



## Broadcast Transcript

**Broadcast:** Crisis Point: Youth Suicide— Addressing our Kids' Mental Well-Being – Part 1

**Guest(s):** Jennifer Cisney-Ellers

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**Dr. James Dobson:** Hello, everyone. You're listening to Family Talk, a radio broadcasting ministry of the James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Dr. James Dobson. And thank you for joining us for this program.

**Roger Marsh :** Welcome to Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh. And today on the broadcast, we are tackling the difficult topic of depression and suicide among teens. Adolescents today really do grow up in a tough environment. They deal with the pressures of school, extracurriculars, and the ubiquitous connection to their peers through smart devices. They're also experiencing puberty and have a deep longing to fit in and belong. Sometimes teens can feel like it's all just too much. Well, our guest today here on the program is Jennifer Ellers. She's a professional counselor, a life coach, a crisis response trainer, author, and speaker. Jennifer is acutely aware of the stress and strain that comes with growing up in today's world. Today on the broadcast our co-host Dr. Tim Clinton and Jennifer Ellers will be discussing several important issues. Like why do kids get so hopeless? What are signs that your child is struggling with depression or suicidal ideation? And how can you step into their lives and help them? They'll also give advice on how to connect with your team. Let's listen in now to the special edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

**Dr. Tim Clinton:** According to a study published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the oppressive COVID-19 pandemic has led to a dramatic increase in adolescent suicide attempts. The increase started in May 2020 with a particularly alarming spike among girls aged 12 to 17. From February to March 2021, suicide attempts for girls in that age range were over 50% higher than during the same period in 2019. By contrast, this is interesting, for boys of the same age, the increase was just under 4%.

Welcome to Family Talk, a division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Dr. Tim Clinton, co-host and president of the American Association of Christian Counselors. Joining me today to discuss these disturbing statistics and to put it all in perspective is my good friend, Jennifer Ellers. She's a professional counselor, life coach, crisis response trainer, author, speaker. She speaks extensively and provides training, counseling, and coaching in the field of grief, crisis, and trauma through the Institute of Compassionate Care. Jennifer is also an approved instructor for the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation.

In addition, she serves as director of the grief crisis and disaster network for the American Association of Christian Counselors with her husband, Dr. Kevin Ellers. Jennifer is co-author of *The First 48 Hours: Spiritual Caregivers as First Responders*. Jennifer, welcome to Family Talk.

Jennifer Cisney-Ellers: It's a pleasure to be with you, Tim, and thanks for doing this important subject. You know it's dear to my heart.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Jennifer, as we get started, I think everyone would agree since the COVID pandemic hit, we've seen just really insane conditions from the lockdowns to the loss, to the racial tension unrest, trauma, the rioting, the election chaos, the impeachment trials, suppression, censorship, division, the COVID delta variant, hurricanes, wildfires, Afghanistan, and more. We had a mental health crisis prior to it all. Jennifer, we're in the midst of what most would call is now a mental health disaster. You're on the front lines. What are you seeing out there?

Jennifer Cisney-Ellers: You're absolutely right, Tim. And I was concerned before the pandemic about the mental health situation in our country, especially with our kids. I had actually written a youth suicide course a couple of years ago because of my serious concerns about our young people and rising suicide rates there. But the truth is the suicide rate across all age groups had been on the rise since about 2008.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Jennifer, the statistic that I cited earlier about a 50% rise in teenage girls suicidality. I mean, every parent, when they hear that, it just scares them to death. It scares me to death.

Jennifer Cisney-Ellers: Yeah.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Jennifer, what are your thoughts behind that? What do you think is precipitating that, especially among our girls.

Jennifer Cisney-Ellers: I have a couple of thoughts. Now remember Tim, we have to look at a statistic and go that doesn't tell us why. It tells us what. But I have a couple of ideas based on my research and study in suicide. First of all, we've all been like you said, affected by the stress of the last couple years, but girls, females tend to be more relational in general. So the isolation that the pandemic has brought has really had more of an impact on those that are very relational, the girls. They, I think have even suffered more, females from the isolation, not being able to be with their friends, be in school, connect with other people. The other issue is young people in general have a different perspective. Now this pandemic has been hard on all of us. All these changes, the stress, but remember young people, their long-term perspective is not the same as an adult because their frontal lobe isn't fully developed, that part of their brain.

