



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Preventing Teen Suicide: Kids in Crisis

Guest(s): Dr. Tim Clinton

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Dr. James Dobson: You're listening to Family Talk, the radio broadcasting division of the James Dobson Family Institute. I am that James Dobson, and I'm so pleased that you joined us today.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Hello, and welcome to Family Talk. I'm Dr. Tim Clinton, president of the American Association of Christian Counselors and co-host of Family Talk. I'm glad you're here with us today. This is going to be a very important broadcast. You see, I believe one of the most tragic issues a person or a family will ever endure is when someone close to them takes his or her own life. Over 6,000 teens in the United States have committed suicide every year over the last five years, and we're seeing a major uptick right now. These kids haven't even reached adulthood, but they feel like the pressures of life are too much to handle. Our hearts go out to every family and individual who has been touched by this tragedy. A few years ago toward the beginning of the big uptick in teen suicide, Dr. Dobson, and I sat down to discuss this growing issue.

We'd like to re air that conversation today. You see, it's only by beginning to understand the issue of teen suicide, that we can begin to put our arms around these hurting kids. And in many cases, the teen or young adult in crisis, is right in front of you, but we don't even see the warning signs. Maybe today's conversation will be a game-changer for you or someone you love. Regardless of your circumstances, I can assure you, today's conversation between Dr. Dobson and myself will be helpful to some parents out there. Let's dive right into today's edition of Family Talk.

Dr. James Dobson: There is an epidemic of suicide, especially among young people today, that breaks my heart. It's taking place every single day. There's nothing that terrifies parents more, for good reason. I mean, just the very thought of losing that precious kid to some kind of self-harm, it's breathtaking in nature. What is going on now? Why the great increase in this horrible practice of killing oneself?

Dr. Tim Clinton: Here's what we know Dr. Dobson; most agree that teen suicide is now the second leading cause of death for children aged 10 through 24 years of age. Some are saying it's the second leading cause of death among college age, and youth, ages 12 to 18. Catch this, more die from suicide than cancer, heart disease, aids, birth defects, the flu, lung diseases, combined, at that age.

Combined. Every day, that means every 24 hours, 5,240 teens attempt to take their life.

Dr. James Dobson: What could be happening to cause that?

Dr. Tim Clinton: When people do research on teen suicide, they try to assess risk factors. One of the elements in there that's contributing to all this, there's no doubt, first of all, and you've been talking about this for years, the breakup of the family is devastating to children. You know that it strikes deep into the heart of a child, when mom and dad, for example, divorce. A lot of kids take that personal. They think they may be the reason. Maybe in the midst of it, we want to not talk to our children, and so they often have to try to figure out what happened on their own. And the mind can be a very beautiful place, free, or it can be a very dark, turbulent, broken place.

Dr. Dobson, we know now that depression, or mental disorders, even substance abuse, tend to be a big contributor to teen suicide. Some say as much as 90% of those who actually commit suicide, have some type of significant depression or substance abuse going on. Relationship breakups, horrible experiences, growing up in an abusive situation, feeling trapped, being in school where you're bullied, maybe you're struggling with your grades or what have you, just getting lost. I think a lot of these kids they're...

Dr. James Dobson: Totally lost.

Dr. Tim Clinton: They're lost.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah.

Dr. Tim Clinton: And they're reaching, they're reaching for hope. They're reaching for help, but they can't find it.

Dr. James Dobson: And you know, the kids who come out of dysfunctional families, where there's an assault on self-worth anyway. I mean, it's just so difficult to understand what that experience is like, but then you add to that peer pressure and bullying and rejection.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Yeah. You know what I've learned about suicide through the years; it's not that they hate life; people who commit suicide, teens who commit suicide, they hate life the way it is. They don't believe it's ever going to change. They've tried, but they're inside this box and you know as well as I do, when you get angry, you can't think about anything else than what you're mad at, right? And when you get lost, when life begins to spin away from you, you can't see beyond it.

Dr. James Dobson: You know, suicide is only one of many expressions of self-hatred. People wonder, "Why are kids cutting themselves? Why would anybody do that? Why would anybody pick up a knife and draw a bunch of lines down your leg and

leave yourself bloody and disfigured? That doesn't make any sense." Unless you realize a person is saying, "I can't stand myself another minute." That's the way a lot of young people feel. And then you add drug abuse to it, which screws up the mind anyway, and then you've got the makings of yet another tragedy.

