

## ***Introduction to the Alive to Thrive Participant's Book***

If you're working your way through this book, the term "participant" is too generic to apply to you. "Concerned adult" or "desperate parent" may be closer to the truth, but they still don't capture the essence.

So we'll go with "difference maker."

You don't need to be reminded that the forces aligned against teenagers seem overwhelming. But what you may need to be reminded of is the difference that one caring, motivated adult can make in the life of a teen who isn't sure whether life is worth living.

This book will equip you to channel your motivated concern into strategies that will resonate with your teen. The group dynamic of this study will allow you to "sharpen iron" with other concerned parents and adults. As you share your successes, failures, frustrations, and hopes with one another, you'll find much-needed support, encouragement, and empathy. As you brainstorm together workable strategies for keeping teens *Alive to Thrive*, you'll discover new perspectives and solutions for dealing with your own teen.

So as you work through this book, think in terms of both helping your own teen and contributing to the group dynamic so that other parents can help their teens.

May God bless and guide as you embark on this essential study.

### **Session 1**

#### **The Best Defense Against Suicide**

##### **1. Break the Ice**

Jesus sets the benchmark in John 10:10: "I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly." There's the goal, right there: abundant life. Certainly we've reached a crisis point in our culture when it comes to teen suicide. And it's essential that we stem that tide, starting with those closest to us. But simply keeping kids alive is not our ultimate aim. Remember, the title of this series is *Alive to Thrive*. The thriving is essential. So our best defense against suicide is to equip kids to pursue and experience a thriving, abundant life.

What we need to understand as we begin this life-changing program is that there's no such thing as too early or too late to start this equipping. An abundant life begins with a healthy attachment and connection between parent and child. Beyond that, it requires a high level of self-care—knowing what we need in order to function at our highest level and making sure we get it. The best way to foster self-care in our kids is to model it in our own lives.

Our loving discipline is what makes it possible for our kids to recognize the path to an abundant life. There are, after all, plenty of dead ends masquerading as the way to fulfillment and happiness. Our support is one of the things that can keep our kids going when an abundant life seems out of reach to them.

These four building blocks—attachment, self-care, discipline, and support—are essential elements of an abundant life. That means they're also essential strategies in the best defense against suicide.

## 2. Explore the Word

Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus uses a construction analogy to emphasize the importance of choosing the right foundation as we build an abundant life for ourselves. Read Matthew 7:24-27 and answer the following questions.

Obviously your responses will come from a place of personal experience, interpretation, understanding, and application. But think also about your group dynamics. How can you answer these questions in a way that inspires, encourages, or motivates other parents?

*Why do people build, either purposefully or unknowingly, on sand instead of solid ground?*

*How can you tell if your house is built on solid ground?*

## 3. Consider the Need

If the issues of attachment, self-care, discipline, and support have not presented themselves as crises in your family, they may seem a little abstract or hard to identify with. So consider the story of Noah and his family. During the PowerPoint presentation in the group setting, you'll touch on Noah's story as you discuss the best defense against suicide.

*Noah spent the first eight weeks of his life in a neonatal care unit, due to a heart condition. With two other young kids to care for at home, Noah's parents were unable to spend every waking hour with their newborn, a reality that caused them no small amount of regret, worry, and guilt. Noah's mom jokes that the neonatal nurses spent more time with her son than she did.*

*Since that time, it seems like Noah's parents have been trying to play catch-up with their youngest son, without quite succeeding. From the time he could walk and talk, Noah constantly vied for his parents' attention, which frequently set him at odds with his siblings. If he didn't get their attention, he would resort to lying or acting out. If he did get it, he wanted more.*

*Noah's separation anxiety was so intense that his parents pulled him out of preschool. Though that specific anxiety faded with time, others took its place. Today Noah is a freshman in high school. He makes good grades, but struggles in other areas. He doesn't have many friends or interests. Occasionally he lashes out with a violent or destructive outburst. A few weeks ago,*

*he was suspended from school for three days after he destroyed a gym locker with a baseball bat, all because one of his few friends jokingly pushed him into the shower with his clothes on.*

Here's a place to take notes on the rest of the PowerPoint presentation.

#### **4. Embrace the Challenge**

The challenges of fostering attachment, self-care, discipline, and support in your relationship with your kids may or may not hit home for you. (We'll discuss that more in Step 5.) You may, however, know some parents—or find yourself in a study group with some parents—who are struggling desperately with one or more of these challenges. Here's an opportunity for you to come alongside those parents; to empathize with their pain, frustration, and fear; and to help them craft a workable strategy for overcoming or working through these challenges.