They don't have the ability to go, "This is a season we will get through." They just see this disaster as the world has changed and "This is what I have now." So

I think it's had an even greater toll on our young people. Females have always had Tim, a higher rate of suicide attempts. Okay. Males though completed suicide more because they chose more lethal means. What I'm most fearful of for our young girls is that they are leaning now more toward the means that used to be just with our boys. I think they're getting more comfortable reaching for a firearm, for example, with suicide. And that's my biggest concern. Traditionally females have chosen non-lethal means if they're going to attempt to take their life, maybe pills and taking overdoses, cutting their wrists, something that generally we, first of all, they don't often do that in a way that would be lethal to them. So they're, have an attempt, but it doesn't take their life. If they are going to choose though, and be more comfortable with those lethal means, we're going to see a much greater, a number of young girls dying.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Jennifer, the topic is suicides difficult. It's hard to have casual conversation if you will about this.

Jennifer Cisney-Ellers: Yeah.

Dr. Tim Clinton: It's hard to do a radio broadcast around it.

Jennifer Cisney-Ellers: It is.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Because it's such a difficult subject. Yet everybody seems to turn the dial up here. And what I've found when I'm out speaking and I usually get to a place to ask the room, "Do you know of someone who has struggled with thoughts of suicide, someone close to you? Do you know someone who has attempted suicide? Do you know someone who's actually taken their life?" And I said, "If that's you and it's someone close to you, I want you to raise your hand." Jennifer invariably, 90, 95% of the room hands are going straight up in the air. You know why I, because this stuff is endemic to a society that's out of control and people who are losing their sense of being.

And it's horrible to think about our girls, our kids, when life should be real simple and fun, should be the best years of their life, struggling with hopelessness. Jennifer, I want you to help us for a moment. Understand what are some of the signs? During the pandemic, there actually was an article written about Clark County, Nevada. And in that article, they had talked about that one area witnessing, seeing 18 different teen suicides in nine months. And you can imagine if you're a mom or dad living out in that area, you're mortified, Jennifer. And it's like, "What are some of the signs? When kids are in trouble how do I know?" We're going to talk about what we should do about it, but Jennifer, what are some of those signs?

Jennifer Cisney-Ellers: Well, there's some of the obvious ones. If they are really hurting, you see signs of depression or anxiety, they talk about being hopeless, feeling like this isn't going to change. Talk of death, dying, it's not worth it. I don't know how I'm going to do this anymore. And then if you see the signs of just a dramatic

change or shift in your young person, the things they used to love to do, they're not doing anymore. The friends they used to hang out with, they're not, they're isolating. They're not connecting with anymore. If you see a change in their personality-

Dr. Tim Clinton: Going up into their room, closing the door, not connecting.

Jennifer Cisney-Ellers: Well, and absolutely, especially if your kid was usually down there watching TV with you, they were playing games. They were socializing. So a shift. If your normally very quiet, young person starts talking to you more, that's a shift too. So are they changing? Is something radically shifted and I go, "That's not normal for my kid." Now if their grades start to slip, especially if they were a straight A student or had good grades, if their grades are changing, if they're getting into trouble when they didn't get into trouble before. And so you may have some kids that already were struggling with some things, but they have a radical shift in the way they're handling things, the way they're coping. Those are all signs.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Jennifer, some parents think that the isolation that the kids have had to experience because of the pandemic, the lockdowns and more,

Jennifer Cisney-Ellers: Yes.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Not being able to go to school, going into online learning. And by the way, shifting also more and more into the online space. I know it's ridiculous. How many screen hours we all have even as parents, but our kids, they live in that world. That's the world they've grown up in. And that is a dangerous and difficult world, especially for kids because the bullying and everything else going on online is horrifying. And one statement, one mistake, and your kid could get into a real spin.

