

Bigger than the darkness

DOCTRINAL ELEMENT

Issue Night

TOPIC

Suicide, Depression, and Mental Health Issues

GOAL

The goal of this session is to break the cultural stigma, ignorance, and intolerance of depression, as well as introduce teenagers to the prevalence of teen depression and suicide. Teens should learn about the symptoms of depression and the signs of suicide. Finally, hope will be instilled within everyone, whether those struggling with this illness or not.

SECONDARY RELIGION GUIDELINES

II.II.A.2.c.i.b

USCCB FRAMEWORK

III.A.3.a; VI.A.1; VI.A.B.2.a.5

SCRIPTURE

Sacredness of Human Life – Gen 1:26-27, 4:8-12, Ex 20:13, Dt 5:17, 1 Sam 26:24; Ps 139:1-18
God is a great support – Deut 31:8, 33:27, 2 Sam 22:17-22, 29, Jer 29:11, Ps 9:9, 31:22, 24, 34: 18-19, 147:3, Prv 12:25, Jam 4:10, 1 Pet 5:7, 2 Pet 2:9
Having hope – Ps 27:14, 55:23, 126:5, Eccl 9:4, Lam 3:22-24, Rom 15:13, 1 Pet 4:12-13
Prayers in times of darkness – Ps 37:23-24, 43:5, 62:6, 143:7-8, Phil 4:6-7

CATECHISM

We are created because of God's love – 293, 356
Our unique role in creation – 355
Sacredness of human life – 2258
Suicide – 2280-2283
God's mercy for those who've committed suicide – 2283

GOLDEN THREADS

The Dignity of the Human Person – Every human person has been made in the image and likeness of God. Because of this all human life is sacred and therefore we all have a dignity that surpasses everything else in creation.

The Paschal Mystery – By entering into the Paschal Mystery Jesus embraced all human suffering. He experienced loneliness, rejection, and pain and knows what this feels like. His experience of the Paschal Mystery is a reassurance of his great, personal love for us and can help us relate to him when we are hurting.

MEDIA SUGGESTIONS

Songs

- “Take My Hand” by Shawn MacDonald
- “Prayer for a Friend” by Casting Crowns
- “Remind Me Who I Am” by Jason Gray
- “Breath Your Life Into Me” by Red
- “Set Me Free” by Casting Crowns
- “Praise You In This Storm” by Casting Crowns
- “Life is Worth Fighting For” by Church of Rhythm
- “My Hope Is In You” by Aaron Shust
- “Breath Me” by Sia
- “Worn” by Tenth Avenue North

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- “More Beautiful” by Johnny Diaz
- “I Need You Now” by Plume

YouTube Clips

- 11 minute video of Kevin Breel, a 19 year old comedian and mental health advocate talking about his experience of depression: www.youtube.com/watch?v=C3yqXeLJ0Kg
- Short Clip that emphasizes life can hurt but God heals (end at 1:43): www.youtube.com/watch?v=8NdJwvM9wmk
- 1 minute video with stats and encouragement to get help <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DSFsW9lqqf4>

Resources:

- Nelson, Gary E., D.Min. *A Relentless Hope: Surviving the Storm of Teen Depression*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007.
- Website from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: www.morethansad.org
- Lesson plan from PBS on depression: www.pbs.org/inthemix/educators/lessons/depression1/

GATHER

Environment: Have some of the different songs listed under Media Suggestions above playing as teens are gathering for the session.

Icebreaker: Stereotypes

On note cards, write stereotypes such as cheerleader, jock, drama queen, emo, teacher’s pet, or other stereotypes common in high school. Make one of them pertain to a stereotype of someone who is depressed or suicidal. Make two sets of each, and distribute the cards to the students so each student has a match somewhere in the room. Instruct the students not to share what their card says, but to start brainstorming different ways that that “kind of person” acts.

Explain to the students that they are going to be circulating around the room, acting out their stereotype. They need to introduce themselves; chatting and trying to figure out what stereotypes other students are as well. Their goal is to find their “match” who is amidst the other students in the room by acting out their stereotype. Once the pairs meet-up, instruct them to sit down and wait for the rest of the group to finish. At the end of the activity, discuss with the students how they were able to find their match. Then, talk about how no one really fits an individual stereotype. These stereotypes exist because it is easier to place people into categories rather than get to know the person. Nonetheless, because we put people into these categories, it can be shocking, in some sense, when we have gotten to know the person and realize they do not fit that category.

