



Written by [Sam Blumenfeld](#) on June 4, 2012

## Teen Suicide: Is Death Ed a Cause?

By all accounts, American teenagers should be the happiest people in the world. They live in a virtual Disney universe, with delectable Big Macs, fantastic new cars, parents who buy them video games and cater to their every need, music that appeals to their adolescent tastes, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and all sorts of magical gadgets and computers. They are citizens of the greatest, richest, most advanced nation in history, the beneficiaries of its freedoms and beauty. So, why has life become so unbearable for so many of them?



The CDC (Centers for Disease Control) reports that 60 percent of high school students claim that they have thought about committing suicide, and around nine percent of them say that they have tried killing themselves at least once. Indeed, the CDC reports that suicide is the third leading cause of death for Americans aged 15 to 24. The only two phenomena that cause more death among teenagers are car accidents and homicide.

A recent survey of high-school students found that almost one in five had seriously considered suicide; more than one in six had made plans to attempt suicide; and more than one in 12 had made a suicide attempt in the past year.

But this is not a new situation. *Education Week* (10/31/84) reported that there were 18 teenage suicides a day in the United States, or about 6,570 per year. According to the *Boston Herald* (3/5/86), a half million teenagers tried to kill themselves in 1985. There is no reason to believe that this morbid death-wish has abated among teenagers in 2012. Indeed, teen suicide is now so common that only the most spectacular tragedies get national attention.

One such tragedy occurred in April 1990 in Sheridan, Arkansas, where three high school students committed suicide within 24 hours of each other. This rural community of 3,200 people is about 40 miles south of Little Rock. According to Facts on File (5/18/90):

The suicides began April 30, when a 17-year-old student, Thomas Smith, walked to the front on his American history class at Sheridan High School, told one of the girls in the class he loved her and then shot himself in the head with a .22 caliber pistol as his classmates watched.

Later that evening, a friend of Smith's, Thomas M. Chidester, 19, was found shot to death at his home with a .45 caliber pistol, leaving a note that read, "I can't go on any longer." The next day, another Sheridan High student, Jerry Paul McCool, 17, was found shot to death at his home with a .22 caliber pistol. Police labeled the death a suicide, although McCool's parents insisted it had been an accident. The three deaths occurred in the wake of another suicide in Sheridan, by 17-year-old Raymond Dale Wilkinson, who had shot himself to death on March 28. Police said there appeared to be no link among the killings, other than the friendship between Smith and Chidester, and that none of the youths had been in trouble with the police.



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We are now all too familiar with these bizarre cluster suicides that have shocked and baffled communities all across America:

Jefferson County, Colorado: At least 14, possibly 17, teenagers committed suicide between January 1985 and April 1986. A study showed that “few of the victims had taken drugs or alcohol before killing themselves. Some had problems at school or with the law, but others were model students who participated in sports and had high grades.” (*Rocky Mountain News*, 4/10/86)

Fairfax County, Virginia: Three Annandale High School seniors committed suicide between September 17 and October 26, 1987. According to the *Fairfax Journal* of 10/29/87, Annandale students are a “very ordinary bunch of American kids. ... Nobody really knows what specific troubles the Annandale youths who killed themselves may have been facing.”

Omaha, Nebraska: Three teenagers attending Bryan High School committed suicide and two attempted suicide within a two-week period in February 1986. According to *Education Week* (2/19/86), the students were “normal kids, not really involved with drugs or anything.”

Leominster, Mass.: On March 27, 1986, George Henderson, 14, a Leominster High School honor student, shot himself to death with a 12-gauge shotgun in his bedroom. He was the sixth teen suicide in Leominster in two years, the third in that school year. According to the *Worcester Telegram* of 3/28/86: “Here was a boy not identified as being a child at risk. ... There was no indication something was wrong ... he was a good student, an athlete from a relatively normal family.”

Bergenfield, New Jersey: In March 1987, four teenagers — two boys and two girls — committed suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning in a car idling in a closed garage. They had made a suicide pact.

Alsip, Illinois: Nancy Grannan, 19, and Karen Logan, 17, described as best friends and classmates, committed suicide in March 1986 by carbon monoxide poisoning in a closed garage.

School officials and parents expressed bafflement when trying to figure out why these young people killed themselves. Some psychologists suggested that it may have had something to do with low self-esteem. But many of these suicide victims were good students, good athletes, well-loved by their families. So why did they put an end to their promising young lives?