Be prepared to share your responses to the following questions in a group setting.

*Secure attachment depends on parents meeting three conditions, so that a child knows (1) "I'm safe"; (2) "I can trust my parents"; and (3) "I have a voice, which means I'm confident enough to speak my thoughts and ask for what I need, knowing that my parents will respond and make sure that my needs are met."*

*What specific things can parents do to meet those three conditions?*

*How can you take care of yourself in a way that leaves a lasting impression on your kids?*

*Of these four qualities—self-discipline, resiliency, balance, and confidence, choose the one you think is most important to instill in kids. Write down why you think it's so important, what happens when it's missing and how parents can instill or reinforce it in our kids' lives.*

*What is the difference between healthy support and unhealthy support, when it comes to our kids?*

## **5. Bring It Home**

On each of the building blocks below, draw cracks or crevices to indicate how broken you think it is in your child's life. The more cracks you draw, the more unstable you think that block is.

*[DESIGN: Illustration of a cutaway view of a tower. At the base of the tower are four building blocks. The blocks are labeled "Attachment," "Self-Care," "Loving Discipline" and "Support."]*

If you drew cracks on any of the building blocks, answer the following questions about it.

*What is the biggest challenge you face in dealing with this issue?*

*What resources can you draw on as you face this challenge?*

*What do you need that you don't have to overcome this challenge?*

*What would the best possible outcome of this situation look like?*

## **Session 2**

### **Things That May Make Your Child Vulnerable to Suicide**

#### **1. Break the Ice**

The path to abundant life, the kind Jesus talks about in John 10:10, isn't always smooth. In fact, it can be treacherous at times, especially for young people. Worldly values can work their way into kids' lives, causing them to question God's truth. As a result, kids lose sight of who they are in Him and what He has planned for them. Significant losses, such as the death of a loved one, rejection by a friend, or other traumatic events, can unmoor kids and set them adrift. Divorce can trigger anxiety, depression, and a host of negative emotions and behavior. Domestic violence can cause deep emotional scarring and cause kids to question whether they deserve to live. Bullying can expose their weaknesses and vulnerabilities, and make life miserable for them.

Worldly values, significant losses, divorce, domestic violence and bullying can cause serious damage to kids. As the title of this session indicates, that damage can make them seriously consider finding a permanent way out of the problem. But these challenges need not have the final say. As parents, we have the potential to counteract their negative influence and bring healing to our kids.

#### **2. Explore the Word**

It's not inevitable that these things, as damaging as they are, will exert control over kids. The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Christians in Rome, makes it clear that all believers have the power to withstand even the most powerful outside influences. Read Romans 12:1-2 and answer the following questions.

Obviously your responses will come from a place of personal experience, interpretation, understanding, and application. But think also about your group dynamics. How can you answer these questions in a way that inspires, encourages, or motivates other parents?

*What does it mean to conform to this world?*

*How can we help our kids test and discern what God's will is—especially when they're faced with worldly influences, significant losses, divorce, domestic abuse, or bullying?*

### 3. Consider the Need

If you haven't faced worldly influences, significant losses, divorce, domestic violence, or bullying in your family, these issues may seem a little abstract or hard to identify with. So consider the story of Nicole and her family. During the PowerPoint presentation in the group setting, you'll touch on Nicole's story as you discuss the things that make kids vulnerable to suicide.

*When the family court judge asked Nicole if she wanted to live with her mother or father, she replied, "Neither." As far as Nicole was concerned, she had no home anymore—and no family, for that matter. In her darkest moments, she wondered if she ever really had a family at all. How long had her parents pretended to be a happy couple for the sake of Nicole and her sister? How long had her family been one giant lie?*

*And why couldn't her parents have kept pretending? That's the question Nicole hated herself for asking. Her dad said that she and her sister "deserved to know the truth." Nicole took that to mean that they deserved to know that no one can be trusted, that the people you love will eventually desert you, and that happiness isn't real. That was now her truth.*

*Nicole was surprised by how quickly her sadness over her parents' divorce passed. Her anger lasted much longer, but it, too, eventually passed. In its wake, it left something much worse: numbness. Nicole told her best friend that she feels as though she's sleepwalking through life. Everything seems muffled and muted. Nothing makes her happy or sad.*

*She lost interest first in sports, which disappointed her dad. Then she lost interest in choir, which disappointed her mom. Now even the thought of doing anything but the bare minimum to get through the day makes her tired.*

*Nicole's parents are worried about her, but they have no idea how much she's really struggling. They're still too caught up in the ugly aftermath of divorce. They have a hard time seeing past their own pain, anger, and guilt.*

Here's a place to take notes on the rest of the PowerPoint presentation.

