, including Wellbutrin, have been used with greater success.

If you think a teenager is struggling with depression, don't take any chances – address the situation immediately. It could spell the difference between life and death.

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