

OPINION: Teen suicide: No mother should have to bury her child

By Tricia Baker

Recently, I attended the funeral of a young man who was a classmate of my son's. He was 23 years old and came from a good home and a loving family. He had struggled with an ugly illness that takes so very many lives each year: depression. So very sadly, the young man lost his battle; depression had won.

As I walked into the funeral home, I heard his mom saying, over and over, "Why, my baby?", and she was crying the deepest, most mournful cry. I immediately started to tear up, because I know her pain. I, too, lost my baby to this horrible disease. Almost six years ago, Kenny was diagnosed with mental health disorders when he was 15 and he ended his life by suicide at the age of 19.

The statistics are staggering. According to a 2012 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention survey: 15.8 percent of high school students reported that they had seriously considered attempting suicide; 12.8 percent had a plan about how they would attempt suicide; 7.8 percent of students had attempted suicide one or more times during the 12 months preceding the survey, and 2.4 percent of students had made a suicide attempt that resulted in hospitalization.

To me, these numbers are alarming, yet, to my surprise, few adults feel comfortable talking with their children about depression, mental health issues and suicide. Fifty percent of all mental health disorders present themselves by age 14. It is critical to start these conversations early. Our teens are much more open-minded about having these discussions with their peers. Teens want to help each other. They struggle, or they see their friends struggle, and they don't know what to do or whom to talk to, because so very many adults don't understand. Too many adults believe the symptoms of mental health disorders are behaviors that you can "snap out" of.

As a parent of a teen who battled depression and an anxiety disorder, I understand how other adults feel. There is no definitive book about how to parent a child with mental illness, and parents are often left hopeless and confused about what they should do to help their children. After all, many think "How difficult is it to put your feet on the ground and get out of bed each morning?"

I used to battle with my son on this issue every single morning. I was so afraid that he wasn't going to graduate from high school, but what I should have worried about was this reality: Will he live long enough to finish high school? Sadly, he didn't.

What should every parent and adult who works with teens know?

Mental health disorders are real and they are on the rise among our youth. Anxiety disorders are the most prevalent of all disorders. More youth die from eating disorders than any other mental health disorder. To be physically healthy, all young people need nutritious food, adequate sleep and exercise and a healthy living environment.

What can parents do to help ensure their child is mentally healthy?

- Provide unconditional love. Security and acceptance are the basis for love. Parents should know their children's abilities and be proud of them, no matter what. Each child is a unique gift and is special in his or her own way.



- Build self-esteem. We must give our children sincere praise. Love alone will not stop the onset of a mental health disorder. If love could have saved someone who was depressed, Kenny would surely be alive today. Kenny knew he was loved by many.

Parents and adults who work with youth must educate themselves so they recognize the warning signs of mental health disorders.* It is critical that children receive the appropriate evaluations, diagnoses and treatments early in the onset of illness. The earlier treatment begins, the more likely its success.

Here are some warning signs that children who are struggling with mental illness may exhibit:

- 1) talking or writing about suicide or "going away";
- 2) increased use/abuse of substances;
- 3) acting recklessly, as if he/she has a death wish;
- 4) change in sleep or eating habits;
- 5) withdrawing from family and friends;
- 6) mood changes, anger;
- 7) losing interest in activities, and
- 8) numerous unexplained physical ailments.

A good friend of Kenny's, who is only 24, has lost nine friends to suicide or overdose, both symptoms of untreated or improperly treated mental health disorders. I looked at all of the young faces at the funeral I recently attended and thought: These young people should be at concerts, going to parties, in school, working at their new careers with their entire lives in front of them. They should not have to watch a friend be laid to rest.

No mother and father should have to live with the pain of this horrific loss. We must start the conversation about good mental health today.

Tricia Baker is a co-founder of Attitudes In Reverse (AttitudesInReverse.org), along with her husband, Kurt, and daughter, Katelyn.

* Tricia and Kurt Baker are certified instructors of Youth Mental Health First Aid, which provides education on the signs of mental health disorders and on how to effectively help youth in crisis.