

A life lost every 40 seconds

Suicide is fast becoming a major risk to public health

SUICIDE is a terrible tragedy, not just for those driven to end their lives, but also those left behind. Often, after such a tragedy, families, friends, colleagues and communities struggle to understand how grief, sadness, pain, isolation and helplessness can force a loved one to believe that suicide is the only option left.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), every year some 800,000 people around the world intentionally take their own lives. In other words, one life is lost to suicide every 40 seconds — and someone attempts suicide every three seconds.

Suicide poses such a risk to public health that WHO has dedicated this year's World Mental Health Day, which fell on Oct 10, towards increasing global awareness on suicide prevention.

GRIM FIGURES

WHO estimates that by next year, one person will attempt suicide every second — and every 20 seconds, one of them will succeed. Globally, suicide is already the second leading cause of death amongst those aged 15 to 29 (after road injuries).

In Malaysia, the 2011 National Health Morbidity Survey found that suicidal behaviour — thinking, planning and finally attempting suicide — was highest amongst those aged 16 to 24. This calls for a national response and further strengthening of policies such as Malaysia's National Mental Health Strategic Action Plan, as well as other government initiatives.

But what can we do, as individuals and organisations, to understand and help prevent suicide better, especially among

those who are just starting out in life?

YOUNG AND SUICIDAL

"Young adults are in a difficult stage of transition in their lives and face multiple challenges," says Evelyn Soong, a clinical psychologist at IMU Healthcare Medical Clinic in Kuala Lumpur.

Biologically, they are moving from childhood to adulthood. These are the "growing pains" of physical development, including hormonal changes and sexual development.

At the same time, their social relationships are expanding and deepening with new friends and perhaps even new romantic relationships. Young adults have to cope with social comparisons and peer pressure as well as the stress of new environments, whether in education or the workplace, or both.



Inability to cope can erode confidence while feelings of helplessness, confusion and common mental health issues start to set in.

PICTURE
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while feelings of helplessness, confusion and common mental health issues such as anxiety and depression may start to set in," says Soong.

IDENTIFYING THOSE AT RISK

First, we need to identify the early warning signs that indicate potential suicidal behaviour. "We always have to remember that regardless of age, suicide and suicidal behaviour is preventable but we have to know what to look for," says Soong.

We can tell if someone is at risk of suicide from what they tell us, particularly if they say explicitly that they wish to die.

However, subtle and more internalised statements can also indicate loss and isolation that has progressed to unhealthy levels. Statements such as "I'm just a burden to everyone" is an example, as well as "it's hopeless; life isn't worth it anymore" and so forth.

These remarks are often accompanied by abnormalities in mood and behaviour such as anxiety, depression, mood swings, uncharacteristic irritability, changes in sleep patterns (either too much or too little sleep). And also changes in eating habits (again, too much or too little).

Loss of interest in things that were previously a source of joy or pleasure, such as hobbies, are also warning signs, as is withdrawing socially from family and friends. Engaging in high-risk behaviour such as driving recklessly, or alcohol or drug abuse can also happen.

"Whatever the case, we should always take any suicide threat or attempt at suicide very seriously."

As they pass the age of 18, they begin to face up to adult responsibilities and have to start thinking about things like their own long-term financial independence. At the same time, they have to navigate a world that is increasingly driven by technology and with access to information on a scale unknown to previous generations.

"There is pressure to try new things — healthy as well as risky — and amidst all these new experiences and challenges, young adults are also coming to terms with their identities independently for the first time."

This can include fundamental questions about personal beliefs and gender, and the combination of biological and social change can be overpowering, especially if the young adult lacks adequate guidance from a mentor he or she respects. "For some, the inability to cope can erode confidence