Is it possible that death education is an important contributing cause? Most people, including parents, haven't the faintest idea what death education is. A graphic description of death education was given in the *Winslow Sentinel* of 4/9/90. Winslow, a town of about 5,500 inhabitants, is in central Maine where people assume that weird subjects like death and dying are not part of the school curriculum. You'll assume differently after reading this account:

Death, dying, funerals, wills and organ donations — pretty morbid stuff, but not for a group of Winslow High School seniors.

They wrote their own obituaries and epitaphs, filled out organ-donation cards, visited a funeral home and talked about such issues as mercy killing. They wrote instructions for their own funerals.

As part of a week-long seminar on death and dying, the 60 seniors learned to feel more comfortable about the issue of death — what to do if someone dies, what to say to family members of a deceased loved-one, how to prepare for the inevitable.

“It's the first time I'd ever been exposed to anything like this. Families don't talk about death,” said



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Jennifer Erickson, who took the seminar as part of her psychology class. “Because of this course, I’ll talk to my own kids about death,” she said.

Jeffrey Charland attended the seminar as part of his sociology elective. “A lot of people don’t have experience with going to funerals,” he said. “It helped us to feel more comfortable about being around someone who has lost someone.”

Guidance Counselor Cathleen Clement taught the seminar. She came up with the idea for the course when she was in graduate school, looking at different areas in which students need exposure. ... “I wanted to (conduct the seminar) in a positive, upbeat way, even though the topic is morbid,” she said.

How anyone can be upbeat about death is a bit of a stretch. Ms. Clement could have taught a seminar on the Constitution, or some interesting aspect of American history, but she chose death education which she learned about in graduate school. High school seniors, concerned with making productive lives for themselves after 12 years of politically-correct schooling, ought to be given a positive outlook which will help them deal with living instead of dying. But as the Rev. R. J. Rushdoony has written: “Humanistic education is the institutionalized love of death.” The article continues:

Activities for the course included role-playing, in which students pretended someone had died. They went through the motions of dialing 911, making funeral arrangements, and either going through stages of grieving themselves, or helping another person through those stages.

In the process, they learned about the cost of being embalmed and buried in a coffin, as opposed to being cremated, and about the choices they have. “We got a price list on everything, and it’s expensive to die,” said Erickson.

Charland said that while taking the course he has made the decision to be cremated when he passes on. “I want to be cremated because of environmental reasons. It saves land and is a lot cheaper,” he said.

The trip to Gallant Funeral Home Inc. in Waterville was neat, according to Charland. Although the students did not see any bodies there, they did see the equipment and tools used for preparing them for burial. ... The students saw the make-up, and learned that a hairstylist comes in to fix the corpse’s hair. ...

Clement said the students never stopped asking questions at the funeral home. ...

Erickson said she wants to teach, probably high school sociology, and Charland wants to work in the field of psychology. Clement said some students initially felt uncomfortable with the seminar, but eventually became less afraid.

There is no indication in the newspaper article that parents were consulted about the seminar or were asked for their approval. Also, not all students react to death education as calmly as the two interviewed by the reporter. Some get quite upset. Death educator Nina Rebak Rosenthal, in an article entitled “Death Education: Help or Hurt?” (*The Clearing House*, Jan. 1980) wrote:

Death arouses emotions. Some students may get depressed; others may get angry; many will ask questions or make statements that can cause concern for the instructor. ... Students may discuss the fact that they are having nightmares or that the course is making them depressed or feeling morbid. ... Others may have no reactions or feel a great sense of relief that someone finally is talking about the things they often felt they could not say. Others may become frightened. In fact,



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Bailis and Kennedy report that secondary students increased their fear of death and dying as a result of participating in a death education program.

Depression, fear, anger, nightmares, morbidity. These are the negative emotions and reactions stirred up in students by death education. Is this what parents want their children to experience? Is this what they send their children to school for? However, according to Ms. Rosenthal, simply because death education can cause such emotional turmoil and anxiety is no reason not to teach it. "Since death has been such a taboo topic, open and honest communication is essential. Such communication," she writes, "helps to desensitize students to anxiety-arousing items."

Thus, the purpose of death education is to "desensitize" children to death — to remove or reduce that reasonable, rational, and useful antipathy toward death that helps us preserve our lives. Maybe that's why it's a taboo subject. But it is when children begin to see death as "friendly" and unthreatening that they begin to be drawn into death's orbit and lured to self-destruction. It's a phenomenon that might be called "death seduction," in which an individual is drawn irresistibly into a fascination and then obsession with death. The individual, with the usual adolescent problems, begins to reject life and love death.

*(To be continued.)*



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