

# Project Alive - a plan to prevent adolescent suicide

BY SUZANNE KEENE

LANCASTER — About 25 counselors, health workers and teachers gathered in Lancaster this week to talk about one of the leading causes of teenage death - suicide.

Every year in the United States more than 5,000 young people aged 13 to 24 commit suicide. An estimated additional 400,000 make unsuccessful attempts.

In an effort to prevent such deaths, a study-action team from Lancaster's Family and Children's Service developed a lesson plan on adolescent suicide titled "Project Alive: Adolescent Suicide Prevention."

Debra Meckley, a counselor at Family and Children's Service and a member of the study team, conducted this week's seminar which outlined factors contributing to adolescent suicide, warning signs of suicide, methods of dealing with potentially suicidal adolescents and coping skills for teenagers.

Meckley said the project began when an eighth-grade boy committed suicide at a county high school three years ago. Everyone, she said, felt really unprepared to deal with the situation and with the questions the other students were asking.

In the three years since that incident, Meckley has collected 192 questions about suicide from teens. "The kids had a lot of questions and were eager to talk," she said.

While some people argue that talking about suicide encourages people to try it, Meckley disagrees.

"I don't think you're putting ideas in kids' heads by talking about it," she said. "The child has already had that idea."

Meckley said the highest completed and attempted suicide rates are among families with single, divorced or widowed parents. Many of the teens in such family circumstances believe they are in some way responsible for the situation.

"The important point you have to get through to those kids is it isn't their fault," Meckley stressed.

Adults can help teens cope by assisting them in developing a substitute relationship with another adult like a big brother or sister, she added.

Presenting a troubled youth with several viable options to suicide and then allowing him to make a decision about his life is another way adults can help. This, she continued, gives the youth the message that he is a competent person who can make his own decisions.

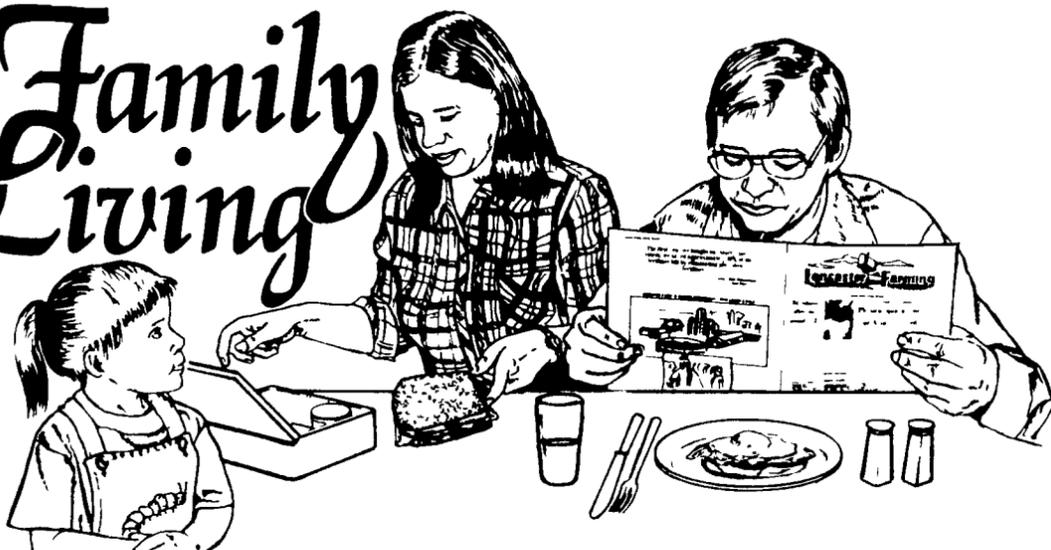
Often the teen just needs to talk about himself and his problems.

"Just be willing to sit and listen," Meckley advised.

A teens' behavior is often a clue to his distress, she said. Symptoms that indicate a serious problem include:

- A drastic change in appetite
- A loss of interest in normal activities
- A serious loss of memory
- Fatigue or chronic listlessness
- Disrupted sleep or insomnia
- Pain for no obvious reason

## Family Living



- Preoccupation with sad thoughts or thinking and talking about death

- An inclination to give away objects of value

Any of these can be a way of making someone hear their despair, Meckley warned.

According to the study guide, in many suicide attempts, "the adolescent feels hopeless, thinks there is no way out of a terrible situation, feels worthless, as if he or she is nothing and that no one cares and feels helpless, powerless and not in control of his or her life."

"Suicidal people," it continues, "somehow lose perspective and need to feel and understand that others do care and do want to help."

Some cries for help are indirect and easy to miss, Meckley warned.

"There is no way to know for sure if someone is going to try it or not," she added.

Meckley said that when a person tells her they have a definite plan for committing suicide, she considers the problem more serious than if the individual is simply threatening to kill himself. But either way, "be serious about it," she advised. "It's important not to have a cavalier attitude about it."



Debra Meckley, a counselor at Family and Children's Service, tells Lancaster teachers and counselors how they can detect and help suicidal youth.

