

“The **suicide rate** in the **United States** remains comparatively high for the 15 to 24 age group with 6,211 **suicides** in this age range in 2018, (up 35% in 2 decades) making it the second leading cause of death for that age range.” This is a result from a Google search, that pulls up a Wikipedia answer to “What is the teen suicide rate in the USA”.

If your child isn't outwardly dealing with stress and other life impacts, you may never know these numbers or even think to look for them. If you have experienced a loss by suicide, no matter the age, you are left with a huge hole in your heart and in your life, it never quite fills in. You may search for suicide rates, how you can help others, or how to help lift the grief you can't shake when you are touched by the effects of suicide. But what is being done to face this subject?

Imagine for a second, you are again 15 years old, you are dealing with the stresses of school, home, and whatever hormone is acting up that day, and you feel like you can't breathe with the weight of this invisible world on your shoulders. You have no idea really what makes you feel this way, but you know that nobody feels the way you do, so you keep quiet. Your days come and go with anxiety and you feel tension building up and its getting tighter and tighter inside you to keep it all in, but when your parent or teacher ask how you are doing, you continue to say “I'm fine”, or you play a goofy grin to distract both of you from actually talking about it. You know that it would take so much to explain and no adult is going to understand, because your picture of adulthood is missing the piece that they used to be young at one time.

How do we connect? School in the “old days” didn't have a way really, of dealing with stress and anxiety, as children were seen under a different lens. Sure, there was a counselor and, if you were lucky a really cool teacher or staff member you connected with. Schools have come a long way in recognizing and supporting anxiety and depression in students of all ages.

When I was a child, starting before kindergarten, I was very anxious. In my early years, there was a lot going on at home and I did not fit in as a “normal” child. I had no idea about how my body was working or not working with my brain and that stressed me out too. My parents were divorced when I was 10 and we moved countless times, always into a new school or district. Growing into ways of coping with stress and life, with tics and sounds I could make myself feel calm. Still, the adults in my life seemingly overlooked the uniqueness of these differences and I remained stressed and it was building. I used these socially awkward ways to deal with my strain but it worked and I found different ways to do them so people wouldn't notice. It wasn't until adulthood that I was diagnosed with Turrets Syndrome and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD). I, by this time, had found ways to deal with stress and urges to make sounds or facial stretches and bring them to a minimum. Although there are triggers that still haunt me, I have minimal social issues. I found my relief through self-help books and when the internet came into my life, I researched everything I could find much quicker than going to book stores and the library. Understanding how chemicals in our body influence our emotions was one of the best things I studied, and learning how to cope with the way it feels was another lesson that took time for me to feel comfortable enough to ask a professional to help me recognize.

When I was in school nobody acknowledged that I needed help and if they did, I didn't understand that is what they were doing. Currently in our school system, in addition to trained specialists and staff, there are groups of students that help to recognize when a child needs help and highlight the day to day needs that they and their peers experience. They work with school staff to bring those issues to light and better create a system that helps the students all across our state.

Whether it is physical or mental, the support system has grown to be quite successful in assisting students. But there are still the silent ones who are very good at hiding the anxiety and the sadness. I was blessed with finding many ways of coping that my anxiety did not become a severe depression but many times it was extremely depressing. Teen suicide has been around forever and the reasons continue to grow as the world changes. The young people who get through into adulthood but never seek out or are given a way to cope with stress and sadness may still choose to end their life. This topic is not just important to the student, parents, or school but all the way up into and past the legislature. If we really believe "The Children are our Future", then we need to start very early in their lives to make a difference.

While our schools are working hard being trained and to identify the students that need help, we at home need to pay attention to the signs and listen to our kids. It seems easy but its not. I have a 10-year-old son and often have to pry out his real feelings through crafty questions and bowls of ice cream. Many times, I have included his teacher or school staff to help me recognize what the problem is. This is not ever an easy task. The saying, "It takes a village" really rings true when we need support in helping our kids. We don't have to be desperate to reach out and neither do our kids, we just need to know where to look and how to recognize when we need help. Above all, we need to know it is okay to accept it.

There are amazing groups of students engaging through their districts, with Washington State School Directors' Association (WSSDA) and our legislature to implement the most effective ways in connecting students and staff. The Washington State Legislature passed Substitute House Bill 2589 in the 2020 legislative session which requires school districts to start listing suicide crisis hotline information on all student and staff ID cards by June of 2021. WSSDA and student advocates strongly supported the passage of this bill. This is a positive thing that can help a person in a tough time. I look forward to what tools we can offer students and staff that help when we don't have a way to call the hotline and how we can all be better at dealing with emotions and stress inside ourselves before they become an ultimate barrier to leading our lives and growing up. The more students, parents and guardians, and school staff communicate, the better we will be able to help students earlier on and throughout their school experience.

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline number is (800) 273-8255 and the link to the article on the WSSDA website is <https://www.wssda.org/suicide-prevention-mental-health-a-priority-for-student-leaders/>. Text line -Text "home" to 741741211 for help with mental health resources.

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