#### 4. Embrace the Challenge

These discussions of worldly values, significant losses, divorce, domestic violence, and bullying may or may not hit home for you. (We'll discuss that more in Step 5.) You may, however, know some parents—or find yourself in a study group with some parents—who are struggling desperately with one or more of these challenges. Here's an opportunity for you to come alongside those parents; to empathize with their pain, frustration and fear; and to help them craft a workable strategy for overcoming or working through these challenges.

Be prepared to share your responses to the following questions in a group setting.

*How can parents counteract the constant barrage of worldly influences that our kids face every day?*

*What are the most effective strategies for finding healing and moving forward after suffering a significant personal loss?*

*Is "Don't get divorced" a workable strategy for making kids less vulnerable to suicide? If so, how can it be applied without causing constant misery and tension in the family? If not, what would be a more realistic and workable strategy?*

*What does a "zero tolerance" for domestic violence look like?*

*You've probably faced your share of bullies. What have you learned about them that might help your kids deal with their own bullies?*

## 5. Bring It Home

On each of the following targets, mark an “X” to indicate how close to home each issue hits for your family.

*[DESIGN: Illustration of five targets with bull’s eyes in the middle. The targets are labeled “Worldly Influences,” “Significant Losses,” “Divorce,” “Domestic Violence,” and “Bullying”]*

If you drew an “X” on one or more of these targets, answer the following questions about it.

*What is the biggest challenge you face in dealing with this issue?*

*What resources can you draw on as you face this challenge?*

*What do you need that you don’t have to overcome this challenge?*

*What would the best possible outcome of this situation look like?*

## Session 3

### Mental Health Issues and Suicide

#### 1. Break the Ice

An abundant life may seem like an unattainable goal to kids who struggle with mental illness. Depression can rob them of motivation, joy and energy. It can leave them feeling sad, apathetic, and hopeless. Anxiety can make them see catastrophe where none exists. It can shrink their comfort zone and intensify their desire to stay there, frightened of what lies beyond it. Obsessive-compulsive disorder can trap them in rituals of their own making and keep them from living productive lives. Post-traumatic stress disorder can cause them to feel the crippling effects of a trauma for years.

Kids who struggle with mental illness face a unique set of challenges, beginning with diagnosis. Normal adolescent development can be volatile at times. Recognizing the difference between a mentally healthy teen who’s going through age-appropriate developmental changes and a teen who’s struggling with something more serious can be a challenge. The good news is



that resources are available to meet that challenge. Our culture is taking positive strides toward removing the stigma of mental health struggles. Advancements in the pharmaceutical treatment of various forms of mental illness are being made every day. Professional counselors are discovering new and more effective ways to treat people who struggle with mental health and to help them experience abundant life.

## 2. Explore the Word

The apostle Paul knew what it was like to struggle with a debilitating condition. He referred to it as a thorn in his flesh. He doesn't tell us whether it was a chronic illness, a disability, or a struggle with mental health. All we know is that three times he pleaded with the Lord to take it away, and three times the Lord said no. Read 2 Corinthians 12:6-10, 1 Kings 19:4-8, and then answer the following questions.

Obviously your responses will come from a place of personal experience, interpretation, understanding, and application. But think also about your group dynamics. How can you answer these questions in a way that inspires, encourages, or motivates other parents?

*How did God explain His decision not to remove Paul's thorn in the flesh? What might someone who struggles with mental illness take away from Paul's discussion of his thorn in the flesh?*

*In 1 Kings, how did God care for Elijah when he was depressed? What can we learn from how God cared for him?*

## 3. Consider the Need

If struggles with mental health have not presented themselves as crises in your family, they may seem a little abstract or hard to identify with. So consider the story of Javy and his family. During the PowerPoint presentation in the group setting, you'll touch on Javy's story as you discuss the connection between mental health issues and suicide.