Jennifer Cisney-Ellers: Absolutely. You mentioned a couple things I want to play off of. Number one, screen time across all age groups, but especially in our young people, is not good for their mental health. Okay. We see as screen time increases, happiness decreases, joy decreases, stress increases because screen time doesn't seem to correlate with good mental health. And so the increase in screen time hasn't been good for any of us, but especially for our kids. Let me talk about loss for our kids for just a minute. Tim, that isolation caused great loss for our young people and they lost moments, special moments and times in their life that they will never get back.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Sure.

Jennifer Cisney-Ellers: The proms, the senior trips, the sports in their junior and senior years, their graduations, some of those are gone forever and they are grieving. They're sad. Their whole world changed and it moved on without them in a way. So if you were supposed to be a graduating senior in the last two years, you got really cheated out of a lot of what you'd looked forward to really your entire life as

long as you can remember. They were isolated from friends, girlfriends, boyfriends, that part of their life that was such a treasure. I mean, I even remember my senior year. Don't you remember yours? But that got really taken away from them. And so they're grieving that on top of the stress of what is my life going to be like, what is college even going to be like for me? Is that going to happen?

Dr. Tim Clinton: Some parents might come back and say, "Wait a second, you have everything in the world. What do you hope to be depressed about? Why are you struggling?" Family dynamics often play into this don't they? Like conflict between mom and dad or worry about mom and dad not having money. Or feeling left out, ostracized because maybe I don't fit in, or I'm a little different than the other kids around me. Jennifer, all these things. And it's like, "You have no idea what it was like to grow up in my world. No, dad, you don't understand my world and the insanity that I live in." And that disconnect can be really difficult and drive more isolation and loneliness really. You can be talking and connected and be very disconnected at the same time.

Jennifer Cisney-Ellers: Not feel understood, not really feel heard. And I think that's happening with our kids, but you also mention parents are stressed. They're stressed about finances. They're stressed about their jobs. They're stressed about their health and keeping their kids safe. But you know what I always say, our kids are like sponges and they absorb the emotional state going on with their parents. If their parents are stressed or depressed, kids are going to pick up on that. Their sense of security and safety is undermined when they sense a high level of stress in adults. And we as parents, Tim, as adults are stressed. And so our kids sense of security and safety is a bit undermined by that. Now I'm not saying that we as parents have to pretend not to be stressed. We are, but I think sometimes we don't handle it the way we should. We don't even, we're not honest with our kids. We don't have conversations. Like, "you know what? I know this is hard for you. It's hard for me too." And having those honest conversations about that.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Jennifer, let's talk about depression in our kids for a moment because I really believe the loneliness and isolation piece feeds that emotional disconnect for kids. And then they spin into an episode of depression. More than just discouragement, more than just the blues, depression can be biological. So many factors feed into it. But what is depression looking like in a teenager?

Jennifer Cisney-Ellers: Well, that's one of the major risk factors for suicide in youth is untreated mental health issues. And the number one is depression. Do you know that 60 to 65% of the kids who have clinical depression get no treatment. Our young people are not getting treated for the depression. I think there are several reasons for that. But they're depressed and families either think, well, that's just being a teenager, right? No, it actually isn't. They're actually suffering from a clinical depression or they're like, but my kid won't go to counseling. I definitely don't want medication. And so they end up doing nothing. And so we have an

epidemic of untreated depression in our youth. And that is one of the major factors for suicide.

Dr. Tim Clinton: You're listening to Family Talk, a division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Dr. Tim Clinton. I'm your host. Our special in studio guest, Jennifer Cisney-Ellers, crisis response trauma expert, par Exelon. She's one of my favorites. And we're talking today about a very difficult subject, teenage suicide, and specifically the sharp increase we're seeing in our teenage girls. Jennifer, I had talked earlier and you had mentioned that if you see substantive change in your child, I know my kid. It's not them. Jennifer, I ask you about depression and what specifically depression looks like. Now we've seen a change and are we seeing some depression, mom, dad, what are those signs?

