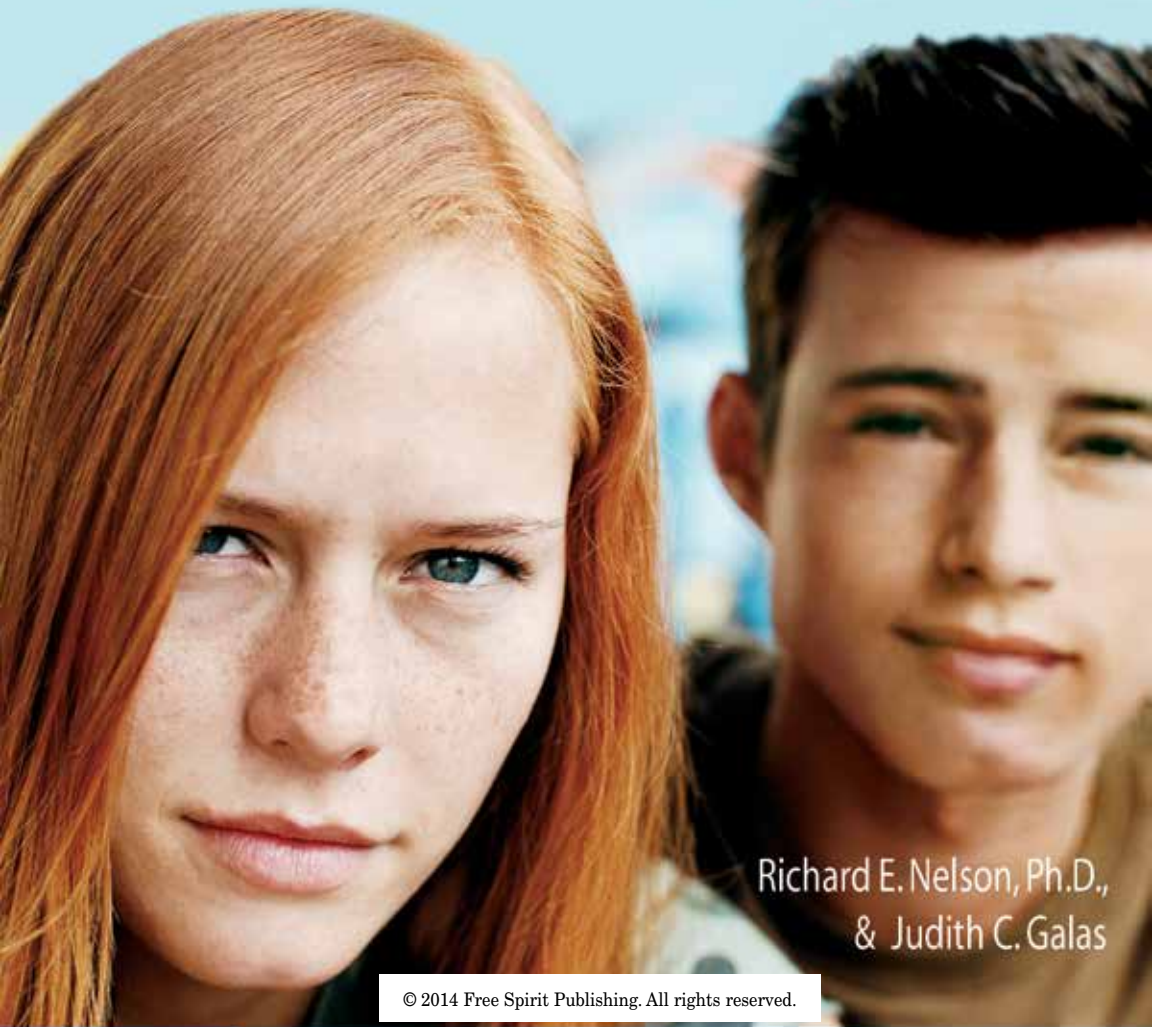


Updated
Edition

The Power to Prevent Suicide

A Guide for Teens Helping Teens



Richard E. Nelson, Ph.D.,
& Judith C. Galas

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PUBLISHING®

Foreword by Bev Cobain, R.N.,C.,
author of *When Nothing Matters Anymore*

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To my family, most of all Barbara, for their love.
-REN

