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Four in Ten Americans Have Been Touched by Teen Suicide

Majority of Americans See Teen Suicide as Major Problem and Social Stigma a Barrier to Seeking Help, New Research Shows

San Francisco: The tragedy of teen suicide touches nearly half of all Americans, according to the first-ever study to accurately measure the reach of teen suicide. A study released today by the Iris Alliance Fund found that 42 percent of Americans have known someone who attempted or completed suicide as a teenager. In addition, 38 percent of Americans have been approached for help by someone contemplating suicide. These numbers are the natural by-product of the fact that suicide is the fourth leading cause of death for people younger than 20. In fact, statistics that show that about five teenagers commit suicide every day, and nearly 200 will attempt it.

“This is groundbreaking information,” said Mary Hayashi, founder of the Iris Alliance Fund. “It proves what we know from personal experience to be true—that suicide touches everyone. The fact that 42 percent of Americans have been touched by the tragedy of teen suicide makes it even more clear that suicide and depression are not matters that should be swept under the rug. They are public health issues that we have to address before any more lives are lost.”

The research is to be released today at the Third Annual Meeting of the Iris Alliance Fund’s National Leadership Council, in San Francisco. Working from the theme of *Building the Circle of Influence: Innovative Approaches and Messages for Suicide Prevention*, the conference will bring together some of the nation’s leading authorities on mental health, including doctors, researchers, providers and advocates.

This poll hits home for those who are among the 42 percent who have faced this tragedy, including Patrick Hines of San Francisco. He was working as a successful international banker when his son, one of his three adopted special needs kids, attempted suicide by jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge. Fortunately, his son survived, and now Patrick stresses the need for parents to take their children’s cries for help seriously and get them the help they need. “The poll speaks to the hardships kids are facing today, when in crisis they all too often think suicide is the way out,” he said.

The research, conducted in September of 2004 by Research!America, surveyed 800 Americans. There was a companion instrument that surveyed 600 Californians, with similar results.

Highlights of the research include:

42% of Americans know a teenager who attempted/completed suicide.

38% have been approached for help by someone contemplating suicide.
Social stigma/embarrassment was most often cited as a barrier that prevents teens from seeking help.
57% of Americans view teen suicide as a major public problem.
62% view research to prevent teen suicide as valuable.
Mental health professionals were the leading place to go for help for a teenager contemplating suicide.

Teen Suicide – Understanding the Problem

1,817 teens committed suicide in 2001, according to the CDC, and 74,844 made an attempt (in California, 174 teens committed suicide in 2001, and 3,795 made an attempt). Suicide is the fourth leading cause of death for people younger than 20. The Iris Alliance Fund is determined to reduce the teen suicide by 50 percent by 2010, getting behind the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Healthy People 2010 campaign's own suicide reduction goals.

On average, 30,000 Americans commit suicide each year, and another 650,000 will receive emergency care after attempting to take their own lives.

“This survey shows the steps we need to take as a society in order to prevent teen suicide. Many of the barriers to seeking help—including shame, fear, embarrassment, isolation and lack of hope—can be overcome by simply talking about mental illness. For all the stories of tragedies, there are many more stories of hope, of people overcoming mental illness and going on to lead healthy, happy, productive lives,” said Mary Hayashi.

Teen Suicide – Finding an Answer

Stopping teen suicide is a major public priority according to this new research. Sixty-two percent of those polled want to see more research to prevent teen suicide. And with embarrassment, fear, isolation and lack of hope being cited as barriers that teens face, parents really need support to be able to effectively reach out to their kids.

“We need to reach out to parents and encourage them to pay close attention to their teens and teach them how to recognize the signs of depression and where to go for help,” said Marlene Isaacs, a Sacramento mother who lost her oldest daughter to suicide seven years ago. Marlene encourages parents to pay close attention to their teens and how to recognize the signs of depression.

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About the Iris Alliance Fund:

The Iris Alliance Fund, was founded by Mary Hayashi in memory of her sister who committed suicide in 1980 at the age of 17. The Iris Alliance Fund is a mental health foundation that focuses on changing the public discourse to make youth suicide prevention a greater priority. Mary Hayashi also recently authored the book, *Far From Home*, which chronicled her personal experience and other preconceptions about suicide among the Asian-American community and the healthcare profession.