Dr. Tim Clinton: People have often said to me, "Why do these kids go out and party like they do? Why are they getting so messed up with drugs and alcohol and stuff?" And some of it's experimentation. Going through the young years of adolescents or what have you. But for many of them, Dr. Dobson, you're right; the peer pressure. But how about just filling the emptiness in the soul? If you're made for relationship and your relationships are broken, they're not working, you're going to reach for something else to anesthetise or to fill the hole in your soul. I saw a post recently online; it was a picture of a young girl, who in our community, committed suicide. And in it, there was this long description about what happened. The person who wrote the description, I think they were close family members to her, said that the bullying... "You bullies finally got her to kill herself." It was just a sad story.

When I think about what must have gone on inside of her heart and mind; she must've been so spun out, so low in her self worth and self-esteem. She must've felt like there was absolutely no one who understood her. Who understood what it was like to live in her world, her life. And that nobody would hear. Dr. Dobson, it's amazing to me; we'll talk about the helping side of this. What do you do as a parent? If you're worried, what are some of the real high risk things you should be looking for? We know this; talking to a son, a daughter, to someone who's on the verge of committing suicide, doesn't make them... It's a myth. It doesn't make them commit suicide. It's not going to lead them into it. If anything, you create a conversation with that young man or young woman that actually, they may believe, "Somebody wants to hear me. Somebody cares. Somebody's going to show up." There's a lot more to that. But you can just imagine the darkness, the heaviness to go to a place to say, "The world would be better off without me."

Dr. James Dobson: Tim, I grew up in a very functional family. I had a great father and a great mother, and there was a lot of love there for us, and I had a very happy childhood. I sometimes feel like one of God's spoiled kids, because I had it all.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Blessed.

Dr. James Dobson: I really did. I was blessed. I found the Lord when I was four years of age, and that gave great meaning to me, even as a child. And so I didn't run all of the gamut of dangers, emotionally and psychologically, that other people do. I give that as a background, because I hit junior high school and my world fell apart. Because I was younger than everybody I had been running around with, they were into puberty, and girlfriends and boyfriends, and I was still a little boy. And I went through a couple of years...

Dr. Tim Clinton: Those are rough years.

Dr. James Dobson: It was rough. I remember going to a band concert in another town, and we rode a bus, and on the bus, I felt like I didn't have a friend in the world. I wonder how many have felt like that when they were in the 8th grade. I didn't even have anybody to talk to. And I finally forced my way into a conversation, halfway back in the bus, where all the kids were laughing and having a good time. One of them turned to me and said, "Why did you come up here? We were having a good time until you came here. Why don't you go onto the back of the bus?" It crushed me. I'd never experienced that in my life before. I cried all the way home. And I got home and my dad was there. What if he hadn't been there? And he saw me crying and he said, "Tell me what's going on?" And I began telling him what had happened on the bus, and he talked me down. When he finished, I knew I was going to be okay. What if I didn't have a father to do that? And many people don't.

Dr. Tim Clinton: You know, a lot of parents think, Dr. Dobson, that their teens don't want to be around them. It's like hugging a porcupine or something, they're just prickly. But the research is opposite of that. The number one things that still make children safe, happy, is a great relationship with mom and/or dad. And you're right, when you don't have someone like that... And let me compound the picture a little bit more; what really concerns me, is the online world that's out there. This suicide topic is being thrown around and it's confusing kids. Some kids are even going to the place where they're killing themselves, committing suicide. There are television programs out there, like there's a Netflix series called *13 Reasons Why*; it sparked a great deal of debate among teenagers and adults alike. It was about Hannah. She was a junior in high school that commit suicide after a slew of unfortunate, and somewhat common, teenage experiences.

And in some ways, Dr. Dobson, what it does, is it almost normalized suicide as what you do when you get lost. These young kids who have no hooks to latch on to, they're pushing that button. They don't know where to go. They get lost and they get so spun out, and they have no place to go. Think of the church, the church needs to be a place where kids can at least find somebody. The Scriptures, say, "though, my mother and father forsake me, the Lord will deliver me up." But God, I think really calls on the church during times like this, to reach into the lives of these young kids, through a youth pastor or someone to speak hope in to their life, because the hopelessness is off the charts. And you know this better than anyone, developmentally, they're wrestling with questions like, "Who am I? How do I fit in?"

