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When a community loses a teen to suicide, it is devastating. Parents are left with questions. How can we help our kids handle this loss? Who is to blame? How can I make sure that my teen is not at risk? How can I help my teen understand what happened? While answering these questions fully is beyond the scope of this essay, here are a few words about risk factors and how to open a conversation with your teen about suicide. Research has revealed a number of risk factors. Many teens who are suicidal will confide in someone, whether an adult or a peer. Teens who are close to someone who dies, especially someone who committed suicide, are more vulnerable to experiencing suicidal thoughts. Teens who are planning to attempt suicide sometimes give away treasured belongings. Some teens express their suicidal thoughts through the creative mediums of writing, art or music. Others will surf online to connect with other suicidal people or to find effective means to commit suicide.

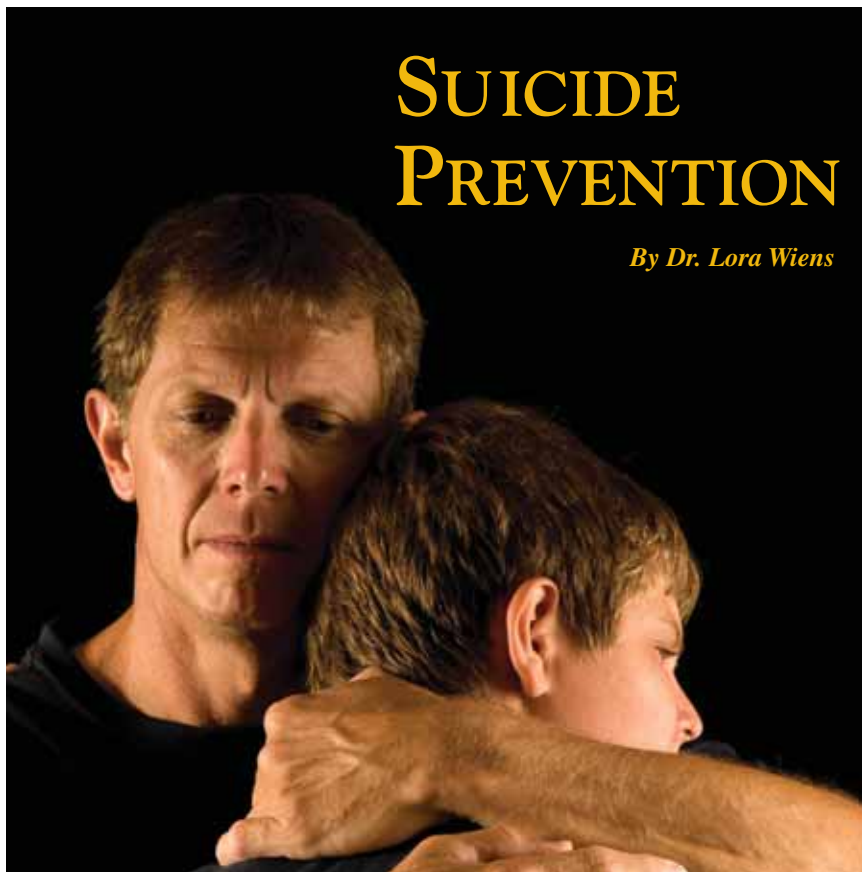
Many teens who attempt suicide qualify for a diagnosis of depression or bipolar disorder. However, a teen confronted by what feels like an impossible problem may become suicidal, even in the absence of any history of mental illness.

Teens who struggle with their sexual identity are four times more likely to attempt suicide than their peers. This risk increases if they feel ashamed of their sexual feelings, are bullied, or anticipate and/or experience rejection from peers and family members.

Drug and alcohol use, a history of emotional, sexual or physical abuse, severe bullying, and the break-up of a significant romantic relationship all increase suicide risk. A teen whose grades slip, who isolates from peers, or who suddenly neglects his/her appearance warrants further attention.

If you are the parent of a teenager, do not be afraid to initiate a conversation about suicide. To do this effectively, pick a time

and place where your teen is most likely to talk. This could be after school, but it may be in the car or right before bed. Open the conversation by calmly acknowledging your own thoughts and feelings about suicide. Then encourage your teen to share any thoughts and feelings. If your teen does not have a lot to say, that is OK. At some point in the conversation, emphasize the importance of telling an adult if your teen or someone he or she knows is suicidal. Communicate that it is OK if your teen seeks out an adult outside of the family. To find out whether your has teen such an adult, ask what adult they would consider approaching with a problem if you were unavailable.



## SUICIDE PREVENTION

By Dr. Lora Wiens

If you are worried your teen might be suicidal, do not be afraid to ask directly. This will not plant any ideas but will communicate that you are concerned and open to listening. If your teen is having suicidal thoughts, schedule an evaluation with a mental health professional as soon as possible. If the risk is immediate, go to the ER. If your teen denies being suicidal but you are still worried, consider consulting other adults who interact with your teen. You might also review your teen's text messages and internet activity. While privacy is valuable,

safety is more so. A final option is getting a second opinion from a professional. While your teen may be fine, engaging the eyes of a mental health professional can help determine the best course of action. Finally, know that you might be the adult your teen's friend feels comfortable approaching. Working together as a community, we can make a difference!

*Dr. Lora Wiens is a psychotherapist at the Samaritan Counseling Center of the Northwest Suburbs in Barrington. The Samaritan Counseling Center is active in suicide prevention efforts in local schools and churches. If you are interested in having us come to your group of parents or teens, please contact the Samaritan Center at (847) 382-4673. ■*