To Cindy, who's always there.
-JCG

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Foreword

by Bev Cobain

It's not uncommon for teens to feel overwhelming distress and powerlessness at one time or another. You probably have a friend or know someone who has voiced these feelings. Most problems can be resolved with the help of understanding friends and adult support. But experts at the World Health Organization report that suicide is the third leading cause of death for teens. It could happen to someone you know.

Many people—adults and teens alike—think that if someone feels suicidal the person must be mentally ill, or at least have a serious diagnosable depression. Although some depressed and mentally ill people do kill themselves, most suicidal feelings are rooted in unresolved problems, stress, or anxiety that cause severe inner pain. This pain may be so intense that the idea of suicide may be considered as the only way to get out of the situation. It's not.

You have the answers in your hands. This book is amazingly honest and was written by two authors who know what they're talking about. When you finish reading it, I promise you will know more about how to help prevent suicide than most people on the planet. *The Power to Prevent Suicide* will give you the tools and the understanding—real power—to help someone you know.

—Bev Cobain, R.N.,C., author of *When Nothing Matters Anymore: A Survival Guide for Depressed Teens*

Introduction

Fourteen-year-old Jack Renfro* of Laredo, Texas, had been depressed ever since his brother's death in the spring. He thought a lot about killing himself. To him, it seemed better than going on living without his big brother.

Like many suicidal teens, Jack didn't keep his plan a secret. In fact, he told 21 friends what he was going to do that October weekend in 1987. Those friends either didn't believe him or they didn't know what to do, because they did nothing. No one stopped Jack from putting on his best suit and tie, taking a gun from his house, going to his brother's grave, putting the gun to his head, and pulling the trigger. Jack was one of more than 5,000 young people who committed suicide that year.

Researchers have gathered a lot of data on teen suicide. They have learned that at least half of America's young people have thought about killing themselves.¹ Like Jack's thoughts, these thoughts are much more serious than the "I wish I were dead" kind we've all had when we were frustrated, embarrassed, angry, or sad.

Researchers estimate that each day more than 1,000 American teenagers attempt suicide, and 11 of them, ages 15 to 24, die.² Some of the research numbers tell us that if you're in a school with 2,000 students, over 300 of your classmates may be thinking about suicide, and 170 of them will attempt suicide each year. Almost 60 of them will make a suicide attempt that will result in an injury.³ Every four years, someone in your school will commit suicide.

The researchers also know that just like Jack, most young people share their suicidal thoughts with friends. In fact, when young people were asked, "Who would you tell about wanting to commit suicide?" 90 percent said they would tell a friend first.⁴

What would you do if a friend confided to you that he or she was going to commit suicide? Would you ask your friend to tell you about his or her sad feelings and plans to die? Would you go with him or her to an adult who would be able to help? Or would you think your friend

*The stories in this book are real, but we have changed the names to protect people's privacy.

was just kidding? Would you decide not to get involved because you believed your friend would snap out of it?

Jack didn't have to die. If only one of the many friends who spoke with him that weekend had told a teacher, coach, counselor, or parent what he was planning to do, he probably would be alive today. He'd still miss his brother, but he'd also be in the process of learning how to work past his pain to build a new life for himself.

You're an important key to helping stop young people like Jack from committing suicide. You probably know some teens who talk about committing suicide. You may even have thought about killing yourself, or you may have tried. We believe you can save a friend or yourself from committing suicide.

In fact, you might be able to do a better job of reaching your troubled friends than many of the adults around you. Your friends trust you. They know that you understand what it feels like to be a teen and the kinds of problems young people today struggle with. They can be themselves around you, and they might tell you things that they would never tell their parents or other adults. That puts you in a special position to make a difference and possibly even save someone's life.

