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Gay Teen Suicide: On the Rise

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Dedicated to Sean Taffe, a very open and sharing person who will be missed greatly.
Sean passed away May 2, 2001 as a result of a tragic swimming accident.

The teen years can often times be very difficult in general, but for homosexual teens their problems can turn out to be more than they can deal with. Being gay for many teens is something that they can not live with because society, most of the time, says that homosexuality is wrong. These teens usually have no one to go to with his or her problems for fear of being taunted or harassed. Also, schools rarely have groups for gay students to go to for help and parents are often unaware of what their children are going through. With no place to go and no one to help them, homosexual teens can feel alienated which may force them think of more harmful ways of dealing with their problems, so at times gay teens may turn to suicide rather than having to deal with their problems.

In general teens have a hard time dealing with the changes that happen in their lives in school and with their own personal problems, so some teens become depressed and think suicide might be their only way to get away from these problems. The suicide rates among both homosexual and heterosexual teens have been on the rise. In a study reported on the internet site "Healthy Place" the statistics show that "adolescent suicide has increased threefold in the last 10 years, making it the second most frequent cause of death among youth aged 15-24"(Lindop 2001). In a study done on the population in Massachusetts in 1998 there were 503 suicides and 123 homicides (Healy 2001). Nationwide in 1998, there were 30,000 suicides and 18,000 homicides. In a study done in 1997 on 4,000 high school students, the statistics show that about 10 percent attempted suicide. Most common ways teens attempt suicide is either by ingesting prescription or nonprescription drugs or by self-laceration (Lindop 2001). I think one reason for this occurrence is because of the fact that, now more so than in the past, children have to learn to grow up a lot faster. There are many more responsibilities that teens have to deal with like fact that in most families both parents work and the older kids are left being the parent to their brothers and sisters or their parents are divorced and this causes a lot more

problems in their home lives. These teens are expected to take on responsibilities that they are not ready for, and this can cause added stress and depression. When depressed, many people can not find a way to be happy. When people are unhappy with their lives and can not make themselves happy, they think of other ways to relieve their pain, and suicide, along with drug use, is becoming a more common way to end ones pain. For homosexual teens there are far more problems that they have to deal with in their everyday lives.

Gay teens have significantly higher rates of both attempts and thoughts of suicide. In his study on gay teen suicide, Patrick Healy concluded that gay teens are "five times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers"(2001). As reported in "Lesbian News", "these youth account for 35% of the American population and 15% of all suicide deaths"(O'camb 2001). Of the 4,000 students who were surveyed in 1997, 40 percent out of the 10 percent of high school students who attempted suicide were gay. For many gay teens their everyday existence can cause severe psychological damage. When they are at school they are taunted and harassed, and at home if they are not "out" they have the constant fear of "what would my parents say if they new I was gay?" Both of these situations can cause considerable stress on a teen, especially since they have to go through the other stressful problems that all their peers go through. The school environment can be a very unsafe and scary place for an "out" gay teen. Many times they are beaten-up and called names like "fag" "queer" and "dyke". In a survey done last year by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) on 496 gay adolescents "69 percent of gay students reported having been targets of verbal, physical or sexual harassment in school, and that 42 percent said they had been physically assaulted."(Portner 2000)

Often times there is no safe place for these kids to go. Most high schools don't have an organization for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students. I think that if there were some place for these students to go there would be fewer suicides among gay teens. As for colleges there are often organizations for students to go to for support. Here at IUP there is Pride Alliance and the Safe Zone. Pride Alliance is a very good place to meet people and feel supported. I have attended many of the Pride Alliance meetings, and I would have to say that I felt very comfortable and have made many good friends. As Marcie Wood, president of Pride Alliance says, "It is like a family. We even have Thanksgiving dinner for all the kids who can't go home for the break." Wood also says that a good place for teens to go is the Internet. She says, "The internet has made it better for many people because they don't have to feel as isolated, and no one really has to know about them looking at gay internet sites." The Safe Zone is run by the faculty and provides a place for people to go for support. Both of these organizations, I feel, help students and provide the needed comfort and support so that they can try to deal with their feelings of being an "outsider". I feel that if high schools had these types of organizations, even if there were only a few students who participated, they could save a lot of pain and suffering for many gay teens. In one Manhattan City School, Michael Perelman started a group to help students talk about sexuality and about how to get along. "They purposely called the course a 'gender-discussion' group because some administrations were afraid that the district leaders would perceive the session as

promoting homosexuality."(Andino 2001) I know that my high school did not have any support for the homosexual students, and I think that is very sad because I'm sure there were students that could have used someone to turn to. As I have seen with many of my homosexual friends, they needed some sort of support though high school and even now in college.

I spoke to my gay friends and asked them questions about their high school experiences and about their sexuality and how this made them feel throughout their teen years. I have also sat in on panel discussion groups which are basically a group of Pride Alliance members who go around to classes and tell their stories about coming out in their teen years. I have learned a lot about how hard and traumatizing it was for kids in high school to be gay. One panel member, Joe, said that he was constantly harassed throughout high school. He was tripped on the bus, called "fag" and "queer" and was sometimes beaten up. Joe wasn't "out" at school, but the kids all assumed that he was gay, and they felt it was okay to beat him up because of his sexuality. Joe was okay with his sexuality. He was gay, and he didn't care. He knew there was nothing wrong with homosexuality, and he wasn't going to try to change just because everyone else was ignorant to the issue. Another panel member, Sean, had a different experience. Sean had feelings of homosexuality from an early age, and he didn't feel comfortable with them. He didn't think that anyone would accept him for who he really was. So he decided that he would "try to be straight" until his 18th birthday this went on for four years and when his 18th birthday finally came, he realized that he was not "straight" and there was no way to change that. At this point he decided that he was going to commit suicide. He held a bottle of prescription medication in his hand for a while and finally decided that it was not worth it. It took him four years to realize what he realized in one minute, that it was not his problem it was societies problem. He had to face the people he thought would reject him. Sean just recently came out to his mother, and that has helped him realize that if people really love you they will not turn their backs on you. I think for homosexual teens to overcome the barriers they need to realize that they are who they are and there is nothing wrong with that. I think this realization would make it easier for them to deal with their everyday lives. For Joe, he had no suicidal feelings because he knew that the kids at school were just ignorant, and he just dealt with the harassment. The coordinator of violence prevention and international injury, Ellen Connoton told the Boston Globe that there is no proof that homosexual students are predisposed to suicide, "They are no more mentally unstable than other students, but they are susceptible to victimization by their peers."(Healy 2001) I think that if people would just be a little more accepting of people "different" from themselves there would be less of a problem with gay teen suicide.

From my research I have found that many gay teens felt very alienated in high school and in some cases still do in college. Through my interviews and information from panel discussions, I have also realized that suicidal thoughts were very common in gay students. I learned that just being a teen was hard for them but to have to deal with harassment just because they were "different" from their peers explains why gay teen suicide is such a problem. I just hope that one day homophobia is no longer a problem and that we can all live together in peace. More high schools are starting alliances for gay

students and people in general are becoming more tolerant than in the past of homosexuality. I think that the world is moving in a positive way and this should help gay teens forget about suicide.

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