unwritten
your story is not finished
Generation Z faces a myriad of unique challenges as they grow up in an ever-changing world. These challenges have impacted the mental, emotional, and social health of teens in the United States. There has been a rise in depression and anxiety among young people. There has also been a stark increase in the number of suicide deaths in the United States. In fact, deaths from suicide jumped 84 percent in the past decade among children 17 and younger. Suicide is the third leading cause of death for children ages 10 to 14 and the second leading cause of death among ages 15 to 24. The number of high school students who reported seriously thinking about suicide increased from 0.67% in 2008 to 1.79% in 2015 (“Children’s hospitals,” 2017).

These statistics are alarming. Each teenager’s story of suicide breaks our hearts. At the core of who we are at Christian Women Connection is a desire to support missionaries and to help children. In Madam President, Nora is quoted as saying: “Jesus’ eyes are upon the children everywhere...There are four corners of civilization: the home, the school, the church, and the state... Are we seeking opportunities to enter every area of a child’s life?” (Neal, Bolitho, & Meyer, 1982, p. 69). We are moved to action to help children and teenagers who struggle with depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts.

But what can we do? The statistics feel overwhelming. How can we make a difference? First, we believe in the power of prayer. We may not be able to stand against such a giant of a problem, but we serve a God who is more than able. As the women of Christian Women Connection, we begin with prayer and follow it with action.

The first step is to educate ourselves on the life of today’s teenager. We believe that we cannot understand the rising rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide without first understanding the factors that are impacting their lives. The life that teenagers live today is very different from what adults over 30 might have experienced. With the rapid developments in technology, the gap between generations only grows wider.

One of these differences is the rise in depression rates amongst teenagers. The Department of Health and Human Services reported that “in 2015, some three million teens, ages 12-17 had at least one major depressive episode in the past year” (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2017).
Students are also increasingly feeling overwhelmed. In 1985, the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA began asking freshmen if they felt overwhelmed in the previous year. In 1985, 18 percent said they did. By 2010, that number increased to 29 percent, and in 2017, it rose to 41 percent (Denizet-Lewis, 2017). Almost half of the incoming college freshmen felt overwhelmed.

They are also facing new levels of anxiety: “Teens today have the same level of anxiety as a psychiatric patient did in the 1950s,” stated Dr. Robert Leahy (2008). Due to the angst surrounding school shootings, drug or alcohol abuse, or domestic abuse, teens are now suffering from secondhand anxiety (Elmore, 2017, p.9).

But why are these things happening? What is contributing to the rising rates of anxiety and depression? What is leading this generation of teenagers to pursue suicide? Through the course of our studies, we believe several factors have contributed to this.

Overwhelmed

First, teenagers today are overwhelmed. These students are facing pressure from many different areas of life.

Parents still hold the greatest influence on the lives of their children. Due to this great amount of influence, parents are noted as one of the greatest sources of pressure. Parents often are guilty of putting pressure on their children to achieve. They want the best for their child; therefore, they want their child to be the best. Madeline Levine (2006) describes this pressure to achieve:

Achievement pressure often comes from parents who are overinvolved in how well their children perform and inadequately involved in monitoring these same children in other areas. We can be overinvolved in the wrong things and uninvolved in the right things, both at the same time. (p. 28)

While there is nothing wrong with wanting your child to do well, problems arise when parents become too focused on the academic and athletic achievement of their students and under involved in their mental health. Additionally, Generation Z is being raised by
what some consider “under protective” or “free-range” parents, who give their children more freedom because they do not want to appear coddling (White, 2017, p.53). For this group, the cardinal sin of parenting is to be a ‘helicopter’ parent, always hovering over their child. This combination is having a negative effect on the mental health of teenagers.

Parents are still the most influential people in their teenager’s life. Their words and actions have the greatest impact on teenagers. If they apply too much pressure, whether in reality or in their child’s perception, it can produce undue anxiety.

In addition to achievement pressure and relationships with parents, teens are overwhelmed by the relentless stream of media and communication. Unlike previous generations, Generation Z has been raised with personal technology that has developed rapidly and continues to progress. While having instant access to information in our pockets has its benefits, there are also some drawbacks to constant exposure to information and communication.

Generation Z has been raised in a world of constant noise with something or someone always vying for their attention. Our brains were not designed to handle this information overload, and it has had some damaging effects. Jean Twenge’s (2017) research shows that “Teens who spend five or more hours a day online a day were 71% more likely than those who spent only one hour a day to have at least one suicide risk factor.”
In addition to feeling overwhelmed, teenagers are also facing a rising rate of depression. Although every teenager is unique and will have unique triggers and symptoms, the following list from Dr. Tim Elmore (2018, p.9-10) contains behaviors for parents and adults to watch for:

1. Social Withdrawal from friends or family
2. Anger and extreme impatience with random, small triggers
3. Obsession with (and spending too much time on) their phones
4. Napping or sleeping far more often than usual
5. Emotional spells filled with tears or even weeping (mood swings)
6. Extremes—either wanting to be alone or needing to cling to others
7. Low energy and reduced motivation
8. Self-harm, cutting or mutilation with sharp objects
9. Feeling overwhelmed by normal activity
10. Neglecting to shower or take care of personal hygiene
11. Extreme weight gain or weight loss
12. Substance abuse
13. Feeling hopeless and helpless

According to a report by the U.S. Department of Education, “In terms of identification, the students most at risk for causing harm are those who present some combination of signals, including drawing pictures or writing about harm to others, making verbal statements about hurting others (online or in-person), assaulting other students for minimal slights, and disrupting the classroom process with outbursts. Some students may not be participating in school activities, not joining others at lunch, or walking alone between classes” (Fein et al., 2004).

