

An Overview: Understanding and Assessing Suicide in the Gifted

By Andrew S. Mahoney, M.S.,L.P.C.,L.M.F.T.

When discussing the topic of suicide among the gifted population, one runs into the same divergent, often unexplainable, ambiguity associated with this special population. Though there is no conclusive evidence that the gifted are more prone to suicide than the non-gifted (Delisle, 1986), suicide among the gifted is a serious issue. There are several factors that counselors, parents and teachers should understand to precipitate earlier and better suicide assessment and intervention among the gifted. These include a clear understanding of the signs of suicide and the possible connections between mood disorders, hypersensitivity and suicide in the gifted.

SIGNALS OF SUICIDE

The most common signs of suicide (adapted from *Overcoming Depression*, Papolos & Papolos, 1992) include:

- ▶ Changes in sleep and/or appetite patterns,
- ▶ Decline in school performance,
- ▶ Increased social withdrawal,
- ▶ Loss in interest and pleasure in previously enjoyable activities,
- ▶ Changes in appearance, for instance no longer caring for one's clothes,
- ▶ Preoccupation with themes of one's death or the theme of death itself,
- ▶ Increased irritability and behavioral problems,
- ▶ Giving away important possessions,
- ▶ Use of drugs and alcohol,

- ▶ History of a previous suicide attempt,
- ▶ History of abuse and neglect,
- ▶ History of learning disabilities and a sense of failure,
- ▶ Frequent somatic complaints,
- ▶ Verbal expressions of self death statements such as “I wish I were dead,”
- ▶ No longer concerned about making plans for the future,
- ▶ Depressed mood.

Becoming aware of these symptoms will enable those who work and live with the gifted to more quickly identify children who may be in need of assessment or intervention. It is also important to note that many signs of suicide are also indicators of mood disorders.

MOOD DISORDERS AND HYPERSENSITIVITY

A great deal of research is being conducted to show some relationship between mood disorders, such as depression, manic-depression and cyclothimia (a milder form of the latter), and genius (Jamison, 1993; Hershman & Lieb, 1988; Shaw & Runco, 1994). This should be of significant concern to anyone working with the gifted population because mood disorders are the most commonly known cause of suicide. An important place to start is with the awareness that a mood disorder is a biochemical condition of the brain. Psycho-social environmental factors can trigger a mood disorder in someone who is predisposed genetically or chemically (Papolos & Papolos, 1992). When it comes to suicide and the gifted, culturally we tend to romanticize the notion by placing great emphasis on the legendary qualities of the deceased, as in the recent death of musician Kurt Cobain. There was virtually no mention of any mental illness playing a role in his suicide, yet there was an abundance of reporting on how talented he was as a musician. Kay Redfield Jamison (1993), in her book *Touched with Fire*, does an excellent analysis of gifted well-knowns and their plight with mood disorders. More connections and associations are being made as to how one variable may interface with the other.

Jamison is also able to demystify the hypersensitivity of gifted persons. It has been suggested that a link between the gifted and suicide may lie in the areas of hypersensitivity, independent nature and asynchronous development, which may create internal struggles and vulnerabilities far beyond the ego capabilities of the gifted child (Hayes & Sloat, 1989; Webb, Meckstroth & Tolan, 1982). Emphasis needs to move in the direction of understanding the hypersensitivity of gifted people and providing nurturing and accepting environments for them. Based on what we know about the vulnerability of the gifted, it could be speculated that the gifted may be more susceptible to suicide.

Because nearly half of all suicide victims suffered from depression (Papolos & Papolos, 1992), counselors, teachers and parents must be aware of the characteristics associated with a mood disorder along with the signs of suicide. Keep in mind that when assessing suicide with the gifted population, you are dealing with potentially manipulative individuals, possessing well developed defense mechanisms. Having the added edge of brilliance in this circumstance is not always a gift.

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Andrew S. Mahoney, M.S., L.P.C., L.M.F.T., is director of *The Counseling Practice of Andrew S. Mahoney & Associates*, a counseling center for the gifted and talented in Herndon, Virginia. In addition, he is an executive board member of the Counseling and Guidance Division of the National Association of Gifted Children, and a trainer and supervisor of counselors. For more than a decade, Mr. Mahoney has explored and developed frameworks for the counseling and psychotherapy of Gifted and Talented individuals. His work offers a new and original perspective for those interested in better serving this unique population.

On the web: www.counselingthegifted.com

e-mail: mahoney@counselingthegifted.com

Telephone: 703-318-6621

U.S. Mail:

Andrew S. Mahoney and Associates
441-B Carlisle Drive
Herndon, VA 20170