The person whose life you save doesn't have to be your best friend. It might be someone you sit next to in one of your classes. It might be a friend you talk to a lot, or someone you just say "hi" to in the halls now and then. The point really isn't whether you're best friends or not. The point is, if you were in trouble, wouldn't you want someone to help you?

Why We Wrote This Book

Many books have been written about suicide in general and teen suicide in particular. You may have read some of them yourself. If so, you may be wondering why anyone would want to write or read another book on this topic.

The fact is, for whatever reason, other books don't seem to be working. Maybe not enough people are reading them. Maybe those books aren't saying what teens most want and need to know about suicide. All we know for certain is that young people are killing themselves today, right now. You know this, too. You've read the stories in newspapers and magazines, and you've seen them on the news. One of those stories may have been about someone you knew personally—a friend, a classmate, or another teen in your school or neighborhood.

The statistics on suicide, and especially the experience of grieving someone's suicide, can be frightening and overwhelming. You

may be feeling powerless, as if there's nothing you can do about the needless loss of life. But there *is* something you can do. And that's what this book is about.

The Power to Prevent Suicide recognizes the power you have to help your peers and yourself. In this book, we'll tell you what you can say and do to be a suicide preventer. We'll give you specific suggestions for reaching out, listening to, and helping someone who's thinking about suicide. We'll explain how young people like you can be the first line of defense against the rise in teen suicide. And we'll show how you, personally, can take positive, timely action to save a life.

We wrote this book because we believe that teenagers are capable enough to notice when someone may be suicidal, and caring enough to want to do something about it. We *didn't* write this book to make you a counselor. It takes many years of schooling and experience to become a counselor. But it doesn't take years of schooling and experience to be a caring person. All it takes is the desire to help someone who needs help.

We *didn't* write this book to diminish the important role parents and other adults can play in preventing suicide. But parents, like teens, often are uninformed about suicide. Parents, like teens, often are fearful of the word "suicide." And parents often don't know what to do when they are concerned about one of their own children.

Many parents have helped to prevent their children from killing themselves. These parents have seen the warning signs, and they have listened well. They have created homes where children and teens can openly talk about any problem. Teens who have parents like this are fortunate.

Many teens, however, feel that their parents don't understand them. They feel that they can't go to their parents when they are in trouble. Maybe their parents don't listen. Maybe they are preoccupied with their own problems. Or maybe they seem too "perfect." Sometimes it's hard for young people to believe that their parents ever had any serious problems when they were growing up, and it's easy to assume that parents don't understand the problems of teenagers today. These perceptions may be inaccurate, but they can still keep teens from going to their parents when they need help.

If you have parents who love you, who listen, who try to understand, who sincerely want to help, then they should be the first people you go to with questions about suicide or concerns that a friend may be considering suicide. But if you don't feel comfortable talking with your parents, please find another adult you like, respect, and trust.

You may decide to share this book with your parents or other adults. That would be great. Although we have written it especially for young people, we hope that adults will read it, too. We hope you will talk about it together. One big problem with suicide is that people don't want to talk about it. This book may be a way for you, your parents, your teachers, and other adults to bring this subject out into the open, where you can discuss it honestly and do something about it.

About This Book

We have divided this book into two parts.

- Part One, “Why, What, and Who,” explores why someone might want to die, what you need to know about suicide and suicidal people, what warning signs to look for, and who's likely to be at risk.
- Part Two, “How to Be a Suicide Preventer,” guides you through the steps of helping a troubled friend. You'll learn how to reach out, how to listen, and how to get help for your friend. We'll also tell you how to protect yourself against your own suicide and how to comfort yourself should someone you know and love attempt or commit suicide. After all that, we'll give you some ideas on how to get your community and school involved in saving young people's lives.

