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## Answering the Cry for Help: A Counselor's Plea for Family Enrichment

Ronald E. Hawkins

*Liberty University*, [rehawkin@liberty.edu](mailto:rehawkin@liberty.edu)

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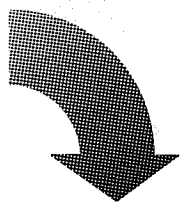
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# Answering the Cry for Help

## A Counselor's Plea for Family Enrichment

by Ronald E. Hawkins



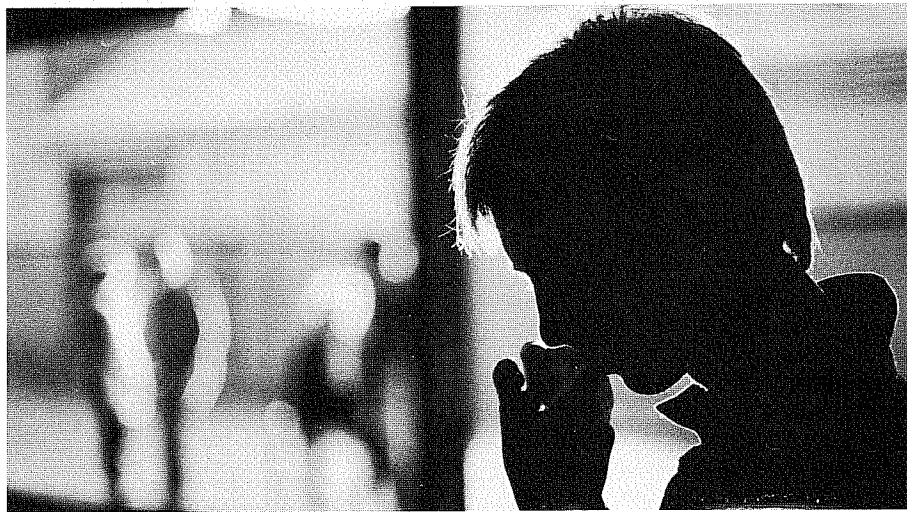
No one likes to hear about it, but the facts are undeniable. Suicide rates among the adolescent population are increasing at an alarming rate. Between 1950 and 1980

successful suicides among adolescents increased by more than 200 percent. Five times more girls than boys attempt suicide, while five times more boys actually kill themselves. A recent

mothers. Suicide data indicate that the bonding of the baby with a loving mother is the single most important key to feeling good about one's self and life.

Other social phenomenon that contribute to the rising suicide rate include the loss of culture and community, alcohol and other drug abuse, disintegration of the family through divorce, negative feelings over school marks, loss of an intimate friend, and incest.

Adolescent suicide is also a developmental issue. Adolescence is a time of



established suicide hot line in Chicago averages one call every 20 seconds.

Numerous myths about suicide abound in our society. Suicidal persons are believed to be insane, the victims of bad genes, or basically inferior. None of these myths are founded on reality.

Adolescents who decide to take their lives are usually struggling with a number of issues. Frequently they are vexed by the lack of a feeling of belonging or bonding. This feeling may have deep roots in their childhood. Some feel that the common denominator in teenage suicides is that these adolescents failed to bond with their

great introspection. Adolescents are possessed by the ideal of perfection. They know how things ought to be and are energetic in criticizing institutions and persons of their shortcomings. At the same time they are critical of themselves. While they are intellectually in love with perfection, they are biologically a mess. They have "zits," fat, and their hair is never "right."

Adolescent suicide is also a spiritual issue. Young people raised in our society are often alienated from God and man and erasure of self seems an acceptable solution.

Most teenagers give some warning signs of their intention, either to

friends or family members. These actions are usually a cry for intervention and should be carefully noted and monitored—and taken very seriously.

- Expressions of worthlessness
- An I-don't-care attitude
- Expression of loneliness
- Lack of energy
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- Antisocial behavior
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits
- School problems
- Giving away possessions
- Prolonged depression

We must realize that our adolescents are not immune to the tendency to periodically consider suicide as a way out. Churches and schools need to be more aggressively involved in parent education and family enrichment.

We need to learn how to communicate more effectively with adolescents. We need to understand them and accept their introspection, egocentrism, and criticalness as part of a developmental process and not the result of a personal war they are carrying on against society. We need to know what we believe and why we believe it. We need to major on acceptance, dialogue, and our unalterable commitment to them—no matter what. We need to believe that armed with the power of God's spirit we can always start anew on the foundation of forgiveness in Christ. When trust and bonding is not present, we need to confess our failure to God and the child and pray and work for its inception.

We need to protest the literature and media presentations that cheapen life and glorify suicide as a heroic act. In our families we need to continuously challenge the values of a culture where suicide is becoming a popular way of resolving the riddle of life. While lovingly holding before our children the hopefulness and joy derived from a lifestyle rooted in the values of the Word of God, we can model and teach those values with the certainty that they are right for every generation.

■ **Ronald E. Hawkins** is director of counseling at Liberty University, Lynchburg, Virginia. He holds a D.Min. from Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and is completing further doctoral work at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Virginia.