*For the longest time, Javy thought other people could hear the voices, too. The voices didn't speak very often. But when they did, Javy would look around to see how other people reacted to them. They seemed to ignore the voices, so Javy tried to do that, too. It was easy at first. He would pretend that they hadn't said anything, and they would go away for a while.*

*The first time he ever mentioned it to anyone else was when he was playing Monopoly with his sister. He was ten years old at the time.*

*"Let us finish the game first," he said suddenly. To his sister, who was two years older, he sounded annoyed.*

*“What are you talking about?” she asked.*

*“They want us to knock all the pieces off the board and dump out the money,” Javy replied. “But we can wait until we’re finished playing.”*

*“Who does?”*

*“Didn’t you hear what they said?” Javy asked. The look of confusion on his sister’s face slowly morphed into something resembling fear. And that’s when Javy realized that she hadn’t heard the voices—and that no one else but him could hear them.*

*Javy expected his sister to tell his parents what had happened, and she did. Later that afternoon, his mom knocked on his bedroom door and asked if she could talk to him. Javy answered her questions honestly. Yes, he’d been hearing the voices for a while. No, they didn’t talk to him all the time. No, they didn’t tell him to hurt himself, but sometimes they told him to do things that might get him in trouble.*

*His mom seemed calm when she left the room. But later that night, Javy overheard her talking on the phone with someone—probably his grandma or aunt—and she started crying when she mentioned what had happened.*

Here’s a place to take notes on the rest of the PowerPoint presentation.

#### **4. Embrace the Challenge**

The challenges of mental illness may or may not hit home for you. (We’ll discuss that more in Step 5.) You may, however, know some parents—or find yourself in a study group with some parents—who are struggling desperately with these challenges. Here’s an opportunity for you to come alongside those parents; to empathize with their pain, frustration and fear; and to help them craft a workable strategy for overcoming or working through these challenges.

Be prepared to share your responses to the following questions in a group setting.

*How can you tell whether your child is facing the normal ups and downs of life as a teenager or struggling with depression?*

*How should parents respond when anxiety and/or depression start to control what their child will or won't do?*

*What specific steps can a parent take to help a child who's in the middle of an obsessive-compulsive routine, such as checking a door ten times to make sure that it's locked?*

*How can parents find the right mental health professional for their child?*

## **5. Bring It Home**

On each of the following targets, mark an "X" to indicate how close to home each issue hits for your family.

*[DESIGN: Illustration of four targets with bull's-eyes in the middle. The targets are labeled "Depression," "Anxiety," "Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder," and "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder."]*

If you drew an "X" on one or more of these targets, answer the following questions about it.

*What is the biggest challenge you face in dealing with this issue?*

*What resources can you draw on as you face this challenge?*

*What do you need that you don't have to overcome this challenge?*

*What would the best possible outcome of this situation look like?*

## **Session 4**

# **Technology and Suicide**

### **1. Break the Ice**

In the rush to introduce the latest advancement in technology, an essential question often gets left in the dust: *Is this a good idea?* Unfortunately, by the time we're able to answer it with any certainty, the damage has been done. Social media started with the utopian vision of connecting people in an immediate way, bringing the world closer together, and giving a platform to those whose voices weren't being heard. Yet the visionaries seem to have ignored a few key questions, such as whether it's a good idea to make it easy for people to say regrettable things in the heat of the moment. Or what predators might do if they're given access to a universe of potential victims. Or what vile messages might gain traction in a virtual world of complete anonymity and zero accountability.

Because these questions didn't figure more prominently in the planning stages of various social media, an entire generation of kids—and their parents—are left to deal with the fallout. Social media and screen technology pose obvious threats to kids, in the form of pornography, cyberbullying, and the addictive nature of screen time. They also pose less obvious threats, in the form of groupthink, narcissism, and materialism. The combination of these threats can chip away at kids' core identities, make them lose sight of who they are, and leave them vulnerable to thoughts of self-harm.

Sexting is an especially dangerous threat. The number of kids whose lives have been ruined—or who *believe* their lives have been ruined—by one lapse of judgment is growing rapidly. Too many young people are discovering too late that once an image or message is sent, it exists forever online.

Overexposure to traumatic images also can take a serious toll on kids. The never-ending demand for content and the competition for viewers created by the 24-hour news cycle ensures that the most lurid stories and pictures will be featured. Non-news video sites offer even more extreme content, without any pretense of journalistic ethics or morality.

