

The Neglected Issue

Buchholz High School, 11th Grade

Teenagers have a reputation for being impulsive, emotional, and in many cases, seen as untrustworthy among adults in society; they are expected to behave as adults, but are more often treated like children. Often, when a teen is struggling, it is only seen as a “phase” and is not taken seriously. Even worse, the problems and struggles facing teens go unnoticed even to friends and family members. For example, the straight-A student athlete or the well-spoken prom queen might cry him or herself to sleep each night and be the only one to know. Their lives seem picture-perfect on the outside, but are actually quite the opposite. Teenagers are continually put under the stress and pressure to excel. As colleges and universities are becoming more competitive, the pressure for students to maintain adequate grades and obtain scholarships increase. Divorce has become significantly more common and easier to conduct compared to fifty years ago. As a result, more families have separated, and more children and teenagers are faced with family problems. For these reasons, genetics, and due to other factors, many teenagers suffer from depression and self-harm. Unfortunately, depression and self-harm amongst teens remains a sensitive issue that is not getting the crucial recognition and awareness it needs.

Approximately two million self-harm cases are reported annually throughout the United States. Unfortunately many teens who suffer from self-harm do so in secrecy and in silence, so the actual number of cases is likely much higher. Regardless, the issue needs to be further addressed and taken seriously. Ninety percent of self-harm afflictors start in adolescence and many have learned to do so through other people or pro-self-injury websites. Teenagers are very easily influenced and these pro-self-injury websites are extremely detrimental. The websites provide a “safe place” for afflictors to connect with other self-harmers where they can

find encouragement, share stories, and receive tips in a judgment-free atmosphere. Many of these sites have initially been shut down, but are suddenly starting to reappear again. Instead of receiving encouragement to continue self-harm habits, teenagers need a *real* safe place where they are able to talk about their struggles in a judgment-free way to receive help, recover, and develop better habits to combat their depression.

The first step in conquering self-harm and depression in teens is to become aware. By increasing awareness we can acknowledge the issue's seriousness and see it as a problem. Part of becoming aware of self-harm and depression is *understanding* the disorder; this means knowing the methods of self-harm and identifying potential causes for depression. Know that self-harm serves as a way to deal with emotional pain. Common methods for self-harm are cutting, burning, and interfering with healing wounds however, methods aren't necessarily limited to the following, so it's important to be observant. Self-harm and depression can be indicators to other disorders such as eating disorders, anxiety, and substance abuse.

The second step is to talk. If teenagers suffering from depression and self-harm are encouraged to talk about the issues they're facing, they are more likely to find answers and solutions. Also, simply knowing that someone else cares about their wellbeing can be extremely significant; it lets them know they are not alone. In extreme cases depression can lead to suicide, the third leading cause of death among teenagers. The more we know and are aware of depression the more likely we are to prevent potential problems and save lives.

The third step in combating self-harm and depression is treatment. Depending on the level of severity there are many different treatment options, especially if self-harm or depression has indicated another disorder. It is important for the parent and the teenager

experiencing the disorder to carefully discuss and evaluate each option. For some, it may be visiting a therapist or some other medical professional. If more severe, or if there is a second disorder such as substance abuse, the person may benefit from a rehab facility or something similar.

Confronting someone with these disorders can be difficult, but it is important to remain calm. Listen with open acceptance; the last thing a teenager suffering from self-harm or depression wants to hear that you are outraged or that they are not “normal.” Establishing an open relationship with friends, family, and other adults are ways we can encourage discussion and let others know we are here for them. That way, when teens face a problem they can confide in a safe-place rather than suffer in secrecy or resort to viewing pro-self-harm websites. Once we recognize self-harm and depression as a pressing issue, encourage others to talk about it, and aid in their treatment, we have chance to prevent further problems and even save lives.