How can we help?

Generation Z is desperately in need of loving, caring adults who can invest their time in the lives of these teenagers. We believe that it is our role as the church to help shepherd and guide these students through this crucial and difficult time in their lives. We believe that both parents and other adults have a role to play in fighting the rise of suicide.
Parents:

- Monitor your child’s social media account and technology usage (Have an open-door policy for computer and smartphone usage).
- Have ‘unplugged’ times where EVERYONE in the household is unplugged.
- Have face to face interaction with your kids.
- Don’t be afraid to delete social media accounts if they prove to increase your child’s anxiety.
- Empower your student by turning over more adult responsibilities to them as they grow older (choosing the menu for meals or be involved in paying the bills).
- Set an example of proper technology usage by unplugging for family time or family dinners.

Other Adults:

The Church plays a unique role in supporting families. Throughout history, adults in the church have built relationships with children through acting as Sunday school teachers or small group leaders. These relationships are vital for teenagers who need adults to have a healthy relationship with them when they might have a strained relationship with their parents.

As Christian Women Connection, we are challenging you to be committed. Teen-age years are a time of many great changes, with few things remaining consistent. To help these teenagers, you need to be truly committed or risk doing more harm. Students who have had mentors who have not followed through with their commitments have shown ‘drops in self-worth and perceived scholastic competence’ and increases in alcohol use’ (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002, p.213).

Consistency and commitment are needed to build a solid, healthy relationship with students that will then produce a mutual respect. Teens no longer grant a person of authority respect; they, instead, believe that adults must show respect to teens in order to get respect (Clark, 2011, p.82). Whereas in the past, a title or role such as a teacher afforded respect from children and teenagers; today, most teenagers expect to be shown respect before giving it to someone else.
We are also challenging you to be trustworthy and show integrity. Many teens believe they have been taken advantage of for most of their lives by those in authority (Clark, 2011, p.46). They believe that every person is acting in their own self-interest and will use them as a commodity. Unfortunately, our society has turned people into commodities, meant to be used and disposed of for personal gain. Because of this, teens believe that few if any adults genuinely care about them (Clark, 2011, p.54).

As Christians, we are called to love others. Throughout the gospels, we see Jesus extending love and personhood to those society had deemed as ‘less than.’ He spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well despite the social and religious barriers. He touched lepers and dined with tax collectors, treating them as people, never commodities. We would make a greater difference in individuals’ lives if we were simply there for them, without an agenda or a list of critiques (Clark, 2011, p.73).

Teens are extremely perceptive and can tell when an adult isn’t being authentic or is using them for personal gain. For many teens, the adults in their lives are more concerned with their own agendas than with the needs of the adolescent, and therefore, they can’t be trusted. The challenge, then, is to be genuinely interested in who they are. We cannot treat them as an assignment, or worse, an obligation. Each teenager is a unique and special creation, loved by God, and worthy of our attention.

We believe that the first step to making a difference in the lives of these teenagers is to build a relationship with them. We believe the next step is to interact with them in a small group atmosphere. This small group will be designed to teach them coping skills, margin, mindfulness, and managing emotions.
Another aspect of our challenge is to teach them how to cope with the stress of everyday life. Adults are needed to teach teens how to handle stress (Clark, 2011, p.138). Historically, parents and grandparents would teach their children about life and how to handle the problems they would face. Unfortunately, this is not necessarily true today. Sometimes it is due to parents and grandparents being disengaged. Other times, parents believe they are helping their children by removing obstacles in their way. This, however, does more harm as it does not teach children resiliency.

As you interact with teenagers and children, look for the effects of stress. They include recurring headaches, insomnia, and lack of concentration. These symptoms can lead to more serious problems such as eating disorders, substance abuse, self-injury, and suicide (Clark, 2011, p.139). We want to equip you and these students with tips for coping with the stress that they face.

Margin can be considered a lost art in our society. This lost art, however, is connected to emotional health. Those who are emotionally healthy are those who create margin in their calendar. Even as adults, we have felt the effects of not creating enough margin in our lives. Whether due to the stress of work or family demands, a lack of margin can lead to exhaustion and burnout.

Mindfulness means to be truly present and aware of our surroundings and emotions. In a world where we are constantly multitasking, mindfulness challenges us to flee from distractions. Unfortunately, we have become used to noise and distractions and are forced to be intentional about being present. Some ways to do this include deep breathing, getting outside and in nature, and getting enough sleep. We also want to teach teenagers to name their emotions and know what triggers negative emotions. Sometimes we are tempted to avoid any uncomfortable emotions; however, we can benefit from sitting in these emotions and learning to recognize them.
Finally, teenagers can benefit from adults in their lives who are empowering them. When teens feel out of control, anxiety and depression spike. Adults can help by teaching them ways to take control of their lives in responsible ways.

**TEENS are now AFRAID to take risks and AFRAID to MAKE MISTAKES.**

Adults need to help them take those risks and then learn from failures. They can also benefit from having others depend on them. Plan service projects where students feel someone else is depending on them (Elmore, 2018, p. 35). Help students find their gifting through personal assessments.

We recognize that the rise in depression, anxiety, and suicide among teenagers is a problem that is enormous and complicated. We are not seeking to oversimplify a complex issue, but instead, we want to help adults understand some of the factors that are contributing to this problem. God often calls us to do things that are beyond our scope of ability to show His great power. We are trusting that as we follow God’s lead, cover this endeavor with prayer, and build healthy, loving relationships with teenagers, God will bring healing to these teenagers who so desperately need it.

Recommendations: “What Is Depression” by Helen M. Farrell

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-IR48Mb3W0
References


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