Opening Prayer

Jesus, you give us rest when we are broken and worn. We pray that tonight you may open our hearts and minds. We pray, Lord Jesus, that you may mend our hearts that, at times, feel frail

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and torn. We especially pray for those who feel hopeless and too weak to continue on in life; may find comfort and rest in our presence. Amen.

EXPLANATION

Showing this video would be a great way to start the evening:

http://www.ted.com/talks/kevin_breel_confessions_of_a_depressed_comic.html

Kevin (referring to the person in the video) is the type of person who breaks the stereotype of someone who is depressed. When you think of someone your age who is depressed, you may initially think of someone who doesn't take care of themselves and shows physical signs that they are depressed (*feel free to add examples of what you think of how your teens would say a person with depression looks or behaves*), but Kevin shows us that people who appear that they have it all together may be suffering from depression, too. People's attitudes about depression vary, but many think that it is just a matter of "pulling oneself together" or "just getting on with things" or "stop worrying and cheer up." There is still too much stigma attached to having a mental health problem, especially with something like depression because it is not an illness you can see...therefore being highly misunderstood. People who don't understand depression will often try to blow it off and act like it doesn't exist. For a culture that makes people feel like they need to be strong, independent, successful, all together, we are often unaccepting of people who *we think* aren't working towards that. We also have a tendency to reject the unfamiliar. . There is so much pressure in the world today, to look a certain way, to be making lots of money, to knowing your career by the age of 18, to have life all put together at a certain age, etc. For you, as teens, the pressures are endless: be and act a certain way, be good at this sport or this extra-curricular thing (*add specific things relevant for your teens*). It is understandable why people feel like they don't meet expectations and harbor feelings of failure, self-loathing, loneliness, and shame. We have all experienced points in our life where we feel depressed.

But, there are people in this world who find it harder to get out of those low moments in life...and that's why depression is a difficult illness to understand, but it is *real*. Depression does not indicate weak character, and it should not be considered something shameful that needs to be hidden, though it often feels like that. Depression is not something that a person can control or prevent by willpower or determination. It is more than someone who has a bad attitude, is moody, difficult, or melancholic. Depression is a serious problem that affects every aspect of life, but it is a treatable illness. A person's life can change with the courage to unveil what we, in some sense, are told to keep hidden. No one wants to be viewed as weak, but there is humility in showing others our struggles so that we can change and grow.

During our time here tonight, I want us to become a little more educated and more aware of signs of people with depression so that we can each make a bigger effort to love and encourage those who are suffering.

I think it's important to first realize that teenagers suffer from depression more than you may realize. Before reaching adulthood, the National Institute of Health says that about 20% of teenagers will suffer from an episode of depression, with the average age of onset being 14 years. Also, more girls than boys suffer from depression. However, because of this, depression among young men can go undetected. Although depression is highly treatable, experts say that only 1 in

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5 teens receive help. Unlike adults, who have the ability to seek assistance on their own, teenagers typically have to rely on parents, teachers, friends, or caregivers to recognize their suffering and help them to get the treatment they need.

This is why it is important for you, as peers, to know what the signs or symptoms of depression are, so that you are more equipped to assist a peer in seeking help. It will also assist you with helping those who suffer with depression to feel like they are accepted and cared for rather than looked down upon and criticized, since they are often told to “just get over it.”

So, let’s talk about the symptoms. It can be difficult to tell the difference between normal “ups and downs” that are just part of being a teenager and compare it to teen depression. Before jumping to conclusions, it’s important to note that periods of sadness or withdrawal are *normal*, even for adults, especially when surrounded by difficult circumstances of life. The first thing to do would be to try to determine whether the person seems capable of managing the challenging feelings, or if life seems too overwhelming. Also, consider how long the symptoms have been present, how severe they are, and how different your friend/peer is acting compared to his or her usual self. And if you determine that their sadness and symptoms are more than the normal teenage bouts of sadness or withdrawal, it’s important to share your concerns with a parent, teacher, school counselor, youth minister, or someone you can trust, because you don’t want to wait to get them help! Unfortunately, teen depression too often leads to suicide, which is the third leading cause of adolescent deaths. Suicide is a real problem, but it *can* be stopped!

