


NEWS

# Internet a 'Lord of the Flies': Teen suicide rise started after Instagram, Snapchat began

 Dr. Courtney Harkins, a clinical supervisor at Jserra Catholic High gives a presentation to Jserra students about suicide, depression, how to recognize the symptoms and what to do about it in San Juan Capistrano on Wednesday, Feb. 28, 2018. (Photo by Leonard Ortiz, Orange County Register/SCNG)

Dr. Courtney Harkins, a clinical supervisor at Jserra Catholic High gives a presentation to Jserra students about suicide, depression, how to recognize the symptoms and what to do about it in San Juan Capistrano on Wednesday, Feb. 28, 2018. (Photo by Leonard Ortiz, Orange County Register/SCNG)



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PUBLISHED: March 21, 2018 at 9:00 a.m. | UPDATED: March 22, 2018 at 12:36 p.m.

### ***Third of three parts. Part 1 and Part 2***

A counselor at JSerra Catholic High School in San Juan Capistrano faces a gathering of somber students and asks if they knew any of the teens who recently took their lives.

A half-dozen hands immediately rise. After a pause, more hands poke up.

"I knew Kyle," one boy quietly volunteers. "He always seemed super happy. I never would have guessed."

In new series of sessions about suicide at JSerra — as well as at many other schools — little by little

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One student talks about 13-year-old Emma Pangelinan who lived in Mission Viejo. Another teen says he knew Patrick Turner, a 16-year-old who lived in Corona del Mar. A girl mentions two girls in a nearby town. A boy asks about another boy who died.



It used to be that kids in high school knew one, maybe two kids who committed suicide. Back then, there wasn't the reach of social media and methods to kill yourself weren't just a Google search away.

With the Internet as well as Instagram and Snapchat "likes" creating round-the-clock races for online popularity — who sleeps anymore? — high school today is not your mother's high school.

It's not even the high school that millennials experienced.

Kids are cutting and killing themselves in increasing numbers and experts are only beginning to understand why — and more importantly how to stem the tide of tragedy.

Several weeks ago, the Orange County chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics went so far as to make a public statement about what experts call a suicide cluster.

In a world where going public about teen suicide once was verboten, the academy's statement may seem reckless. But that was the 20th century when relatively few kids heard about a teenager's suicide.

In the digital age, friendships cross school boundaries and teens know far more than even the saviest parents realize.

Courageous parents who have lost children to suicide, therapists, even news information companies are lifting the veil in an effort to build awareness and reduce increasing teen suicide

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"The face of suicide is changing," the pediatrics chapter warns. "The rate of suicide is increasing in Orange County and all teenagers are at risk, including our high achieving students, athletes, and artists."

This month, three hospitals in Orange County launched after-school ASPIRE programs to help teens and parents cope and communicate. Like JSerra, other middle and high schools are revamping and beefing up suicide counseling programs.

These programs are less about old-school depression and addiction than they are about unrealistic Internet-induced expectations that perfection is actually attainable.

"Perfectionism among performance driven teens in academics, the arts, and athletics," the pediatrics academy declares, "is a critical factor to identifying and intervening with the new face of suicide."

"Research confirms that current generations of young adults put more pressure on themselves than generations before them. This self-imposed pressure to be perfect is a known risk factor."

Understand, getting into college doesn't start with the PSAT as it once did. Pressure for getting into college starts as early as eighth grade, a time when the biggest worry used to be ninth grade.

Being a popular jock doesn't help. Successful student-athletes such as Emma, a softball phenom, commit suicide. Patrick Turner, a sophomore, played both baseball and football.

### **'Best' vs. 'right'**

Experts point out the uptick in teen suicide started a few years after the launch of Instagram and Snapchat. They blame battles for digital "likes" and Internet-induced stress over success on the field as well as in the classroom.

In 2014, Madison Holleran, a University of Pennsylvania freshman track star took her life. Around that time, a cluster of teens committed suicide in Palo Alto. In January, Washington State quarterback Tyler Hilinski took his life.

"We handed the most powerful tool known to man and gave it to children for them to play with and explore," says Don Grant, chairman of the American Psychological Association Device Management Committee. "Would you hand kids power tools and not expect something to happen?"