Jennifer Cisney-Ellers: And let me say, it can be things like withdrawal and isolation from friends, from family. The things I used to enjoy, I don't enjoy. I don't want to do them anymore. Sleeping more, in the room more, isolated more. Talking in a negative way, just more negatively oriented toward the world. Things will never get better. Signs of hopelessness and discouragement, negativity about themselves, their self-worth, their future and plans. Sometimes we even see them stop talking about or thinking about the things they want to do in the future.

Dr. Tim Clinton: It's just sad. It's just sad. Isn't it?

Jennifer Cisney-Ellers: Yeah. Now, and I want parents to understand the big difference here that you're going to see in young people is they don't have the ability to take an isolated event and say, that was just one thing. A bad grade ruins my life for a young person. So they may get a bad grade on one test or one paper. And instead of saying, I'm going to do better next time. Or that was one test. They're like, "Okay, now I'm going to fail this class. I'm not going to get into a good school. I'm not going to get a good job. My life is ruined."

Dr. Tim Clinton: My life's over.

Jennifer Cisney-Ellers: Do you see that? It's immediately going from one,

Dr. Tim Clinton: Blowing things up.

Jennifer Cisney-Ellers: Small thing to my life is over because of this or my life is ruined. It's an all or nothing sort of thinking, and it can snowball. And if you start to see a sign that that's how your young person is thinking, very fatalistic, very one misstep here, a breakup in a relationship there.

Dr. Tim Clinton: That's a big one.

Jennifer Cisney-Ellers: A bad grade. Yes.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Big relationship breakups.

Jennifer Cisney-Ellers: Even fights with friends, but yeah, relationship breakups. And now, "I'm never going to get married. I'm never going to be a mom or dad. This is over. My life is over." Know that that thinking is what we're looking at as sending them toward, I might as well not be here.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Jennifer, all this insanity that's going on in our modern-day world, we have seen a massive uptick in mental health issues like depression, stress and anxiety. It's off the charts. People are talking about relationship tension. We're seeing an increase in abuse and violence. Suicide has become a word in the midst of this pandemic. It's really, and it isn't just troubling. It's concerning to the nth degree. Because we've got, the church needs to step up and into this moment.

Jennifer Cisney-Ellers: Tim, it's not really like anything I've ever seen before. This moment for mental health issues, it really is a disaster in and of itself. And I'm seriously concerned about the mental health.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Jennifer, when kids get into trouble, they begin to medicate. That when your life isn't the way it's supposed to be, you begin to reach for something else to calm or soothe the brokenness in your heart. I think a lot of kids get lost and they drift into that reach. Maybe it's alcohol. They start with parties. They just want to see what it's like. Next thing you know, they're drinking heavily and they're out of control. They start with substance abuse or they're reaching and just smoking a joint. They're just going to try something or the opioid crisis that we're seeing. And these kids getting caught up in heroin and everything else. Jennifer, it's unbelievable what's happening.

Jennifer Cisney-Ellers: It's a huge problem, Tim. And there are two reasons why I'm really concerned about drug and alcohol use and abuse among our youth. First of all, we know that they're not legal age. They're not supposed to be drinking, but are they? They are. So many, even in middle school and elementary school, there are percentages of young people that are drinking alcohol. Then in terms of drug use, that's something I have to stay on top of because every time I'm out doing a class, there's a new drug issue. For a while it was vaping. That was everywhere. And then we started seeing our kids being hospitalized, having serious health concerns. The opioid crisis, like you said. I'm hearing that the fentanyl use among our youth is just out of control. So there are so many dangers.

Dr. Tim Clinton: And kids who by the way, let's just say this, they're not bad kids. Next thing you know, they're out there. They're going to try something because everybody's saying it's fun. Everybody's doing it. And you got some star quarterback who goes out and does something. Next thing you know, he's dead.