The last chapter is “Resources,” where you'll find out about other books on suicide as well as crisis centers, community resources, and national organizations that can provide you with more information about suicide.

Before you start reading Part One, be sure to fill in the blanks on the form you'll find on page 7.* To help a friend who's thinking about suicide, you'll need to know where you can go for help. So write down the work and home phone numbers and addresses of the adults you trust the most. Then write down the phone number of your local crisis center. If and when you need this important information, you'll have it at hand. Finally, there are a few words and phrases we use in specific ways throughout this book, and we want you to know what they mean before you start reading the chapters.

- When we use the term *suicidal*, we don't mean “depressed” or “sad.” When we describe someone as suicidal, we mean “physically

*Better yet, photocopy page 7 before filling in the blanks, especially if this isn't your personal copy of *The Power to Prevent Suicide*.

dangerous to himself or herself.” People are said to be suicidal when their actions or ideas get fixed on suicide.

- An *attempted suicide* happens when someone tries to take his or her life but doesn’t die. People who attempt suicide may use a suicide method that gives them time to change their mind, to call for help, or to be rescued.
- In a *completed suicide*, the person dies. Some people refer to this as a “successful suicide.” They will say something like “The person succeeded in killing herself.” Because we don’t believe that any suicide is a success, we use the phrase “completed suicide” instead.
- A person shows *suicidal behavior* when he or she talks about suicide or gives other warning signs that he or she is thinking about or planning a suicide or is fascinated by death. Suicidal behavior does not involve an attempt to take one’s life.
- Someone in a *suicidal crisis* is dangerous enough to himself or herself to attempt or complete suicide.

Answers to Five Important Questions

1. What if I try to help someone I think may be suicidal, and it turns out there’s no real problem?

First, congratulate yourself for reaching out to someone you thought was in trouble. Sure, you might worry that others will think you overreacted. You might even feel a little foolish. But saving a life is a serious matter. It’s much better to make a mistake and offer help when it isn’t needed than to realize later that there was a serious problem and you didn’t do anything to help.

2. What if my friend just seems to be trying to get attention by talking about suicide?

It’s easy to get impatient with a friend who tries to get attention by saying or doing something that seems overly dramatic. Your friend, however, must be feeling pretty awful or lonely to use suicide talk as a way to get attention. See page 25 in Chapter 2.

3. What if I think a friend may be in trouble, but no one will listen to me?

Keep telling people until you find someone who will help. Don’t give up.

continued →

4. What if someone I try to help commits suicide anyway?

Another person's suicide is never your fault. See pages 85–89 in Chapter 8.

5. What if I think about suicide, but I don't have anyone to talk to?

Call your local crisis center or suicide hotline. On pages 107–108, you'll find information about how to find a crisis center or hotline, plus descriptions and phone numbers for four national hotlines you can call for help or information.

We Want to Hear from You

Please let us know what you think of *The Power to Prevent Suicide*.

Tell us what helps you. If there's anything you feel that we should have included but didn't, let us know. We want to hear your thoughts, your concerns—and your success stories. You may write to us at the following address:

Dr. Richard E. Nelson and Judith C. Galas
c/o Free Spirit Publishing
217 Fifth Avenue North, Suite 200
Minneapolis, MN 55401-1299

We hope that after reading this book, you'll see that there are things you can do to save someone's life. We hope that you'll come to believe in your own power to make a difference in the fight against teen suicide. Young people shouldn't have to kill themselves to solve their problems. With your help, someone may choose to live.

Dr. Richard E. Nelson
Judith C. Galas

SOURCES FOR THE FACTS AND FINDINGS IN THE INTRODUCTION

1. David L. Bender and Bruno Leone, series editors, *Suicide: Opposing Viewpoints* (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2003).
2. "Youth Suicide Fact Sheet," American Association of Suicidology, March 2004.
3. "Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance—United States, 2003," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *MMWR* 2004;53 (No. SS-2): 1–29.
4. E.A. Grollman, *Suicide: Prevention, Intervention and Postvention* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988).

