

Suicides in the US are rising. How can the church respond?

Helping people feel connected to one another is the holy work of any community, including congregations.

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When high school students in Oregon met recently at a statewide conference, they discovered that they all had friends who struggled with mental health issues or thoughts of suicide. In response, they began campaigning for a law that lets students be excused from school for mental health reasons as well as physical ones. The hope is that the law—passed earlier this summer—will help remove the stigma of mental health problems and encourage people to seek professional assistance.

The Oregon students and legislators are trying to reduce the spike in psychological distress and suicide that has spread across the country in the past two decades. The US suicide rate increased 30 percent between 1996 and 2016 and rose in every state but one (Nevada), most sharply in the Midwest and upper Midwest. It is mostly middle-aged and older people who die by suicide, but the rate for teens and young adults has also risen sharply during this period. According to a report in *JAMA*

Pediatrics, the number of children and teens hospitalized for suicide attempts or suicidal thoughts doubled between 2007 and 2015.

What's making life unbearable for an increasing number of people, young and old? Experts point to the stresses of the economic recession of 2008 and its aftermath, as well as to the epidemic of opioid addiction. In the case of teens and young adults, psychologist Jean Twenge and other researchers trace the increase in mental health issues to the rise of social media. Devices designed to link people with their friends end up making people feel more isolated; the more time they spend online, the more unhappy they are.

It's nearly impossible, however, to isolate direct causes of suicide. Substance abuse, chronic mental health conditions, relationship issues, and financial distress are the major risk factors. Yet often suicide is the first sign of distress.

Just as the causes are varied, so are the recommendations on prevention. The Centers for Disease Control call, among other things, for more extensive education on mental health, easier access to treatment, and more controls on guns (the primary means of suicide).

The CDC also makes this simple recommendation: "offer activities that bring people together so they feel connected and not alone." That's the holy work of any community, including any religious congregation: to provide a place where people feel valued and safe enough to ask for help. People with thoughts of suicide feel especially alone. They need communities and congregations that aren't afraid to talk about suicide and that can point people to treatment.

The bewildering horror of suicide is that people in distress may slip through even the most caring of communities. But by taking seriously people's pain, being brave enough to talk about suicide, and knowing when to get professionals involved, every congregation and every person can be part of saving a life.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Preventing suicides."