Jennifer Cisney-Ellers: And the two bigger concerns, even like you said, it can be fatal to young people. We don't know how their bodies are going to react. But number two, we know that their brains aren't fully developed yet. And what we're learning from science is that addiction just like any kind of learning, is so much higher for

young people. If you start even smoking, drinking alcohol, using any kind of drugs, when your brain is still developing, when you still have that neuroplasticity, the addiction locks in quicker and stronger. It can be so hard for a person to overcome an addiction that they started when they were a teenager, much more difficult than one that happens and forms as an adult. The other thing is they already don't have good judgment, that impulse control. And what do these drugs and alcohol do? Further damages our impulse control and our judgment. And so these are really dangerous for our young people. And we see a high correlation between alcohol and drug use and suicidal behaviors.

Dr. Tim Clinton: So, the picture looks like this. Something happens. I may be struggling with some issues, maybe my personality and temperament push me in a direction. I get lost in the spin. I begin to reach for and find something to calm the insanity or the emptiness that I'm feeling. And I want to be loved. I want to be liked. I want to fit in. I want to get through this breakup. Then the reach becomes not only am I abusing it, I become maybe dependent on it, thinking it's the only thing that really brings me any joy or calms me down and I become addicted to it. And nobody knows about it. It's just me and my buddies, my friends. And we're just trying to figure out how to do life. And Jennifer, we get lost.

Jennifer Cisney-Ellers: Yeah.

Dr. Tim Clinton: As adults, we get lost.

Jennifer Cisney-Ellers: And tragically, sometimes that alcohol, that substance can cause our young people to make fatal decisions, decisions that end their life.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Jennifer, it's crazy because they begin at that age to turn to their friends for help to figure out life. And they're turning away from mom and dad and mom and dad get frustrated because they're angry and doors are being slammed and shut and yelling is taking place. And then we withdraw and we don't talk. And that only perpetuates it even more. That's the cycle that you begin to see in these families. And it could be good families and everybody's frustrated, everybody's screaming, but nobody can hear.

Jennifer Cisney-Ellers: It's a real problem. And Tim, what we're not doing also that we really need to be doing is helping kids understand how to soothe and comfort their own emotional pain without drugs and alcohol. I think one of the big challenges is that they also see how adults deal with disappointment and sadness. And if they don't have something really healthy modeled for them, they don't know how I deal with disappointment, sadness, and loss.

Roger Marsh : You just heard part one of a somber conversation between crisis response trainer, Jennifer Ellers and our co-host Dr. Tim Clinton today on Family Talk. They were discussing kids in crisis and teen suicide, things no parent wants to worry about, but every parent should be aware of. Jennifer pointed out several warning signs that a teen might be experiencing depression or suicidal thoughts.



And if you've noticed any of those warning signs in your child, don't hesitate to talk with them about it. They need to know that you are there, that you notice and that you care. And if your child needs extra support, be sure to visit [connect.aacc.net](http://connect.aacc.net), to find a Christian counselor near you. That's [connect.aacc.net](http://connect.aacc.net). Remember that depression is a highly treatable medical illness. If you feel like your child, or maybe even you need help reach out today.

Now, if you'd like to learn more about Jennifer Ellers and her work in crisis response and grief, be sure to visit our broadcast page. Just go to [drjamesdobson.org/broadcast](http://drjamesdobson.org/broadcast). That's [drjamesdobson.org/broadcast](http://drjamesdobson.org/broadcast). Now, before we leave for today, I want to remind you that we have dedicated this entire month to celebrating marriage and parenting. Visit [drjamesdobson.org](http://drjamesdobson.org) for blogs, videos, broadcasts, books, and other resources to support you on your marriage and parenting journey. That web address again is [drjamesdobson.org](http://drjamesdobson.org). Or give us a call at (877) 732-6825. Well, that's all the time we have for today. Make sure you join us again tomorrow for part two of Dr. Tim Clinton's interview with Jennifer Ellers on the topic of teens and mental health. I'm Roger Marsh. Thanks so much for listening today to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

Announcer:

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