Important Information

The adult I trust the most to listen to me and to help me when I'm in trouble is:

Work phone:

Home phone:

Address:

A second adult I trust to listen is:

Work phone:

Home phone:

Address:

The phone number of my local crisis center is:

To find the phone number of the crisis center nearest you, look in the yellow or white pages of your phone book under "Suicide," "Suicide Prevention," or "Suicide Hotline." If your phone book does not list any numbers under these headings, press or dial "0" for operator and ask the operator to give you the number.

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Part One

Why, What, and Who

*We know the topic of suicide can be scary. It might feel even scarier if you know someone who has attempted or committed suicide or if you've thought about suicide yourself. We also know that suicide may be a subject you haven't had much chance to talk about with parents, teachers, or friends. The first three chapters of **The Power to Prevent Suicide** give you the information you need to make suicide feel less scary and more like a problem you can understand.*

A young man with short dark hair, wearing a plaid shirt, is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. He is in a classroom setting, with another student visible in the background sitting at a desk. The background is slightly out of focus, showing a chalkboard with some faint writing.

Chapter 1

Why Would Someone Want to Die?

Maybe you know someone who has attempted suicide. Maybe you knew someone who committed suicide. If so, then you've probably heard yourself or others ask, "Why would she want to die?" or "Why would he do something like that to his family?"

Those are natural questions, but most often they don't lead you to one right answer about why someone you know chose suicide. Here's a better question to ask: "What problem or problems was that person trying to solve?" It may sound strange to you, but most suicidal teens aren't really trying to die. They're simply trying to solve one or many problems. The tragedy is that they choose a *permanent* solution to

their *temporary* problems. The most important thing to remember is that most young people who attempt or complete suicide don't want to die. What they want is to escape the problems they think are too big or too awful for them to solve. Their problems give them emotional and physical pain, and suicide seems like a sure way to make that pain stop.

How can we know for certain that the thousands of young people who committed suicide last year really didn't want to die? And if they didn't want to die, why did they die?

People who work with suicidal teens believe that most don't want to die because of the ways they try to die. Most young people attempt suicide in their own homes between the hours of 4 P.M. and midnight. In other words, they attempt suicide in the one place where they are most likely to be found, and they do it during the time of day when someone from their family most likely will be around. The chance of rescue is high, and people who hope for rescue really don't want to kill themselves.

But what about the young people who weren't rescued? How can we be sure that they didn't really want to die? We can't be sure, but we can get clues about what they were thinking by talking to young people who survived suicide attempts that really should have killed them.

Each of these teens picked a time, a place, and a method of death that left little room for rescue. Some of them survived bullet wounds to the head, jumps from high bridges, or high-speed crashes into brick walls and trees. When they were asked, "What did you think as you pulled the trigger?" "What flashed in your brain when you jumped off the bridge?" "What was in your mind when you knew you were going to crash?" they consistently answered, "I wanted to change my mind."

Faced with the certainty of their own death, most said they suddenly realized their problems weren't so big that somehow they couldn't be solved. Their problems weren't so bad that somehow they couldn't find a way to survive them. In that second before they almost died, they knew they wanted to live.

But what about the almost 4,000 young people in the United States alone who committed suicide in 2001?² Why did they die if they didn't really want to? Some died because they misjudged who would be around to rescue them during their suicide attempt. Some died thinking, "I want to change my mind." Some died because they didn't have a friend who reached out to them and got them the help they needed.

To help keep a friend from committing suicide, you need to know a little about human behavior. Knowing a little about psychology will help you understand why someone you know might choose suicide.

Most people require two basic things to feel positive about their lives:

1. They need love.
2. They need to feel good about themselves.

Most behaviors are influenced by two basic principles:

1. People behave according to how they feel about themselves.
2. Every behavior has a purpose; people's actions don't "just happen."