Ugliness is never more than a click or post away, whether it comes from trolls, with their vile rhetoric; negative news coverage, designed to inflame partisan divisions; or predators and scam artists, looking for any opportunity to strike. Compounded daily, these threats and ugliness can devastate young people's outlooks on the world and cause life to lose its luster for them.

## 2. Explore the Word

For a book written thousands of years before the invention of the telephone, the Bible offers some incredible wisdom on the topic of social media and technology. Read 1 Corinthians 10:31 and answer the following questions.

Obviously your responses will come from a place of personal experience, interpretation, understanding, and application. But think also about your group dynamics. How can you answer these questions in a way that inspires, encourages, or motivates other parents?

*What does it mean to do something for the glory of God?*

*How can we bring glory to God in the way we use social media and technology?*

## 3. Consider the Need

If the issues of social media, sexting, and traumatic images aren't part of your family's daily reality, they may seem a little abstract or hard to identify with. So consider the story of Sammie and her family. During the PowerPoint presentation in the group setting, you'll refer to Sammie's story as you discuss technology and suicide.

*The looks on her parents' faces would be more than she could handle. That's what Sammie told her best friend. Sammie's parents still think of her as an innocent young girl. And that's how Sammie thinks of herself, too. Or tries to. The question is, can one moment of recklessness—a moment that lasted less than sixty seconds, just long enough for someone to take three pictures—erase fifteen years of innocence?*

*Sammie knows that the answer to that question would be obvious on her parents' faces, if they ever found out. Before her father's jaw clenched in anger . . . before he started demanding to know the name of the boy . . . before her mother's face wrinkled in disgust . . . before she burst into tears . . . there would be a look of heartbroken disappointment. And for Sammie, who had never disappointed her parents before, let alone broken their hearts, the thought was almost too much to bear.*

*So Sammie lives in constant terror of her secret being exposed. She also works hard to bury her fear, her regret, and her guilt, so that no one, especially her parents, will suspect that something's wrong. The constant effort is exhausting her, but she doesn't know what else to do. All she knows is that she doesn't want to be around when her parents find out.*

Here's a place to take notes on the rest of the PowerPoint presentation.

#### **4. Embrace the Challenge**

The challenges of social media may or may not hit home for you. (We'll discuss that more in Step 5.) You may, however, know some parents—or find yourself in a study group with some parents—who are struggling desperately with those challenges. Here's an opportunity for you to come alongside those parents; to empathize with their pain, frustration, and fear; and to help them craft a workable strategy for overcoming or working through their challenges.

Be prepared to share your responses to the following questions in a group setting.

*What is the biggest challenge parents face when it comes to social media?*

*Under what circumstances might your child be susceptible to the lure of sexual predators or the temptations of sexting, whether that means taking a picture or posing for one?*

*How can you make sure that your voice still resonates when you're not around and your kids are being bombarded by the temptations of social media and technology?*

*What are some practical and creative ways to set and maintain boundaries?*

## **5. Bring It Home**

On each of the following targets, mark an "X" to indicate how close to home each issue hits for your family.

*[DESIGN: Illustration of three targets with bull's-eyes in the middle. The targets are labeled "Social Media, Video Gaming, Streaming TV, Movies, Music, Texting," "Sexting" and "Exposure to Traumatic Images."]*

If you drew an "X" on one or more of these targets, answer the following questions about it.

*What is the biggest challenge you face in dealing with this issue?*

*What resources can you draw on as you face this challenge?*

*What do you need that you don't have to overcome this challenge?*

*What would the best possible outcome of this situation look like?*

## **Session 5**

### **Problem Behaviors and Suicide**

#### **1. Break the Ice**

One of the hardest things to reconcile for many parents whose kids attempt suicide is that there were warning signs in their kids' behavior. The problem is, unless you know what to look for, those warning signs look very much like teenagers being teenagers.

Any discussion of problem behaviors in teens must begin with alcohol and drug use. Almost half of all teenagers who commit suicide do so under the influence of alcohol, drugs, or a mixture of the two. In many of those cases, the kids' alcohol and drug use came as a shock to their parents. If the opioid crisis has taught us anything, it's that anyone can become an addict. So as we look at the connection between problem behaviors and suicide, parents must be ready to ask uncomfortable questions of our kids—questions we may not feel ready to have answered. We also need to examine our own relationship with alcohol and drugs to see what signals we may be sending to our kids.

