

Suicide: all contemplate it, only a few talk of it

Eric lay on his bed, a 10-inch cher's knife within easy reach, contemplating ending his life.

He recently had broken up with the girl he'd been living with, he was on the verge of losing his job, and Eric (not his real name) had been drinking excessively.

"I thought about where my life had come from and about my prospects for the future," he said. "I just didn't want to face such a hopeless life.

"I could feel my heart beating within my rib cage. I felt so vulnerable and fragile as I considered how simple it would be just to end it all," Eric recalled two weeks later.

Eric, a student at the University, is a part of the growing number of college-age men and women considering suicide as an alternative to coping with life's troubles. According to a Nov. 13 report on ABC News, one out of every eight people in the 18-25 age group considered suicide last year. The number of successful attempts in the same age bracket jumped from eight per 100,000 people in 1950, to 27 per 100,000 last year.

"Eventually everyone considers suicide — whether consciously or unconsciously — or they're not alive," said William Kirtner, University Counseling Center, who has been counseling for 30 years.

"Sometimes people just want to get away from their problems and feel getting away from themselves is one way to do it," he said.

One leading cause for suicide among college-age people is interpersonal troubles such as losing a lover, Kirtner said. Feeling victimized by such social problems as crime, violence, nuclear threat and diminished moral and religious values may also prompt thoughts of suicide.

Everyone is susceptible to occasional depression and feelings of hopelessness, Kirtner said. "I can drive into a Chicago ghetto, feeling like the world is an oyster, but by the time I've reached the other side I can have a sense of futility that makes me feel like shooting myself."

Suicidal feelings are not unusual, but when those feelings surface it's important to seek help. "Find someone to talk to and turn yourself inside out," Kirtner said.

Kirtner recommended professional counseling but added that a friend or family member can also help an individual work through suicidal feelings. "Anybody is better than nobody," he said.

Kirtner advised that anyone who gets approached by a person who is considering suicide should listen carefully and non-judgmentally. "It's important to help them see themselves as they are rather than tell them how they should be," he said.

But sugar-coating suicide symptoms with "positive bombardment" avoids getting to the heart of the problem, Kirtner said. Such well-intended pep talks may be detrimental and may cause the suicidal person to feel even more isolated if trusted friends brush-off the problems rather than try to understand.

Kirtner said symptoms that may indicate someone is contemplating suicide include expressions of futility or hopelessness, excessive isolation, the giving away of prized possessions and any reversals of ordinary behavior. "But," he warned, "don't get carried away and read meaning into every little bit of unusual behavior."

The best indicator of a potential suicide is a person who won't accept help, Kirtner said.

Sue Snyder, director of the University's Crisis Center, said many of the center's callers who are contemplating suicide express feelings of alienation, isolation and overwhelming stress, and they don't see a way out.

"The Crisis Center works to break through the isolation and help students feel connected. We try to help them find ways to cope with distress and deal with their problems while providing some hope for a better future," Snyder said.

"Life is tough, and it's often the college years where we learn just how tough it is," Snyder said. "But it's also the college years where we learn how to deal with life's problems."

Many students expect an idyllic situation at college based on impressions they get from parents and movies. "But once they get here, they find tremendous stress in dealing with academic pressures and career decisions. It's here they experience their first frustrations and failures with their careers, and those first failures tend to be the most dramatic," Snyder said.

...and what about Eric? He said he got out of bed and went for one last submarine sandwich. "and that's all I wanted out of life. It kept my mind occupied." The plan to kill himself faded.

Eric is now getting intensive counseling and has found a new home. He has several job prospects, and he said he is "glad to be out of that old relationship."

"I'm still the same person with the same stuff in my past — nothing's really changed. But I saw that all the things I've done wrong before I don't want to do anymore.

"That emotional outburst where I almost killed myself made me see I didn't have things under control and I needed help — and there's nothing wrong in admitting it," he said.

Free help is available for all University students at the Counseling Center (686-3227), the Student Health Center (686-4441), and the Crisis Center (686-4488).

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