Once you're familiar with these key ideas and how they work in everyday life, you'll understand a little better why some young people might want to commit suicide. You'll see how a concerned and caring friend can play a significant role in reversing someone's suicidal thoughts and stopping his or her suicidal plans.

A Need for Love

All of us must feel loved before we can feel good about ourselves and our lives. This one strong need has three important parts:

1. a need to be loved
2. a need to love
3. a need to belong

If these three ingredients are present in our lives most of the time, we are able to cope with life's ups and downs and work out our problems fairly well.

Take school, for example. If you're an average student who has lots of friends and who gets along with most of your teachers, then you're probably not going to fall apart if you fail a history test. You may feel bad about doing poorly, and you might be embarrassed to face your teacher when she hands back the papers. You might pick at yourself for not studying the night before, and you may resolve to do better the next time. That "F" probably ruined your morning, but it didn't ruin your life. You'll still joke around with your friends at lunch, and

you'll still make plans for the weekend with your girlfriend or boyfriend. You know life has a way of balancing out, and your history grade may be a pain, but it's not a disaster.

Some of the reasons you can ride out that history grade are knowing your friends and most of your teachers like you and knowing you like them. You also know you belong—you have a place among your friends and your school where you fit in. For many reasons, some young people feel disliked or unloved. They may feel like outsiders at school and even at home.

Teens who feel unloved, who don't feel love for others, and who don't feel like they belong within their families, their schools, or their neighborhoods, don't ride out their problems so easily. School failures, problems at home, and arguments with friends add to their feelings of self-hatred, worthlessness, and loneliness. When these feelings build, problems seem bigger and more difficult to solve. Even the problems these teens once might have thought were small suddenly grow in importance because their attitudes about themselves have gone sour.

Some young people have compared this lonesome, troubled time to feeling like they were drowning or being squeezed by a heavy sadness. What do you think they most needed to get them through this sad time? If you answered "a friend," you're right.

Think about it. If you're planning to commit suicide because you believe no one loves you, then having someone care enough to talk to you might give you a glimmer of hope. If you're thinking about dying because you don't love anyone, then having someone be kind to you lights a flicker of warmth in your own heart. If you want to end your life because you feel you don't fit in, then one friend can make you believe that at least you have a place with that person.

One interested, caring friend can keep someone from committing suicide because that friend helps satisfy some part of everyone's basic need for love. Sometimes all it takes is one moment of caring to give another person a reason to live.

Feeling Good About Yourself

Learning about suicide doesn't involve memorizing complicated formulas. But one simple "formula" can tell us something about the things that make us feel good or bad about ourselves: **E + IO = SC and SL**.

Written out, it means that your **E**nvironment plus your **I**nteraction with **O**thers equals your **S**elf-Concept and your **S**tress **L**evel.

By taking the formula apart, you can learn a lot about how and why you feel happy or sad. Let's look at the left side of the formula first.

An *environment* is a place where you can be with others. You operate in many environments including your home, school, and neighborhood. When you're with your friends, you're in a peer environment. Maybe you have even more environments such as work, church, or the basketball court. In each of these places, you *interact with others*. You talk, laugh, and argue. Sometimes you're just quiet.

Now let's look at the other side of the formula. Your *self-concept* measures how you feel about yourself. Are you glad to be who you are, or are you ashamed of yourself, or do you wish you were someone else? Your *stress level* measures how upset or calm you feel inside. Your self-concept and your stress level are directly related to how your environments and your interactions with others make you feel about yourself and your life.

Where Does Our Self-Concept Come From?

Our self-concept comes from within ourselves. How we feel about ourselves, how we feel about our lives, and how we feel about our friends all affect our self-concept.

Our self-concept also comes from others. How our friends, teachers, parents, or coaches treat us and what they say to us affects our self-concept.

How would these things make you feel about yourself?