Eating disorders and self-injury habits are notoriously difficult for parents to recognize—at least, in their beginning stages. Kids who engage in these behaviors learn very quickly how to disguise them. Therein lies the connection to suicide. Eating disorders and self-injury are cries for help. If those cries go unheard, kids may turn to more drastic means to deal with their pain. That's why it's essential for parents to recognize problem behaviors for what they are.

#### **2. Explore the Word**

The apostle Paul offers a compelling reason for us to put an end to problem behaviors. Read 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 and answer the following questions.

Obviously your responses will come from a place of personal experience, interpretation, understanding, and application. But think also about your group dynamics. How can you answer these questions in a way that inspires, encourages, or motivates other parents?

*What does it mean for Christians to have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us?*

*How do we honor God with our body?*

#### **3. Consider the Need**

If the issues of alcohol and drug use or abuse, vaping, eating disorders, and self-injury have not presented themselves as crises in your family, they may seem a little abstract or hard to



identify with. So consider the story of Eric and his family. During the PowerPoint presentation in the group setting, you'll touch on Eric's story as you discuss problem behaviors and suicide.

*Make weight. That's been Eric's mantra since he first started wrestling in grade school. His coaches would tell him which weight class he was wrestling, and Eric would gain or lose—usually lose—as many pounds as he needed to. It was a skill he mastered quickly.*

*In high school, the coaching staff would monitor weight-making regimens for his teammates. But they didn't need to do that with Eric. They said make weight, and he made weight.*

*And he looked good doing it. His high school girlfriend told him that he looked like a Greek god in his senior wrestling picture. Later, after they broke up, she signed his yearbook, "To Zeus." Eric still keeps the photo next to his mirror.*

*A hip injury put an end to Eric's dreams of wrestling in college. As a freshman, away from home for the first time, on a campus where he knew no one, Eric felt lost without his wrestling training regimen. To make matters worse, the guy he saw in the mirror no longer resembled the guy in the photo.*

*So Eric did what he knew best: he started making weight. He knew the number he wanted to reach: the weight class he wrestled his senior year in high school. Using the same methods he used back then—the ones he called Spartan eating and extreme exertion—Eric made weight.*

*Yet he still didn't look like the guy in the photo. So he set another goal: the weight class he wrestled his freshman year of high school. The problem was, Christmas break came before he made weight. The thought of eating holiday meals with his family made him panic. Who knows how far that would set him back?*

*His family didn't help matters, either. When he walked in the door from the airport and took off his coat, his mom and dad seemed stunned. His mom asked if he'd been sick. No one told him he looked good. But they will the next time they see me, Eric vowed. Wait until I make weight.*

Here's a place to take notes on the rest of the PowerPoint presentation.

#### 4. Embrace the Challenge

The challenges of alcohol and drug use or abuse, eating disorders, and self-injury may or may not hit home for you. (We'll discuss that more in Step 5.) You may, however, know some parents—or find yourself in a study group with some parents—who are struggling desperately with one or more of these challenges. Here's an opportunity for you to come alongside those parents; to empathize with their pain, frustration, and fear; and to help them craft a workable strategy for overcoming or working through these challenges.

Be prepared to share your responses to the following questions in a group setting.

*What have your kids learned from your relationship with alcohol and drugs?*

*What drugs do you know most about? Least about?*

*Based on your own experience or the experiences of people close to you, what can you tell your kids about eating disorders?*

*What behaviors would cause you to suspect that your child might be injuring himself or herself?*

#### 5. Bring It Home

On each of the following targets, mark an "X" to indicate how close to home each issue hits for your family.

*[DESIGN: Illustration of four targets with bull's-eyes in the middle. The targets are labeled "Alcohol," "Drugs" "Eating Disorders" and "Self-Injury."]*

If you drew an "X" on one or more of these targets, answer the following questions about it.

*What is the biggest challenge you face in dealing with this issue?*

*What resources can you draw on as you face this challenge?*

*What do you need that you don't have to overcome this challenge?*

*What would the best possible outcome of this situation look like?*

## **Session 6**

### **Dealing with the Issue of Suicide**

#### **1. Break the Ice**

Teen suicide statistics paint a grim picture. But if those numbers inspire us to step out of our comfort zone with our own kids, to say and ask the difficult things that must be said and asked, then they serve a noble purpose.

Addressing the issue of suicide in a frank, impactful manner requires parents to remove our rose-colored glasses, where our kids are concerned. We need to be able to see them as they are—not as they *were* when they were little, or as we *hope* they are, but as they *are*, warts and all. Their lives may depend on it.

