

I am answering a call for submissions into self harm and suicide in children in Australia. I do not want our names or contact details to be made public, but I believe as someone involved in this tragic behaviour from a parent's perspective, you may be interested in my opinion.

My child is almost 16 and has been involved in cutting and occasionally suicidal ideation for almost 2 and a half years now. She is a child who is a talented singer and participates in a program for music theatre since entering high school. She is an only child who has been showered with love and attention within our family since birth. She is attractive, has many friends, loves her specialist school for the arts and to all onlookers would appear to have no reason in the world to have a problem. She complained about bullying in her last year of primary school but it was nothing more than normal schoolyard banter which she seems to take so much more to heart than would seem necessary to anyone else. She is a very creative, sensitive type who has trouble with emotional control and her perspectives of social interactions around her but nothing could ever justify the mutilation she has done to herself.

I have had to sit helplessly watching scar after scar be added to her previously beautiful body. In the last month she has added another 30 stitches to the count. She gets uptight about things that go on at school, which actually isn't that surprising seeing as every second person seems to have some dramatic problem themselves. They are either suicidal, or self harm or throwing up or taking pills or have terrible parents etc etc. The school claims that these types of people are drawn to each other so it's not as bad as it seems but I find that harder to believe than the likelihood that these types of problems seem to be reaching epic proportions, especially when in my time at high school it was non-existent.

Given the horrible history of this behaviour that we have endured I have obviously seen my share of doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists, emergency wards etc etc. What I do know is that the resources available cannot possibly be meeting the need. After one 7 hour stint at waiting for the relevant psychologist to come and interview us, she said to me "oh yes, there's 4 others in the waiting room after you" which is truly tragic indeed. Then for our 7 hours of waiting, they sent us home with a panadol and said someone would call the next day to check on her - which they never did. I guess it was no big deal to them. According to the information I have there are only 21 beds available in the entire state for adolescent mental health, which is so grossly inadequate it's almost laughable (if it wasn't so sad) - especially in a state like supposedly rich with resources in the luckiest country in the world. Can you imagine how bad you have to be to get one of those beds? I would think you would have to be at imminent and likely risk of death.

Although you do have to wonder when even suicidal teenagers sit on a waiting list (yes, that's right - waiting - and hoping they don't kill themselves in the meantime) for a minimum of 2 months to see someone from CAHMS. Supposedly CAHMS are the foremost authority in this area, although we have not found them to be very successful in helping our daughter with her problem. The therapist we waited months to see is basically a social worker who clearly wants to turn every visit into some sort of family therapy which is not what we need and doesn't help our daughter change her behaviour at all. The visits are hard to

come by because it's important to us to have to visits after school that don't interrupt the school schedule (this can cause emotional problems to become even more heightened if they feel they are always running out of school to see psychologists, so there is something 'wrong' with them). Now finally and only because this therapist is leaving they are going to change our daughter over to a psychologist to do some individual behaviour type therapy which is what we say she needed all along. Hopefully this will be more successful.

We started of course with the school psychologist at the high school who was only available at the school part time, because she was also trying to service the needs of a nearby primary school. This is also a joke, because believe me there's enough dramas going on in a large high school full of 'creative types' and program students to keep someone busy 24 hours a day. Our needs soon outgrew the scope of the schools resources so while on the waiting list for CAHMS we accessed services from a clinical psychologist with a suicidal referral from our family doctor, through the Medicare system. This did help tide us over whilst waiting but is hard to keep going indefinitely because you have to keep running back to the doctor for referrals. With the doctor charging \$75 a visit you try to keep the visits to the minimum, and anyway CAHMS were supposed to be much more specialised for what we needed. This all sounds so easy when it's written out like this but I can assure you it took a lot of phone calls, and chasing and pushing on my part to get anywhere - all whilst enduring the terrible terrible pain of being a parent, watching their child do this to themselves.

The impact on a family of a child doing this is enormous. Unless you have been through it I couldn't possibly describe the trauma and the pain of seeing the damage over and over and not being able to make it stop. Especially when there is no apparent cause for why they hate themselves so much that they want to do this. When your only child comes to you in the middle of the night with blood dripping off them, holding their beautiful perfect skin together from the gash they have just done and all you can do is go and sit in a hospital for hours and hours at a time to get them stitched up. The support for the kids themselves is so limited but the support for the parents trying to suffer through the ordeal alone is non existent. There is nowhere to turn for advice or to just share the pain and you better pray you are in a really strong relationship with a committed partner just so you can lean on each other, because the pressure to find a way to make a difference and the dealing with all the troublesome and difficult teenage emotions and behaviour that go along with self harm is so huge it could easily destroy a family altogether. Family and friends in the end don't supply much of a support because they are at a loss to know what to say and after a while it seems easier to not bring it up at all.

The closest thing I have had to support is from a man called _____ from _____ CAHMS. It is his job to go out to people's houses and check on things whilst you are on the waiting list and if you can't see your therapist for some reason. _____ is a father of teenagers himself and I always found his visits to be very comforting because I felt that he understood the parent's perspective. You wouldn't think this is so exceptional, but it surely is, because it is rare to receive understanding from all these therapists. Most if them make you feel like you are somehow to blame and should be reacting differently and better somehow than you are. Parents in this position are already so fragile from the experience that to feel someone else's blame really feels like the last straw.