- Your parents praise you.
- You fail an exam.
- Your friends stand by you.
- Your coach screams at you.
- You make the cheerleading squad.
- Someone calls you a jerk.
- You're elected to the student council.
- You embarrass a friend.

If your environments are pleasant and you get along with people, then you're going to feel positive about yourself and your stress level will be low. Life will feel great. But life doesn't always feel great. Our environments aren't always pleasant, and we don't always get along with everyone. Real life is a mixed bag of positives and negatives. That's when the formula comes in handy, because it helps us understand how these positive and negative things affect us.

Let's imagine that the negative things that happen to you are 100-pound weights. Try wearing one of those around your neck! The positive things that happen to you are colorful balloons that each can lift 100 pounds. Let's put those weights and balloons into the formula.

Imagine that your teacher praises you in front of the whole class, you get that date you want for Friday night, your mom ups your allowance, and you score the winning point on the basketball court. That's four separate balloons. Together they lift your self-concept so high you feel like you're floating.

Now imagine that the day isn't all that perfect. You don't get a raise in your allowance, and you don't score the winning point. That's 200 pounds of heavy weights. But your teacher's praise and that Friday-night date still give you 200 pounds of upward pull, so at least you're even.

Now imagine that your teacher embarrasses you in class, your Friday-night date cancels, you don't get that raise, and you don't score that point. Do all those weights drag you down? Maybe. It depends on how much you were looking forward to that date, how positive you feel about school in general, and how many other balloons you have in your life. As long as the weights and balloons are fairly evenly balanced more often than not, life continues to feel mostly steady and pleasant.

Now imagine a totally awful day. Your date cancels, you flunk your test, you get grounded, and you miss the winning shot in the last second of the game. How do you feel? Weighted down? Of course. After all, you're a stupid, clumsy kid with mean parents and teachers and a fickle date . . . at least, that's how it seems to you. How long do you feel negative about yourself and life? That depends on how many bad things have happened to you recently, how you feel about yourself when one of those really bad days strikes, and how long those feelings last.

Life's weights can feel especially heavy when a young person feels trapped under his or her load. Counselors often describe these feelings as the three "I"s—life's problems are *inescapable*, *interminable*, and *intolerable*. When teens feel like they can't run away from or

overcome their problems, when they believe their sadness will go on forever, and when they fear they will not be able to tolerate this sadness much longer, they will see suicide as a way to escape.

Troubled, weighted-down teens may also struggle with the three “H”s—feeling *helpless*, *hapless* (unlucky), and *hopeless*. These feelings lead them to believe they are powerless, and this belief fills them with despair.

Life delivers a mixture of balloons and weights that lift us up and weigh us down. Young people who feel suicidal have, or feel like they have, more weights than balloons in their lives. The three “I”s and the three “H”s also help them believe their problems are unsolvable and inescapable and they can’t change the bad luck in their lives. When they feel crushed under weights that seem endless is when they’re likely to think about killing themselves.

A caring friend who comes along when life feels heavy is like a balloon. A friend who’s willing to listen helps lighten the load and makes problems seem solvable. So does a friend who goes with you to find someone else who can help.

Feelings Affect Behavior

People behave according to how they feel about themselves at any given time. Think about the times in your life when you thought things were going really well and your spirits were rising higher and higher. Chances are that during those times you didn’t miss much school, you got your homework in on time, and you did well on your tests. If you were playing on a team, you probably felt good about your performance. More than likely you also got along well with your friends and your parents. You acted like someone who felt positive.

When life’s going well, we smile more and we’re more patient with others even when they say or do things we aren’t crazy about. When life’s going well, we have more energy. This positive energy helps us do well in school, at work, and in our interactions with others.

When life’s not going well, however, we feel and act negatively. We say and do things that reflect our unhappy, frightened, or angry feelings. During those down times, we’re more likely to get in trouble at home and at school. We may pick fights, and everyone and everything bothers us. Because we feel bad about ourselves, we may behave as if we hate everyone else. We may be sulky and withdrawn. If we act angry and say mean things, others quickly withdraw from us.