When you have an experience on the back of a bus, or what have you, and you don't have anybody to talk to, and then it starts getting dark for you, and then you start thinking about these internet experiences or games, or you start watching this, and you start getting lost in your own mind. I'll give you another little illustration here, for a moment. I teach a relationships class at Liberty University. All the undergrad students have to go through this class. I took a day and talked about suicide and the brokenness of it. And I ask a question to all the students in the class, on campus, at Liberty. Here's where they ask them; "I want you to raise your hand and only raise your hand, if you know of someone very

close to you, who has thought of and/or attempted suicide or committed suicide." It had to be in the 98 plus percentile.

Dr. James Dobson: What a shame.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Dr. Dobson, there are communities like Colorado Springs. John Ortberg from Menlo Park in California, said to me at the last world conference, "Tim, we've had a number of families out here horrified, because our kids are killing themselves. They're terrified as mom and dad. We've got to do something. We've got to start talking about this issue. Somebody has got to fill in the blanks here. Somebody has got to reach into these hearts and lives and let them know that there's hope. That there's a life. There's a beautiful life in front of them." childhood's supposed to be about riding bikes. It's about, you know, having fun. It's about hanging out with buddies. It's about football and baseball and soccer. It's about joy. It's about loving on each other. It's about the spring of life. And you know how it gets manifested, that message of hope that God's there?

It comes through mom, dad, a youth pastor, a grandpa, coach... Somebody owning their influence in the life of a child, in the life of a teen. Somebody who's willing to give a dutch rub on him and wrestle with them and say, "You know what? This is what I love about you. What I like about you, is everything. I'm here for you. Listen to me, son. There's not one thing I want, I hope you hear this from me as a dad, there's not one thing you can't come to dad and talk about. As a matter of fact, I'm going to talk to you about everything anyway." Mom, "There's not one thing you can't come to me and talk about."

And we get that kind of emotional closeness and connection by what? By being present, by being attuned to our son or daughter. That's how it happens. It's by being attuned to the kids in our youth group, in our church. I remember a quote, that I don't know if you shared it years ago, by Paul Tournier, "the busy, preoccupied, parent misses many a cue, or an opportunity, to speak life into his son or daughter's."

Dr. James Dobson: I tried to express it in my books, both *Bringing Up Boys*, and *Bringing Up Girls*, and it's a message to parents. It may be the most important thing I wrote about. It is, if you are distracted or if you are working long hours, and are worn out when you get home, if you are too involved in your own world to see what's happening in your sons and daughters, if you ignore them, if they are not part of your inner being, if you don't take the time to love them, I will promise you that the culture will take your kids to hell, one way or another. You can't afford to do that. You will miss the most important thing in life, if you invest it all in a career opportunity. I know it is tempting when you've gone to college and you've got this education and you're offered a job and it makes you work or travel too much, or you're gone too much, that you don't notice, right around your feet, some kid is crying for you and reaching for you, but you don't have time for them. This kind of thing is more likely to happen.

You've got to convey, worth and value, and meaning to them. You've got to let them know that they matter to you. And I don't care what you accomplish in life, if you don't get that done, you have failed. Tim, I just looked up at the clock and I can't believe it; our time has gone. Well, you must take a minute to give parents the warning signs, the things to look for, and then what in the world to do about it.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Yeah. I think if your son or daughter is making suicidal statements, first of all, they're talking about it? That's a huge red flag, just number one. Being preoccupied, maybe, with death in conversation, or writing and drawing. If they're giving away their belongings, if they're withdrawing from family. That loner factor really concerns me; they're just getting lost up in their room. Maybe aggressive, hostile behavior, maybe they're, again, neglecting their personal appearance. Bad stuff going on at school, their grades aren't the way they're supposed to be. They've got some real, high conflict going on; maybe a recent breakup, change in personality. Those kinds of factors, Doctor, when they start coming together, they create a horrifying dark place.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah. And Tim, there's one more that people overlook. When you've had a son or a daughter, who has showed those characteristics and has been depressed, and all those things you just talked about, or even just few of them, pay attention if the mood lightens. Be careful, sometimes that child has made up his mind. He's not under pressure anymore. He's not struggling with what to do anymore. He's figured it out. He knows what to do. And he often does it, and you didn't have a clue because you weren't aware that sometimes a lightened mood, is itself, a danger point.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Yes. I know some are probably asking, "What do you do? What do you do? What do you do?" I'd say, first of all, connect. And don't get overwhelmed or lost in it, be deliberate, be intentional. Again, one of the great myths here, is to think that if I talk about suicide, then I'm going to place those seeds into his or her heart.

