

# Crying wolf? Recognise the signs of suicidal behaviour

## Analysis

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"I COULD have stopped it. She was my best friend. I never thought it was this bad. You know, we all have problems. I thought it was just another bad day."

These are the words of a young Grade 10 pupil who recently lost her best friend to suicide and struggling to live with the many unanswered questions following and harassing the loved ones who have been left behind in shock and despair in all suicide cases.

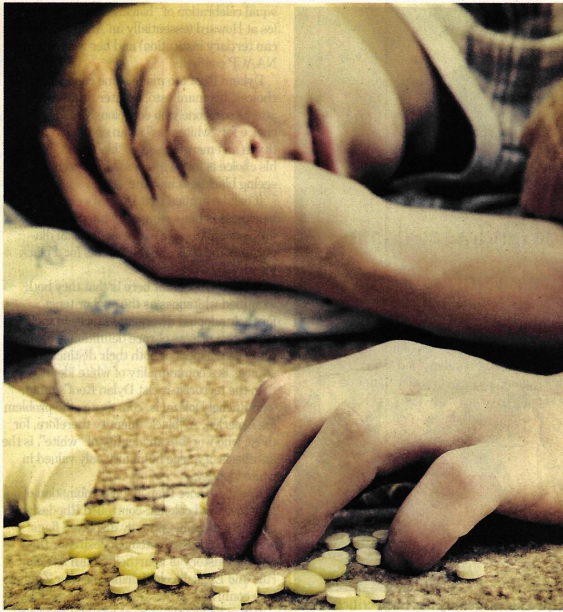
Suicide is the cause of almost one in 10 teenage deaths in South Africa and there is growing evidence that social media sites in some parts are to blame for this ever increasing figure.

According to a 2012 Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) study, the department of journalism, media and philosophy analysed the content of "emo" teenage groups on Facebook and found there is a connection between adolescent use of social media and the promotion of positive perceptions of suicidal behaviour.

"Emo is an abbreviation for emotional and is a popular teenage subculture, similar to Goth and grunge, which commemorates moody emotions through dark dress, melancholic behaviour and angsty music," according to the study.

Worldwide, suicide is the second most frequent cause of death among young people between the ages of 15 and 30. There seems to be an "increasingly concerning rate of teen depression and suicide" – one in four South African teens have attempted suicide and one in three hospital admissions for suicide involve the youth. Yet, most public schools don't have counsellors or psychosocial support systems in place.

According to statistics released by the Depression and Anxiety Support Group (DASG), South African research has indicated that one in five teens thinks about harming



**TEENAGE WASTELAND:** Suicide is the second most frequent cause of death among people aged 15 to 30. PICTURE: SHUTTERSTOCK

themselves, with 7.8% of these youths actually having attempted suicide before, while 57.7% of the sample had told someone of their intentions to end their lives.

For every successful suicide, there are 20 unsuccessful attempts and youths between the ages of 10 and 19 are at the highest risk according to a 2012 University of KwaZulu-Natal study.

Other studies have found that 24.5% of

attempted suicide cases among black South Africans have occurred in youths aged 17 and below. A total of 34% of black youths have considered suicide as an option in response to stressful life situations, such as the divorce of their parents, conflict and relationship problems.

According to the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (Sadag) one out of three suicides in South Africa happen in Gauteng

and a one and a half times increase in suicidal deaths have been seen in the rural Eastern Cape in the former Transkei over the past five years.

Research has shown that there are many psycho-social factors that could play a role, such as untreated mental illness, substance abuse, family problems, trauma, rape and poverty, which all have the potential of contributing to a person feeling suicidal.

The SA Mental Health Federation says about 70% of those who have committed suicide often give warning signs.

"Some of the warning signs are talking or thinking about death often, clinical depression, the loss of interest in things one used to care about, putting affairs in order; a sudden change in behaviour; unexpected switch from being very sad to being very calm or appearing to be happy, visiting or calling people to say goodbye and giving away possessions," the federation says.

Suicide is a desperate attempt to escape suffering that has become unbearable. Blinded by feelings of self-loathing, hopelessness and isolation, a suicidal person can't see any way of finding relief except through death. But despite their desire for the pain to stop, most suicidal people are deeply conflicted about ending their own lives.

They wish there was an alternative to committing suicide, but they just can't see one.

Soul City Institute for Health and Development Communication has been involved in various youth programmes over the past 20 years. The 5 000 active Soul Buddyz, the 800 Rise Clubs and other social media platforms like the Rise Young Women's Talk Show and Kwanda Programmes are a few examples of Soul City initiatives providing a platform for the organisation to gently enter the world of our youth and the struggles they face – one being feelings of despair and worthlessness which from time to time lead to suicidal thoughts or suicide itself.

Which leads to the ever returning question, why? Why do we have to lose a fragile, young

## Key points

- ▶ Suicide is the cause of almost one in 10 teenage deaths in South Africa
- ▶ A 2012 NMMU study found a connection between adolescent use of social media and positive perceptions of suicidal behaviour
- ▶ Worldwide suicide is the second most frequent cause of death among young people between the ages of 15-30
- ▶ According to DASG, one in five teens think about harming themselves
- ▶ For every successful suicide, there are 20 unsuccessful attempts

life in such manner? Does this mean that the support systems in our society are insufficient?

The organisation wants to stress each SA citizen's responsibility to be familiar with the signs and prevent suicide from increasing among our youth.

Since we all interact with and relate to youth on a daily basis in one way or another, we need to be aware of suicidal signs, especially during season changes in order to identify and refer candidates potentially at risk.

Social media can also be used as a positive tool to connect teenagers with people who can help them. Soul City, for example has Rise and Rise Mixed on Facebook, which allows young people to ask questions about topics like depression and suicide and get answers from professionals who they may usually not have access to.

"I'm the girl nobody knows until she commits suicide. Then suddenly everyone had a class with her" – are you really willing to take the risk of ignoring the suicide warning signs? *Hannah Geysers is the provincial manager for Youth Programmes in the Free State.*

