



GUIDELINES DAILY COMMENTARY ON LIVING WITH DR. HAROLD J. SALA

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Subject: Suicide

IS ANYONE LISTENING?

Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out--those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned. John 5:28-29

Looking back, his mother said that the problems started with her 19-year-old son when he was turned down at the school he wanted to attend. Trade school was their recommendation. About then he started drinking pretty heavily and started smoking pot. "Makes me feel better," he said. His appearance took a hit too. Whereas he had been pretty well groomed, he stopped bathing regularly and seemed to be withdrawn and sullen. He often shut himself in his room and listened to music or slept the day away. "I wish I was dead," he told a friend.

When his mother would ask him to come on out of his room and be sociable, he would yell, "Leave me alone--I'm all right!" Then he gave away personal possessions that he had always prized.

Then it happened. Suddenly and unexplainably, according to his mother, he ended his life with an overdose of drugs that was no accident. A terse suicide note was written saying, "I'm sorry for having messed up my life, but there is no way out."

When tragedy struck, people said, "How could he do that? He had everything to live for. Something must have snapped!" But the fact was his death was neither sudden nor without warning.

Almost everything I have described was a warning, a red flag which no one seemed to notice. Are there signs which friends and parents should see which should tell us something is wrong, something very serious? Yes, but, too often, we see them only in retrospect.

What are some of those indications that things are not right? 1) Isolation and loneliness. 2) Contacts with other people--especially authority figures, close friends and family--become shallow and without real meaning. 3) A preoccupation with death. 4) Changes in both sleep patterns and appetites; and those changes go both ways--from habitual sleep to insomnia, from eating practically nothing to eating so much there is rapid weight gain. 5) A loss of interest in what has previously been meaningful--school, music, sports, or work. 6) A breakdown in communication as an individual becomes withdrawn and introspective. 7) An uncharacteristic burst of generosity--even to the tidying up of a room which has previously looked like a disaster zone. 8) Comments about suicide which may be a far more frank assessment of a situation than anyone realizes at the time. 9) Depression and lethargy.

Never under any set of circumstances should even the casual threat of suicide be taken lightly. People usually talk about what they eventually do.

OK--what does a person do when some of these signs are present? The head of a suicide prevention hot-line suggests three things: LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN. He believes that most suicides are a desperate cry for someone to be heard. Skip the advice. Don't waste your breath saying, "Snap out of it--everything is going to be OK." Save the sermons on how much you have to live for, but listen and take seriously the cry of a person whose problem may not seem very big to you but is life-threatening to the one who is depressed.

If what I have described is a picture of someone you know, get help for that person. It is far better to confront than to forever wish you had insisted on getting help. Especially for the young, life doesn't appear to be terribly hopeful, yet to know that someone cares and will listen helps destroy despair and brings hope. Where there is life, there is yet hope.

Resource reading: John 10