



"Saving Lives in Tennessee"

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
NOVEMBER 16, 2017

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TSPN RESPONDS TO STUDY ON TEEN SUICIDE AND SOCIAL MEDIA
Network Addresses Suggested Link Between Increased Social Media Use, Rising Death Rates

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — The Tennessee Suicide Prevention Network (TSPN) has fielded several inquiries from the public regarding a recent study that claims a relationship between the widespread use of social media and increases in teen suicide rates.

The study, published November 14 in the academic journal *Clinical Psychological Science*, analyzed content from two surveys of U.S. high school students which referred both to their use of electronic devices and social media as well as their frequency of feeling hopeless and considering and/or attempting suicide. They claimed that the number of teens who used electronic devices for at least five hours a day doubled, and that teens who did were 70 percent more likely to have suicidal thoughts or actions than those who only used them for an hour a day. Teenagers who spent more time on "screen activities" such as the Internet, social media, and television were more likely to show signs of depression, consider suicide, or make a suicide attempt than those who spent more time on "nonscreen activities" like in-person social interactions, sports, homework, or exercise. The study frames these findings in the context of a steady rise in suicide rates among teens during the years 2010 and 2015 following a decline over the past two decades, as measured by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The study authors note the implication of cyberbullying in several high-profile teen suicides, as well as the potential for teens to see others' posts portraying perfect or idealized lives and become depressed. But critics have observed that many different environmental factors—which were not assessed in the current study—may influence mood, mental health, and potential youth suicidality. "As an example, we know that school pressures play an outside role in young people's mental health," observes Scott Ridgway, MS, Executive Director of the Tennessee Suicide Prevention Network. "Inpatient hospitalizations of teens for suicide attempts and ideation peak in the fall, with the start of the school year, and again in the spring, in sync with final exams, the college acceptance process, prom, and other stressors. This is a trend we've seen both locally and nationally."

However, TSPN advises that parents should engage with their children about their activities online—how much time they spend on their computers and phones and what they do on them. Increased amount of time on electronic devices and pulling away from others represent a form of self-imposed isolation which, combined with other behavior, may indicate developing emotional or mental health issues. “Some online and other media glamorizes suicide and presents it as a viable solution to their problems. Already this year we’ve responded to Netflix’s ‘13 Reasons Why’ series and its problematic handling of youth suicide,” Ridgway explains. “Social media is not the only factor, but its influence is something parents should watch.” Finally, mental illness is a factor in 90 percent of all suicides, and external factors usually cannot entirely explain why someone chooses to take his or her life.

Regardless of the viability of the study, the conversation about it serves as an opportunity for a dialogue about suicide, mental health, and other issues. We at TSPN would like to be a part of that discussion and to offer any non-emergency resources and information the community needs. TSPN’s website (tspn.org) offers information about suicide warning signs, risk and protective factors for suicide, and other resources—both print and online—on what you can do to watch out for vulnerable persons and help save a life.



TTY line: 1-800-799-4TTY (4889)

Crisis Text Line: Text TN to 741741

For non-emergency information on suicide prevention, contact the Tennessee Suicide Prevention Network at (615) 297-1077 or tspn@tspn.org.

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