Think back to a time when something sad happened to you. Maybe you broke up with your girlfriend or boyfriend, maybe you lost your job, maybe you had a terrible fight with a parent. How did you feel? How did you behave? Did your behavior reflect your feelings? Maybe your actions were similar to Larry's.

Larry went steady with Sara all through high school, but during the summer after graduation, Sara didn't seem as happy to be with Larry. They were going to different colleges in the fall, and Sara said she didn't want to go steady anymore. She didn't even want to keep seeing Larry. She wanted to be free to meet and date new people.

Put yourself in Larry's shoes. How would you feel if someone you'd loved for four years suddenly didn't want to be around you? This is how Larry described his feelings: "I felt terrible. I thought it was the end of the world. I knew there would never be another woman in my life like Sara."

What Larry felt came through in how he behaved. Right after the breakup, Larry had a severe asthma attack, which was his body's response to his high stress levels. He started to drink a lot and often got drunk. He decided that he hated all women and was rude to the women in his life. He felt depressed. More and more often, he told himself that life wasn't worth living. He thought about suicide and later explained, "I thought that would end the pain."

Larry shared his suicidal thoughts with his best friend. His friend had been worried about him. He'd seen Larry drink too much, mouth off to women, and just mope around. When Larry told him he was thinking about killing himself, his friend acted immediately. "He said I had to get some help," Larry said. "He said no one, not even Sara, was worth dying for, and he went with me to talk to my coach."

For Larry, talking to his coach made a difference. His coach told him to cut out the booze, to stop moping around, and to start doing more with the guys. Larry listened because he respected his coach and trusted his opinion. His coach also didn't forget about Larry. Every week or so, he'd ask Larry how he was doing and if he was still following his advice. A few months later, Larry started to date again. Eventually he started believing that he could have a life without Sara.

All Behavior Has a Purpose

Have you ever watched a little child who starts to whine and cry because he's sleepy? That cute kid who was all smiles and fun in the morning turns into a monster at nap time. He can't say, "Mom, Dad,

I'm really bushed and will feel much better after I get a little shut-eye." Instead, he acts like a terror until an adult gets the message and puts him to bed.

Teens who are thinking about suicide have a lot in common with that tired toddler. They aren't able to talk about their feelings and pain, so they let their behaviors speak for them. Consciously or unconsciously, they hope their suicide attempt attracts attention.

This need for attention is more than a way to say, "Look at me. Love me. Find me." It's a way for the young person to signal for help. Suicidal teens can't say, "I have problems I can't solve. I should be able to, but I can't. I'm acting like I want to kill myself because I want someone to save me from my suicide plan."

If all behavior has a purpose, then the purpose of a suicide attempt is to signal for help and to let others know that the young person really doesn't want to commit suicide.

Help, Not Suicide

Remember, no matter what someone says about wanting to die, he doesn't really want death. He wants help with his problems. No matter how detailed your friend's suicide plans are, she doesn't really want to die. She wants someone who can help her feel good about living. You can be that someone.

**Problems and Situations That Have
Pushed Teens to Attempt or Complete Suicide**

These are just some of the problems and situations we know of that have pushed some young people to suicide:

- a brother's death
- a possible pregnancy
- problems with parents
- a father's death and the sale of the family farm
- hearing loss

continued →

- failing an exam
- breaking up with a girlfriend or boyfriend
- not making the cheerleading squad
- not making an athletic team
- a drug problem
- being gay, lesbian, or confused about sexual orientation

Look at this list again and ask yourself:

- Which of these problems or situations are temporary?
- Which could be made better with time or with help?
- Which are worth committing suicide?

SOURCES FOR THE FACTS AND FINDINGS IN THIS CHAPTER

1. J. Johnston, *Why Suicide?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Books, 1987).
2. "Youth Suicide Fact Sheet," American Association of Suicidology, March 2004.