

Hiding in plain sight: Inside the online world of suicidal teens

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A subculture of depressed teenagers thrives out of sight. Mental health advocate talks about teens posting distressing emotional thoughts on social media and when to take action.



harder and harder to mask my pain. I can't tell if i wanna live or if i wanna die." Months later, he took his life in a park.

More than ever before, young people on smartphones immerse themselves in a digital atmosphere of high drama where a subculture of depressed and suicidal teenagers thrives, out of sight of most adults. As they share despondent messages, teenagers can find support in difficult times. But they also can encounter a push towards self-destructive behavior — or encouragement to "just kill yourself."

On Instagram, there now are more than 2 million posts with the hashtag #kms (kill myself), 554,000 with #hatemyself and 631,663 with #lifesucks. Teens say they also use less obvious hashtags or coded language text to talk about their demons and sense of worthlessness in places parents wouldn't think to look — such as #secretssociety123, which has a dozen variations and more than 500,000 posts. They also use code names for mental health disorders, such as Annie for anxiety and Sue for suicidal.

"Parents are allowing kids to go in their room, close the door and live a whole other life in cyberspace," said Daniel Bober, a Hollywood adolescent psychiatrist and chief of psychiatry at Memorial Healthcare System. "Not every place online they turn to encourages them to get better."

Many teens admitted to spending hours, days, even weeks unburdening themselves about suicide and depression in a hidden online world where adults don't interfere.

Two days before Thanksgiving, Alejandra Agredo of Miami wrote on her Twitter account, "i could use a hug right now." Hours later, the 17-year-old stepped in front of a train.

In April of 2018, 19-year-old Anthony Wolkin-Grudin of Tamarac posted on Facebook, "Should i cling to life? Or should i just kill myself? It's getting

Once caught up in the social vortex, teens wallow in self-hate, writing about how parents don't understand them and why they want to die. Beyond the usual teenage self-pity, they also share gruesome videos of self-inflicted cuts, images of beloved cartoon characters in suicidal acts, and memes with grim messages such as "do it."

Martina Velasquez of Weston was 13 when she first became aware of secret societies for depressed teens on Instagram and Tumblr. "When you are in a position of absolute depression and hopelessness, you think you are completely alone," she said.

"Girls like me were posting about devastating break-ups and romanticizing suicide," Velasquez said. "After a while, you start thinking, I should give in to this. I should feel sad."

Velasquez said she spent many after-school hours on her cellphone, looking at photos and videos of teens comparing who could cut themselves deepest and starve themselves more, or reading sad quotes about no longer wanting to live. "That negativity is definitely not good for your mental health," she said.

"I am mature enough now to know I was feeding off of it and getting worse," said Martina, now 16 and outspoken about keeping younger girls off these sites. "In that time period, I could have killed myself."

For all the empathy the teens share or receive, an element of toxicity can push someone over the edge, not only virtually but in reality. In some of these cyberspace worlds, self-destruction and suicide are not only normalized but encouraged.

Adolescent mental health specialists want social networking sites to do more to hide or ban content that exacerbates suicidal thoughts or triggers self-harm. Currently, when somebody searches a term related to self-harm or sees a post in their news feed, sites like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Tumblr and others provide a method to report suicidal content. Phone numbers to get support are sometimes provided.

Even so, the warning screen or "content advisory" message doesn't prevent anyone from getting to the graphic details. Users can simply choose to view the images anyway.

Tips for parents from teens

- Get to know your child's friends so they feel comfortable coming to you if they see something;
- Learn suicide warning signs;
- Follow your teen on their social media accounts, but know they may have private accounts, too;
- Ask your teen directly about a cryptic post or worrisome hashtag.

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