

Student Suicide Prevention Begins With 4 Simple Questions

As September marks Suicide Prevention Awareness Month nationwide, Americans are faced with how to grasp an epidemic few people are willing to discuss.

New statistics show that suicide has increased 24 percent over the past 15 years—rising to the second leading cause of death among U.S. students, particularly among males who face a suicide rate three times more severe.

When she became chief communications officer for Prince George's County Schools in Maryland, Keesha Bullock never knew she'd become a first responder, helping to coordinate grief counselors, mental health experts, police investigators and educators in the days and weeks following a student's tragic loss to suicide. "Those were truly the worst days," says Bullock.

Careful to keep confidentiality of particular incidents, Bullock speaks from her recently-concluded two-year tenure in the public school system—about why we need to discuss suicide, who is most vulnerable and how to help save lives through practical steps.

Bound4LIFE: As one who served thousands of students in the public school system, you faced several situations of a student taking his own life. What was your first thought?

Keesha Bullock: My first reaction was incredible sadness. You have to find a place inside of you, pick yourself up and be able to stabilize the school community—to do right by the immediate people around the victim who are grieving.

The days of being near to the tragedy of suicide were certainly the worst I faced in two years with the public school system. One of the things people do not realize about someone losing their life to suicide is they leave behind an average of six to ten people who are affected: close family members, siblings and friends.

From day one, my goal was always to try to handle the situation—which often becomes very public—so they can grieve with some sort of dignity. That is very hard to do because there is a stigma around suicide. Can our society get to the place where we have a conversation about suicide as a public health crisis, much as we see with cancer? That would help so many people.

When a student has lost their life to suicide, educators and parents must consider that unknown kid in the school who might also be thinking about it. What message can we send using the loud megaphone of the media to help them choose life, to help them heal, to help them know that there is hope for them? I believe that everybody is going through something.

Bound4LIFE: Why are students, particularly young men, vulnerable to this mindset?

Keesha Bullock: What I've seen is our society raises boys to be tough and not express their emotions. When a little girl falls down, we say, "Come give Mommy a hug." When a little boy falls down, instead we say, "Get up, you're tough, keep going."

Many boys are not taught to process their emotions and they keep it inside more. Then when they reach a breaking point, it is much more dramatic. That can be a contributing factor to the rise of suicide among young men.

Not to dive too deeply into racial issues, but the county where I served is a majority minority school district—with 60 percent African-American and 30 percent Latino students.

Because of stereotypes about African-American boys, in some cases they are seen as second-class citizens in many places. There is an extra layer when you introduce mental illness into that bias they face.

There are a lot of contributing factors to it, but I think it is a loss of compassion and a loss of people really being able to connect with each other in our society today.

Bound4LIFE: You've been a communications professional for many years. When you look at how media use has shifted with this generation, does that play into these issues of connection and relationship?

Keesha Bullock: Students today are digital natives, spending much more time engaged in the electronic space. While in communications we use the term hyper-connected as a good thing, we are now starting to learn about some of the drawbacks and trade-offs.

There is a different side of a personality when teenagers are behind a phone or behind a keyboard than when they are in person. Being a digital native has dramatically cut down on having real human relationships.

One of the things we know about suicide is oftentimes the signs are there, and it does not take much to help—simply looking a person in the eyes and asking four really simple questions: Are you okay? Are you thinking about doing something to hurt yourself? How are you feeling inside? Can I help you?

But if you think about the average day of a teen, when they are behind a phone and behind a computer screen, engaging at that level is probably not happening. In a school system that often has overcrowded classrooms and teachers with a lot of competing priorities, to watch 50 or 100 students and expect educators to pick up on those pieces and the subtleties that come with that, is extremely difficult to do.

It takes all of us to put down our phones and really start to find the value again of having one-to-one real relationships that do not come through a device.

Bound4LIFE: What role can parents take in protecting their children from starting down a suicidal path?

Keesha Bullock: I am not a parent, so it is hard from the outside looking in, and I would not want to be overly prescriptive. But I can draw from my experience working in the school system. I think parents really do need to have a digital plan for their family, to set some boundaries.

The internet is a big, scary place. Social media can benefit families, and certainly we've seen technology like the iPad be wonderful in learning environments. But at the same time, every family has to have a digital plan in terms of how much access they grant at various ages and how much time their kids spend using technology.

When I look back over the past two years serving in the school system, almost all incidents of violence in the schools and even suicide attempts could be traced back to some sort of social media incident. A nasty exchange occurred between students over Snapchat, Facebook or another app—essentially cyberbullying—and we learned later that it escalated into violence.

So one of the most important things is to make sure that you have a plan, as a family, of how are you going to approach social media and technology. Parents have to know what is happening.

Little things like checking on your kid matter a lot. Suicide prevention starts with noticing a small change in their behavior and sitting down with them. Look them in the eye and ask, "Are you okay?"

Take time to do that over and over again, perhaps over dinner

once a week. Living in this region where most people have an hour-long commute, many families see it as too daunting to have meals together. It does not have to be overly rigid, but it's a small thing to consider.

Bound4LIFE: Can you recount an incident where you saw intervention help students who are vulnerable?

Keesha Bullock: I remember very vividly being in a large high school the day after a student had committed suicide. When everybody found out at assembly, the shock was intense. But school leaders started an honest conversation about mental illness. They said, "We are going to band together to take care of each other."

Then a few days later, after the grief counselors had left, the whole tone of the school had changed. You saw people being friendlier and students looking after each other. Oftentimes those success stories are not reported. Clearly it is very good when a community starts to come together, and that is more of what we need to do.

You may not ever know if someone has been pulled back from the brink of harming himself. Much like when a woman is considering abortion, you may not know. It is that gentle touch, putting down the phone and saying, "What is going on? You don't have to tell me everything; I just need to know you're okay—or if you're not." That speaks to their value as a person.

It's hard because there is a lot of taboo around abortion and a lot of taboo around suicide. When people are in a place of vulnerability, it's the small acts of grace that can save lives. {eo}

Josh M. Shepherd serves as communications manager at Bound4LIFE International—a pro-life movement driven by prayer and advocacy. He previously worked on staff at The Heritage Foundation and Focus on the Family. He earned a degree in

Business Marketing from the University of Colorado. Josh and his wife Terri live in the Washington, DC area.

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