

# Respect Life Month

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*Addiction,  
Depression and  
Suicide*



Office of Life,  
Justice & Peace  
Archdiocese of Los Angeles





# ADDICTION, DEPRESSION, & SUICIDE

A few years ago, a man in his thirties took his own life by jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge. After his death, his psychiatrist and the medical examiner went to the man's apartment. They found his diary. The last entry the man had written, just hours before his death, read, "I'm going to walk to the bridge. If one person smiles at me on the way, I will not jump."

## SUICIDE RATES ARE SKYROCKETING

According to a study published in the American Journal of Public Health, suicide is now the leading cause of injury-related deaths in the United States. This means that suicide is responsible for more deaths than car accidents.

In the last fifty years, the suicide rate of young people has increased significantly. Between 2007 and 2017, the suicide rate for ages 10 to 24 increased by 56%, the rate increase for ages 15 to 19 was 76%. Suicide is the second leading cause of death in the age group of 10 to 24 years old, with almost

7 deaths by suicide per 100,000 persons. The CDC reports that there is one death by suicide every 12 minutes and approximately 123 americans die by suicide every day. This is a national tragedy.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, each day in our nation there are an average of 5,400 suicide attempts by students in grades 7-12. These teens ought to be full of hope—planning for their futures, determining which colleges to apply for, or where to travel to, or what to wear

to prom. Instead, many young people are grappling with depression and severe anxiety.

Suicide can seem like one of those issues that is so difficult to address. It is so big and can be so scary. But, what we learn from the man on the Golden Gate Bridge is that often all it would take for someone to change their mind is a small act of kindness—something anyone could do.

Some of you may have watched 13 Reasons Why. If you have not, please don't bother. The show's creators, in an effort to gain viewers and amass a social media following, chose to graphically portray in great detail the suicide of a young girl. In doing so, they endangered countless teens suffering from depression and other mental issues who were triggered by the graphic nature of those scenes. There is never a reason to romanticize suicide. It is always a tragedy.

## WHY SO MANY SUICIDES?

Increasing suicide rates do not occur in isolation. Look around you. Much of our culture has fallen into hopelessness. But, we may not necessarily recognize it. Judging from what our latest post or tweet says about us, we are all living glamorous lives of nonstop fun. Our selfies all show how great we look and how wonderful our lives are. In fact, this is a distortion of reality.



The typical suicidal person is not someone with an inevitable desire for self-destruction but a vulnerable person suffering from treatable mental health problems. Reason and judgment are most often clouded by depression, anxiety, drugs or alcohol.

The rise in depression and anxiety is leading to what is becoming known as “deaths of despair”. These deaths by suicide and overdose are completely avoidable. They are most often the result of a disconnect with the world in which we live; a desperate isolation and loneliness.

Why are all of these suicides happening?

In some cases, people are suffering from severe anxiety as they struggle to achieve impossible goals. In one of the most prestigious private high schools in the Silicon Valley, a rash of cluster suicides in the last 8 years have seen stressed-out straight-A students jumping in front of commuter trains.

Another factor is the phenomenon of social fragmentation. The social bonds that used to connect people to each other have broken down. Today's families are busy, spread thin, with very few relatives nearby. Parents and children alike spend more time on phones and tablets than conversing face to face. What can seem like an overload of connection through social media leaves people of all ages starving for real human contact.

For many teens, there is a strong link between porn use and poor mental health outcomes. For both male and female porn users, this habit is often accompanied by problems with anxiety, body-image issues, poor self-image, relationship problems, isolation and depression.

Other addictions such as drugs, alcohol, sexual activity, gaming, or gambling leave teens feeling guilty and isolated from friends and family. Shame can lead to an increase in these activities which further feeds loneliness and depression.

Depression is a complex phenomenon. Biological and genetic factors contribute, but social and cultural factors also play a role. Depression involves chemical imbalances in the brain that are exacerbated by contributing factors such as habit, guilt and isolation—all of which can lead to hopelessness.