## BACK HOME



By Michelle S. Rodgers

Lancaster Extension  
Home Economist

### Minute Vacations

It's that time of year when all of us begin daydreaming about summer vacation (especially those in school)! We look forward to time at the beach, weekends in the mountains or trips to other states as opportunities to relax and unwind.

Have you ever considered minute vacations? Many of us need to take short minute vacations to get us through a busy, stressful day! What do you do with these tiny capsules of time, these sixty-second pieces? I've become more aware of little chunks of time as I've recently spent minutes waiting in doctor's offices and lines in the grocery stores. Many of us ignore these spots of time or endure them as necessary boredom instead of using them as opportunities for mini-vacations.

Take, for example, the television commercial. It's been calculated that by the time a child reaches high school he or she has viewed over 18,000 commercials. At one or two minutes each, that's a lot of time. Now I have a friend who wisely uses the cue of a commercial to do exercises; like sit-ups or leg stretches (as opposed to running to the refrigerator).

Odd pieces of time occur everywhere, like little jewels scattered throughout the day. I know I find myself struggling to

get the little things done from day to day... thank you notes written, buttons stitched back in place and sorting of coupons.

If you, too, find yourself needing a mini-break try some of these suggestions:

**Stationery Kit:** Place stamps, stationary and pen in a small bag to snatch at a minute's notice and let your creative powers flow.

**Reading Catchup:** Clip out that article you'd like to read or try that book you've had on your wish list and keep it in the car or your purse for a minute or two vacation.

**Coupon Kit:** While you're on "hold" sort coupons into piles and stash them for the next trip to the grocery store.

**Anything New:** Use the minutes at meal time to have each person share one new thing they have learned today. This expands everyone's horizons.

**Silence Is Golden:** In a quiet moment of the day, focusing on any one sense can be a minute vacation. What do you see that you fail to see at other times... sprintime buds, goldfinches in a nearby tree?

Taking these mini-vacations does take practice. For those of you who are task-oriented as I am — take a break, snatch a minute or two for the vacation of your lifetime

## Need for adequate daycare is growing

HARRISBURG — Reliable care for family members is really everybody's problem, more so as women enter the labor market in ever-increasing numbers.

"There is no valid research that points to the return of the majority of women to full-time caregiving at home," Christine Crist, director of the Pennsylvania Commission for Women, said "Although those who are able to choose the traditional role should be given every encouragement to do so, most women are working outside as well as inside the home, and even more are intending to, the data show. The nostalgic yearning for the good old days apparently is not shared by most women. Recognizing this, the Commission is looking into the ways employers, communities, and families are trying to meet the growing demand for day care."

Recent research done by Gettysburg College senior Maria Palombo, while an intern with the Commission for Women, documents the need for more day care. Palombo defines day care, a service often misconceived as a type of nursery school, as "...full or part-time care during the day or night for children under 18 years or for adults of 18 years and older who require some supervision. Services for day care range from in-home care provided in the home of the child or adult, to family home care offered in the home of the provider, to care offered by a staff in a day care center."

Palombo cites statistics compiled by the Women's Bureau of

the U.S. Department of Labor, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the National Commission on Working Women, and other groups to illustrate the nationwide demographical changes that have made women a group that requires these services. She found that 50 percent of adult women, 50 percent of women with children under six, and 66 percent of mothers of school-aged children work outside the home. Furthermore, 90 percent of all single parent households are headed by women, 80 percent of all persons over 65 have a surviving child being called on for care, and almost 8.5 million disabled adults depend on other adults.

The traditional family, pictured with the mother in the home giving primary care to children and dependent adults, is no longer the norm. The economic necessity which contributed to this swing is not expected to diminish. In fact, "Working Mother" in October, 1983 predicted that another 1.5 million children under six will have mothers in the workforce by 1990.

The need for formalized day care has escalated also as a result of another demographic change. In 1958, 57 percent of preschool children were cared for by a relative. By 1982, this percentage had dropped to 29 percent, a drop partially attributed by Palombo to the high mobility of our society in the recent decades.

Are these needs being met? Palombo contents they are not. Help from the government has come in the form of tax credits,

subsidies, and assistance programs, but Palombo concludes that they are not sufficient and suggests that initiatives must come from the private sector and individual employers as well.

"The implementation of the federal and industry-sponsored day care programs (during World War II) offers proof that, (in this way), the United States can meet the demands for day care."

Despite a surge in the number of private day care centers, demand exceeds supply. Much of this gap may be attributable to problems like the costs of providing good care translating into fees many women cannot afford and the reluctant acceptance by society of the concept of generations of children growing up outside the home.

However, another contributing factor is the sheer lack of structure in the field. As on any business frontier, suppliers are cautiously determining the delicate balance point at which their service is desirable, lucrative, and not over priced. Meanwhile, it seems service suppliers' entrance into the market may remain slow.

What are some of the solutions emerging in the private sector?

### Traditional Care

The number of traditional day care centers is growing, if slowly. More education is available for those who wish to establish in-home care. Community Centers are striving to meet the more varied needs by providing transportation for after-school

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