So what do you look for? You, as teenagers, face a host of pressures, from the changes of puberty to questions about who you are and where you fit in. The natural transition from childhood to adulthood can bring conflicts with your parents or guardians, conflict as you begin to assert your independence. With all the drama of being a teenager, it is not easy to differentiate between normal teenage moodiness, which you all have had, and depression. And what makes it even more difficult, is that teens who suffer from depression do not necessarily appear sad, nor do they always withdraw from peers or family. Teenagers who are depressed usually see everything more negatively. They can’t imagine that any problem or situation can be solved in a positive way. Some of the following symptoms of depression may be present:

- Feelings of being upset, restless, and irritable
- Feelings of anger, even over small matters
- Feelings of sadness, which can include crying spells for no apparent reason
- Feeling worthless, hopeless, guilty, or self-hate
- Fixation on past failures or exaggerated self-blame or self-criticism
- Extreme sensitivity to rejection or failure, and the need for excessive reassurance
- Appetite changes (usually a loss of appetite but sometimes an increase)
- Loss of interest or pleasure in activities that were once fun
- Fatigue
- Trouble sleeping, too much sleeping, or daytime sleepiness
- Thinking or talking about suicide or death
- Episodes of memory loss
- Difficulty making decisions
- Difficulty concentrating

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- Ongoing sense that life and the future are grim and bleak

Behavioral problems:

- Acting-out behaviors (missing curfews, unusual defiance)
- Criminal behavior (shoplifting, for example)
- Irresponsible, disruptive or risky behavior
- Poor school performance, grades dropping
- Pulling away from family and friends, spending more time alone
- Use of alcohol or other illegal substances
- Self-harm, such as cutting, burning, or excessive piercing or tattooing
- Frequent complaints of pain or aches, more frequent trips to the nurses office

If these symptoms last for at least 2 weeks and affect one's mood or ability to function, seek help whether you are the one feeling depressed or you are a friend of someone who is depressed. A teen's depression can look differently from depression in adults.

Many things happen in our life that make us feel depressed, but there are many factors that increase the risk of developing or triggering teen depression:

- Having issues that negatively impact self-esteem, such as obesity, peer problems, long-term bullying or academic problems
- Having been the victim of violence, such as physical or sexual abuse
- Having other conditions, such as an anxiety disorder, anorexia or bulimia, ADHD or learning disabilities
- Have a chronic medical illness such as cancer, asthma or diabetes
- Having certain personality traits, such as low self-esteem or being overly dependent, self-critical or pessimistic

We all deal with our sadness or anger in different ways. We find ways to cope with those feelings, whether it is talking with a friend, playing video-games, or going for a walk, but then there are negative coping behaviors like acting out or self-harm. All of these coping mechanisms are way to deal with the emotional pain. Many depressed teens run away from home or talk about running away, as a cry for help. You know how sometimes you try to escape from your problems by going online? Or maybe you know people who do? Unfortunately, excessive computer use only increases the isolation that you or your depressed friend feels rather than helping it. Some depressed teens, often victims of bullying – become violent, self-hating and desire to die, which can erupt into violence and homicidal rage. We have seen examples of this somewhat recently in the cases Virginia Tech and Newtown school shootings.

Often times we say things that dramatize how we are feeling. For example, "My friends hate me. What's the point of life? No one likes me." But for someone who suffers with depression, those phrases really are how they feel; they may truly feel like ending their life because it is hard for them to find a reason for living. It's important, then, to know suicide warning signs in depressed teens:

- Talking or joking about committing suicide
- Saying things like, "I'd be better off dead," "I wish I could disappear forever," or "There's no way out."

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- Speaking positively about death or romanticizing dying (“If I died, people might love me more.”)
- Writing stories and poems about death, dying, or suicide
- Engaging in reckless behavior or having a lot of accidents resulting in injury
- Giving away prized possessions
- Saying goodbye to friends and family as if for the last time
- Seeking out weapons, pills, or other ways to kill themselves

Family history and issues with family or others may also increase a teen’s risk of depression:

- Having a biological relative with depression, bipolar disorder, or alcoholism
- Having a family member who committed suicide
- Having a dysfunctional family and conflict
- Having experienced recent stressful life events, such as parental divorce, parental military service, or the death of a loved one

Even with all these lists of symptoms or signs, it’s important to realize that depression can happen to someone you know, even if their life seems put together and perfect.

If you know someone who is suffering from depression, it’s important that you offer support, be gentle but persistent, listen without lecturing or judging, and to validate their feelings, not brushing off their more negative feelings, words of self-hate, or hopelessness; just as you would want someone to be there for you when you are feeling down, be there for this friend or peer who is suffering, offering them full and unconditional love. Instead of asking questions, make it clear to them that you are there and want to provide any support that they need and that you are able to offer. At the same time, remember that you are not a licensed counselor or doctor. Although you can love and support your friend, you need to contact adults for more help. Let your friend know that because you cannot provide them all the support they might need, you will try your best to get it for them by contacting people you know or trust! It’s incredibly important to not give up on your friend if they shut you out at first; you must be respectful of their comfort level while still emphasizing your concern and willingness to listen. Also, it’s important to resist any urge to criticize or pass judgment when they open up to you. No one wants to have their feelings ignored, even more with one who is experiencing depression; simply acknowledge their pain and sadness.