I think it would be great if there were local centres you could easily access with help also available for parents and more people like _____ and more phone resources too. Although we have used services like Kids Helpline for my daughter to talk to someone who is 'not her mother' in the middle of the night, and the

mental health emergency phone number that somebody gave us. It would be nice if there was somebody out there who cared enough to call US up and check how things are going and give you someone to talk to but even this doesn't happen. Obviously though this is hardly the priority of politicians and until it is their children dripping blood in the emergency room, I seriously doubt whether the necessary funding will be forthcoming. There should also be a lot more activity in schools regarding this, they have the perfect reach to access the very people who need to be talking about this but as we know teachers are already screaming about cuts to their resources, so it just wouldn't be possible to put more on them without extra funds and staff (also unlikely to be achieved). We tried to get help from Headspace but when we were already on the waiting list for CAHMS they basically didn't want to know us.

I believe I tried all avenues available to me to get some help, of course eliminating the possibility of private mental health treatment. My husband is on a good wage but we would be very quickly bankrupted if we attempted to go to a private psychologist. The rates they charge are extravagant and although we have health insurance a few initial visits would chew up their cover limits. Believe me, I investigated all the options. We tried hypnosis and even neuro linguistic programming (also at enormous cost) but here we still are in this nightmare.

The only success that has come from anywhere is from a youth group run by the church that my daughter goes to every week. They provide a safe environment and great fun activities for the kids, plus small groups that break off to talk about individual kids problems whilst delivering a message about God and perhaps passages from the bible to specifically relate to self harm (obviously they see a lot of it too as they have take home sheets already prepared). My daughter managed to conquer the self harm for about nine months and claimed that she managed this because God spoke to her and told her that he didn't want her to do it anymore. Now, who would know if any credence could be given to this but as I say - I don't care if she worships the devil if it makes her stop doing this to herself. We were overjoyed for this brief time thinking that perhaps we had now survived this ordeal and could work on improving the scars and getting back to normal concerns but then my daughter broke up with a briefly held boyfriend, returned to school after the holidays and the nightmare started all over again. It very quickly disintegrated into worse episodes than ever before and now it feels like starting again from square one.

I guess it's like any kind of addictive behaviour being used as a crutch to get through life, there could be relapses at any time (although the experts tell me that they can suddenly stop and just not do this anymore). I'd pray for that if I thought it could happen, though it's so hard not to fear a relapse even when things go well.

All this and I haven't even started on the internet and social media. My personal opinion is that Facebook is the scourge of humanity and even though adults *may* be able to deal with all the repercussions of it, I really don't believe our teenagers have the skills. We do our level best to keep our teenager off it, with passwords on devices and blocked access at every turn - although it is a constant battle and every time we get her off it, she tries again to get back on. The internet can be a scary thing for self-harm. If you don't believe me just Google self harm and click images and then ask yourself if you would want your self harming teenager to access that alone in their room in the middle of the night. The answer would be no. There are plenty of websites and forums where people can compare the damage they do to themselves and some of them use it like a badge of honour. It makes you want to vomit.

I think it is no coincidence that this problem was virtually non-existent before social media became a way of life and I am sure it plays a part in the vastly increasing numbers of sufferers out there. Teenagers these days often live life like celebrities used to. They are constantly taking "selfies" and posting their every move somewhere, looking for comments from every passer by whether they are being "liked" or not. Sometimes it seems like they are all competing to see who has the worst problem to get attention and sympathy from each other. My daughter has certainly been known to post complete lies or text them, making up completely fictitious people or situations to garner this kind of a reaction from people. I guess when you can show someone a slash or a scar; that must really "prove" how tough life is to people.

I also wonder to myself how well we have prepared this generation for life being tough - I don't think very well at all. Examples spring to mind like the following: a prize on every layer of a pass the parcel game instead of just for the winner, ribbons for school sports carnivals for well beyond the usual first three places, not scoring football matches so that no one feels like a loser. So many little things in so many little ways so that the child in our society is ever protected from disappointment or being upset. Maybe the need to be upset in life's ups and downs is a bigger need in our DNA that we even realise. Maybe when they are so protected from every possible harm, they even endeavour to create their own harm just to feel some distress that they can tell everybody about. I really don't know. I'm sure the reasons are different for every person. I do know that there is more and more of it and there's not enough help for families like us struggling through this. I read somewhere that the cases presented at _____ have increased by 80% in the last 4 years and as horrifying as that statistic is, the really alarming thing is that for every one instance of cutting presenting at a hospital, there is probably 10 goes that have happened which were dealt with at home with supplies from the chemist or at the doctor's. I know this because I have lived it.

Even more alarming to me is that even the scarce help we have is under threat despite the overwhelming need for even more services. For instance, the new psychologist we are waiting to see at CAHMS only works 2 days a week; 12 cases were dumped on her the minute she turned up virtually filling up her time slots before she even started. The old therapist we were seeing is leaving and not being replaced and they are now even discussing the possibility of scrapping after school hour appointments all together. The one thing they need the most of might now not be supplied at all. Anyone involved in this business knows that people slashing their own wrists generally don't do it at 9am on a Monday morning for everyone's convenience! Existing services are simply not able to meet the need I can't see politicians having the slightest concern for the mental health of our teenagers and I don't know what it will take to shine a light on this need, but if the Human Rights Commission has the slightest chance of prodding in the right places to cause some change: I wish you every success and I hope my anecdotal evidence can provide even some small assistance in your task.

Sent from my iPad