

Saturday, March 14, 2009

Suicide and Transgender Youth *(The University of New Hampshire Counseling Center)*

Suicide is almost always a desperate act by someone who feels helpless and hopeless. Suicidal feelings and thoughts are a frequent symptom of depression. As a society, we feel shocked and questioning when someone we know commits suicide. We feel that we want to do whatever we can to prevent another such tragedy.

It has been only relatively recently that there has been recognition that transgender youth are at an increased risk of suicide compared to other youth. A growing body of research literature has provided the estimate that gays, lesbians, and bisexual youth attempt suicide at a rate 2-3 times higher than their heterosexual peers. **Some studies indicate that the rate of ideated suicide for transgender youth is higher than 50%.** These studies are not documenting only a recent phenomenon; some are retrospective studies, interviewing older members of the transgender community and finding higher rates of attempted suicide during these individuals' youth decades ago. It is only the attention to this problem that is recent.

Gender minority youth are at a higher risk of suicide largely because of societal and developmental factors. This age period is when all people face the developmental tasks of finding their identity and establishing sexual/emotional intimacy in relationships. Our society fosters, nurtures, and channels these tasks for gender congruent youth. Implicitly and explicitly, gender congruent youth have their feelings, identities, and relationships acknowledged and validated. In general, our society is a perilous wasteland for gender minority youth. It is a wasteland because the resources that might help them in the developmental tasks of finding identity and establishing intimacy are nonexistent in most places, scarce in others. It is perilous because there are real dangers to their emotional and physical well-being which they must try to navigate. Harassment, threats of violence, and physical/sexual assaults by peers and family are experienced by a significant number of gender minority youth. Even more ubiquitous are the slurs, insults, and jokes regarding this population which color their environment and make it a challenge for them to come to love themselves and have good self-esteem. Not all of them possess the internal and external resources or the autonomy that comes with greater age to help them through these struggles with their environment. Although many gender minority youth are resilient, internalized self-hatred and resulting pain for others contribute to a higher risk of abusing alcohol and other drugs as a means of numbing those feelings.

There are several things that can help reduce the suicide risk factors for transgender youth. All of us can make a commitment to making the environment a safer place for them. Gender congruent people reading this can do a lot. Stop laughing at or ignoring the bigoted jokes and insults that are frequently made about sexual and gender minorities. Go a step further and confront those who make these remarks, telling them that you do not find them appropriate. Additionally, you can continue your own education about all sorts of people who are different than you, including sexual and gender minorities. Open your mind and your heart further. Communicate your caring to those around you.