Play the song “Worn” by Tenth Avenue North: www.youtube.com/watch?v=zulKcYItKIA

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The singer speaks about feeling worn, about feeling desperate...and isn't that basically what depression is? And what leads to suicide? We can turn to Christ, like a close friend to find the love and strength we need when we are feeling worn out. His love and friendship can sustain us as we make the difficult journey of seeking the help we need by talking to an adult you trust. It's important to remember that when you are hurting and think you are the only one who is feeling like this, you are not alone. There have been saints who have suffered from depression, and we can turn to them in our times of suffering, asking them to pray for us.

Saint Jane de Chantel suffered with depression. St. Jane de Chantel was a marvelous person, who excelled in a succession of callings—wife and mother, manager of a large estate, widow and single parent, founder of a religious community, and spiritual adviser to thousands of women. Depression is often brought on by hardships; for St. Jane de Chantel, it was after the death of her husband. In order to relieve her of some of her pain, she learned to make choices that made her emotional pain endurable. Anyone who suffers with depression should consider the key elements of her effective approach to her problem. First, **trusting in God...**from the very beginning she recognized the Lord's invitation to rely on him to get through the pain. Her relationship with God would bring her moments of joy, but the reprieve was always temporary for St. Jane. She never gave up hoping in God! Second, **relying on the support of friends...**St. Jane de Chantel developed healthy relationships with friends who supported her. Her relationship with one person in particular, St. Francis de Sales, enabled her to experience a degree of spiritual freedom and inner peace. She found encouragement from St. Francis de Sales, even though she was still battling her troubling thoughts. Third, **disciplining her negative thoughts...**St. Jane learned ways to deal with the tormenting thoughts and was able to apply those skills when she would be plagued with negative thoughts. Fourth, **servicing others...**St. Jane devoted herself to serving others. This selfless, outward focus brought her some measure of healing for her depression.

If you are not someone who is suffering from depression, then be a supporting friend. A supporting friend holds the person accountable to things, encourages them in those times that are most difficult, seeks greater help when it seems outside your ability, and invites the person to join in different activities.

When we struggle with something, most people tend to ask for help. Depression is no different. If you are struggling with depression, seek help. And we must ALL take the advice from St. Jane de Chantel, trust God, rely on the support of friends and family, be disciplined in challenging those negative thoughts, and giving of ourselves in service!

Small Groups:

Break into single sex small groups with 6-8 teens, if possible. See Questions for Reflection at the bottom.

Closing Prayer: Prayer Against Depression By Saint Ignatius of Loyola

O Christ Jesus, when all is darkness and we feel our weakness and helplessness, give us the sense of Your presence, Your love, and Your strength. Help us to have perfect trust in Your protecting love and strengthening power, so that nothing may frighten or worry us, for, living

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close to You, we shall see Your hand, Your purpose, Your will through all things.

Questions for Small Groups:

1. What does society make you think about depression? Or what does society make you believe about the illness of depression? Do you agree or disagree with stigma society places on depression?
2. What have you learned from school, home, or friends about depression?
3. What can you do to break the stigmas that people have about about mental health, especially depression? Mental health also includes ADHD, ADD, intellectual disability, anxiety, etc.
4. Do you think depression is something that people struggle with? Did what you heard in the presentation open your eyes to something new about depression?
5. When you feel sad, how do you act differently? What kind of thoughts go through your mind when you are sad or hurt? (Remind teens that for someone who is depressed it is much worse and those thoughts are constant.)
6. When you feel down and depressed, how you do you cope with the pain, sadness, or hurt?
7. Read 1 Samuel 26:24: *"Now behold, as your life was highly valued in my sight this day, so may my life be highly valued in the sight of the LORD, and may He deliver me from all distress."* How do you value your own life? How can we help others value their life, especially those who may be experiencing depression? What can we do to instill hope in others lives?

Biography

Anne Devine is Professional Counselor with Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Arlington, VA. Originally from the plains of South Dakota, The Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS) brought her to the East to be a missionary first at the Unites States Naval Academy and then to Pittsburgh, PA, to serve as a team director. Never thinking that she would return to school, God had other plans and she returned anyway to receive a M.S. in Clinical Psychology. Desiring to stay involved in ministry, she now is involved in St. Mary's in Fredericksburg volunteering with the youth group, young adult group, and leading a women's group.