Dr. James Dobson: That's really not true.

Dr. Tim Clinton: That is not true. It's the opposite. Go right into it, and if you have an indication that they are contemplating suicide, if they've come up with a plan, if there's a plan... I ask clients all the time, "Did he have a plan?" If they have a plan, you know, this is way down the road. Don't leave them alone, continue to talk with them. And then, you're right, get them help. Get them to a place, because the hopelessness will take them out. It'll take them out, it really will. You get on the phone with 911, you get them to an emergency room, you get them to a professional counselor immediately. Especially if you're seeing this high, high risk behavior taking place, because this is real. And the good news is, if you do that, you can save a heart. You can save a life. And usually, again it's like I said earlier, it isn't that they hate life. It's just that they hate life the way it is.

Dr. James Dobson: You know, Tim, there's some people... Some kids are drawn to some adults. Some coaches, some uncles, some neighbor, that your kid just likes them; that

person can have a lot of influence by saying that, he loves on them, and talks to them, and talks them through, like my dad did for me when I was at the low point. I went on to have a great high school career. Those days passed for me because I had a dad...

Dr. Tim Clinton: A great dad...

Dr. James Dobson: Who believed in me and told me he did.

Dr. Tim Clinton: I love what you're saying there, because I'd love to hashtag this; #ownyourinfluence. I think that word goes out to every coach, it goes out to every dad, to every pastor, to everybody who has influence in the life of a teen. So if we're talking about teen suicide, own your influence in their life. Stop turning them away. Recognize that God's placed them there for a reason. And if you do, you may avert a teen suicide. It could be because you showed up and you spoke hope, truth, love into their life.

Dr. James Dobson: I had a Sunday school teacher, a man that we all loved. Every student, every boy, it was a boys class, every boy in his class, and we were probably 10, loved him. Absolutely loved him. And I remember he would start talking to us and tell us stories, and we would all be crying. He had great influence in our life. Somebody like that can save a boy or girl in trouble.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Soul care ministry; showing up, letting God work through you to bring His comfort and hope to them.

Dr. James Dobson: Tim, we're going to have to do this again because we didn't cover the topic, certainly not anywhere near where it should be. And we need to come back to this subject because there are so many parents out there that are terrified that their kid will say, "I'm thinking of killing myself. I don't know what to do." Of course, they should pray about it, but they should know how to handle that moment...

Dr. Tim Clinton: Act... Do something.

Dr. James Dobson: Because the way you handle it depends a lot on what the individual goes and does.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Yes, It does. Thank you Dr. Dobson.

Dr. James Dobson: Thank you for being with us, Tim. It's always good to have you here, let's do it more often.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Yes.

Roger Marsh: You've been listening to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, and that was Dr. Dobson along with Dr. Tim Clinton, discussing the topic of kids in crisis, and how

anyone can help prevent teen suicide. I hope you've been encouraged by today's conversation. You know, here at Family Talk, we care deeply about families and kids in crisis. To listen to any part of today's broadcast that you might've missed, simply go to drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. That's drjamesdobson.org/familytalk.

You know, suicidal thoughts can affect anyone; male, or female, young or old, regardless of your age or background. September is National Suicide Prevention Awareness Month. We all know that these past couple of years have been a difficult and confusing season for a lot of people. If you, or someone you know or love, is in crisis or experiencing difficult or even suicidal thoughts, you can call the national suicide and crisis lifeline. It's a brand new number Simply dial 988. That's right: it's that simple. Just dial 988, to reach the national suicide and crisis lifeline. Or you can visit 988lifeline.org. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is a national network of crisis centers that provide free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress. 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. There is help and there is hope. And remember, to find a Christian counselor near you, simply visit connect.aacc.net. That will connect you to the American Association of Christian Counselors Directory. Again, that web address is connect.aacc.net.

As always, thank you for listening to Family Talk today. For Dr. James Dobson and Dr. Tim Clinton, I'm Roger Marsh. We appreciate you tuning in and your prayers and financial support of this ministry, and encourage you to join us again next time for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Hi everyone, Dr. Tim Clinton here. When you think about your family and where they'll be when you're no longer living, are you worried? Are you confident? Are you hopeful? What kind of a legacy are you leaving for your children and their children right now? Here at Family Talk, we are committed to helping you understand the legacy that you're leaving your family. Join us today at drjamesdobson.org. You're going to find helpful insights, tips, and advice from Dr. Dobson himself. And remember, your legacy matters.