## WHY DOES THE INCREASING SUICIDE RATE MATTER?

In 2017, about 31%, of teens ages 12 to 17 had had at least one major depressive episode in the past year, according to the Department of Health and Human Services. 13% of these teens report experiencing depression that impairs their daily function. About 30% of girls and 20% of boys—totaling 6.3 million teens—have had an anxiety disorder, according to data from the National Institute of Mental Health. In 2017, 17% of high school students reported that they seriously considered attempting suicide, with 7% of them having attempted suicide with in the last 12 months, 2% of these attempts which resulted in serious injury.

If you don't know someone who is battling depression or anxiety, you probably will. There is overwhelming agreement that being a teenager today is a draining full-time job of homework, managing a social media profile, and worrying about everything from racism to climate change. Every look and every word is documented on social media and open to comments by everyone else, all the time. It is exhausting!

Is it any wonder that many teens are turning to each other, even people they have never met all over the world, to seek answers to their problems, rather than going to their parents? Unfortunately, many of the answers are in the form of positive reinforcement of suicidal thoughts and feelings of hopelessness.

## THE LIFE WE ARE MEANT TO LIVE

This life of anxiety, depression, addiction and hopelessness are not what God intended when he created each unique and unrepeatable person!

At the heart of drug use, anxiety, depression, and hopelessness, is the search for meaning and happiness. Teens, like anyone else, are looking to understand where they fit into the universe and what purpose their lives have. Many teens grappling with these issues have lost the knowledge of their self worth.

Once a person loses focus of the knowledge that God created him or her individually, out of infinite love, for a very specific reason, it is easy to begin doubting one's self-worth and purpose. Symptoms such as eating disorders, self-harm (cutting), teen alcohol abuse and drug abuse, and

suicide attempts tell the story of teens who no longer feel loved. Many of these teens feel they have lost their connection with the God who created the universe and created each one of us.



There are so many negative influences in our culture attempting to tell us that we are in charge of our own lives and create our own happiness. And, there are many factors in people's lives (abuse, neglect, indifference) that teach teens through example that they don't have a purpose or intrinsic value.

## CREATING A CULTURE OF CONNECTION AND JOY!



What can we do to overcome this? The most important thing is to stop and recognize your own value! Don't think about the value that others have assigned to you or what others think is your value.

Instead, think about God, the same creator of the entire universe, choosing to create you just the way you are, and loving you so much that you came into existence. Then, remember that he is sustaining you every single day through nothing but love. If God stopped loving you for even a second, you wouldn't just die, you would cease to be—as though you had never existed! Good thing God never stops loving even one of us!

As Pope Francis said, “I have a dogmatic certainty: God is in every person’s life. God is in everyone’s life. Even if the life of a person has been a disaster, even if it is destroyed by vices, drugs or anything else – God is in this person’s life. You can, you must try to seek God in every human life. Although the life of a person is a land full of thorns and weeds, there is always a space in which the good seed can grow. You have to trust God.”

Knowing that God has a plan for each one of us, and knowing that he created each of us exactly the way he wants us to be, is easier said than done. We are barraged daily by factors wanting us to be smarter, thinner, better looking, more athletic. There might even be people in our lives who tell us that we are not good enough.

Trusting in God may sound like an easy answer to such a complex problem. There is a growing amount of medical research that suggests prayer, religious faith, participation in a religious community, and practices like gratitude and

forgiveness reduces the risk of depression and suicide and helps people recover. A Harvard School of Public Health study conducted between 1996 and 2010 found that people who attended any religious service once a week or more were five times less likely to commit suicide. And, of the almost 7,000 Catholic women in the study who said they attended Mass more than once per week, none committed suicide. None!

Fr. Robert Spitzer, SJ, former President of Gonzaga University, gave a retreat to college students. He explained that God is very much alive in our world today, even when we cannot see him. When we feel overwhelmed or anxious, rather than turning to drugs, alcohol, sex or other activities that will give us a temporary high, go to the source of all peace, all happiness, all hope- God. Fr. Spitzer taught the students a simple, powerful prayer. When times are tough, he said, feel free to shout at God. Let him know you are mad! Throw up your hands and tell him, “I give up! You take over!” You will be amazed what happens next!