Grant, a Los Angeles-based psychologist, calls the Internet a "digital 'Lord of the Flies.'" He adds, "There's always going to be a Ralph, there's always going to be a Piggy," but the Internet amplifies and expands social hierarchies far beyond anything previous generations have faced.

For example, a girl swipes her smartphone and sees other girls she knows from school at the beach. How do you think she feels?

"Kids are sitting home alone, disenfranchised and disconnected," Grant says. "It's very dark the way social currency is wielded. They watch the Kardashians and don't know how to respond."

Parents and schools need to blow up the paradigm that a child has to get into the best college, the psychologist says. "Expose the truth about these myths."

Other experts agree. The American Academy of Pediatrics cautions, "An environment where success is so highly valued fuels this pressure on our teens."

"Intolerance for mistakes and weakness make high-achieving (students) in academics, athletics, or the arts particularly vulnerable to social isolation when their self-imposed perfectionist standards are not met."

Instead of getting into the best school, the new concept is aiming for the right school.

School counselors and psychologists suggest parents and counselors guide students to a college that fits the student — or toward a vocation that fits.

### **'13 Reasons Why' bingeing**

Standing before a screen listing depressive symptoms such as emptiness, hopelessness and worthlessness, JSerra counselor and psychologist Courtney Harkins reminds students that they can make a difference in others' lives.

Being kind is high on the list. So is having a positive outlook.

Still, Harkins is careful to make clear it's not the students' responsibility to handle a potential suicide.

"You might be the rock," Harkins cautions, "but it's not your burden to hold. Even if you've promised to not tell anyone, you have to reach out. Tell school experts."

Unfortunately, Harkins and other psychologists must swim against a tide of popular movies and TV series.

The hugely popular Netflix teen suicide series "13 Reasons Why" depicts counselors and administrators covering up for their school and putting the priority on their own careers after a student kills herself.

For this series of columns, I watched nine of the 13 episodes. Then, I had to walk away from the drama because it was so unrealistic, troubling and depressing.

While some experts applaud the series for sparking discussions about what some wrongly consider a taboo topic, most condemn "13 Reasons Why" for being sensational.

The National Association of School Psychologists phrases it delicately, warning that the Netflix series "powerful storytelling may lead impressionable viewers to romanticize the choices made by the characters and/or develop revenge fantasies."

Some tips for tilting students away from suicide are startlingly simple.

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At the JSerra session, visiting therapist Megan Ure notes there are different types of mindsets.

It may sound dumb and it's not easy, but helping someone realize that they are trapped in a victim mentality can go a long way.

## A new conversation

Perna Rao is clinical manager for the ASPIRE program in Newport Beach and reports her team is seeing an increase in teens hurting themselves. "It's shocking about what's happened in such a short time," she says.

"The biggest thing missing with teens is validation," Rao offers. "Teens have a lot going on emotionally and hormonally."

Instead of building self-esteem, the social media plague of staged "happy" photos creates the opposite of validation.

Daniel Patterson has worked in the trenches at public schools, first as a teacher and then as an assistant principal. Now, he is a parenting and teen life coach and reports that the idea of "tiger" parents and teachers is more myth than reality.

Like other experts, he sees the real culprit as social media and notes that because of Instagram and Snapchat, teens compare themselves to others in real time 24 hours a day.

"It's difficult to wrap your head around," Patterson says of the damage. "It creates a hidden pressure from underneath that's hard to articulate for the teenager."

"It takes the old term, 'Keeping up with the Joneses,' to a different level."



To move forward, Patterson calls on adults to collectively work together and fully acknowledge what social media is doing to teenagers. "Stop dancing around trying to diminish the impact of digital communication on these kids."

Parents need to acquire cutting-edge information on teenage life, and they need to learn the vocabulary of teens so they can communicate. "When teens perceive you don't know something, they maintain a buffer."

It's a buffer we all must break down — parents as well as teens. Moreover, we need to change the conversation.

Sometimes old wisdom is new again. Legendary basketball coach John Wooden once said, "Perfection is what you are striving for, but perfection is an impossibility."

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