We need to be able to recognize predictors of suicide in their lives, including mental health issues, adverse childhood experiences, and a sudden major loss or humiliation. We need to factor in a family history of suicide, chronic pain, or degenerative disease in your kids and the suicide of other teenagers in your community.

Parents must become attuned to sudden changes in our kids' behavior, attitude, or social habits. We need to be able to spot declining grades, expressions of intense guilt or hopelessness and changes in sleep patterns that may be caused by depression.

Most importantly, we need to be able to assess the danger our kids are in by evaluating their suicide risk. If what we discover is alarming, we must intervene immediately. That involves discussing suicide in broad and specific terms, asking questions that may seem way too personal or invasive, and doing everything in our power to keep hope alive in our kids.

## 2. Explore the Word

David, the Old Testament shepherd, psalmist, and king, is an ideal literary companion for parents who are struggling with the well-being of their children. After all, David had a beloved figure (Saul) in his life who struggled with depression. He also knew the guilt and remorse of losing a child. And he was no stranger to dark places. Read Psalm 23:1-6 and answer the following questions.

Obviously your responses will come from a place of personal experience, interpretation, understanding, and application. But think also about your group dynamics. How can you answer these questions in a way that inspires, encourages, or motivates other parents?

*Why was David unafraid, even when he walked through the valley of the shadow of death?*

*What can we take away from David's experience?*

## 3. Consider the Need

If the predictors and warning signs for suicide aren't present in your family, they may seem a little abstract or hard to identify with. So consider the story of Hayley and her family. During the PowerPoint presentation in the group setting, you'll touch on Hayley's story as you discuss how to deal with the issue of suicide.

*One evening, Hayley's parents returned home from their after-dinner walk to find Hayley looking at photos of herself on the wall. Every class picture she'd ever had taken, from preschool through her junior year of high school, hung side-by-side, in order. There was just enough space at the end for next year's senior picture.*

*"If something ever happened to me, what age would you remember me as?"*

*Her mom's mouth dropped open. "Why would you ask something like that?"*

*Hayley laughed and said, "I'm not saying anything's ever going to happen to me. It's just something I thought about."*

*"I'm not going to answer that!" her mom said. "I don't even want think about it!"*

*"I will," her dad replied. "I want to remember you at age 105, because that means I'll be 130!"*

*Hayley and her dad had a laugh, Hayley's mom shook her head in disapproval, and the incident was soon forgotten. Three weeks later, Hayley's mom got a call from Ally's mom. Ally was Hayley's best friend.*

*Hayley's mom tried to make small talk, but Ally's mom seemed eager to get right to the point—even if she wasn't exactly sure how to do it. "This is really awkward," she said in a halting voice. "And I know teenage girls sometimes say things they don't mean. But if it were my daughter, I would want to know."*

*"Know what?" Hayley's mom asked.*

*"Ally told me that, at lunch today Hayley asked if Ally knew where she could get fentanyl."*

Here's a place to take notes on the rest of the PowerPoint presentation.

#### **4. Embrace the Challenge**

The challenges of actively trying to prevent a child's suicide may or may not hit home for you. (We'll discuss that more in Step 5.) You may, however, know some parents—or find yourself in a study group with some parents—who are struggling desperately with these challenges. Here's an opportunity for you to come alongside those parents; to empathize with their pain, frustration, and fear; and to help them craft a workable strategy for overcoming or working through their challenges.

Be prepared to share your responses to the following questions in a group setting.

*What sign or signs have you seen in your child that made you worry about the possibility of suicide?*

If that question doesn't apply, try this one: *What sign or signs in your child would make you start to worry about the possibility of suicide?*

*What's a good strategy for getting past the awkwardness and discomfort of talking openly about suicide?*

*What can you offer a loved one or acquaintance whose child attempted suicide?*

*In Psalm 39:7, David says to God, "My hope is in you." What comfort can be found in those words for a parent of a suicidal teen?*

## **5. Bring It Home**

On each of the following targets, mark an "X" to indicate how close to home each issue hits for your family. Which one do you need help with?

*[DESIGN: Illustration of four targets with bull's-eyes in the middle. The targets are labeled "Looking for Suicidal Signs in Your Child," "Talking Openly About Suicide," "Responding to Another Family's Suicide Crisis" and "Keeping Hope Alive."]*

If you drew an "X" on one or more of these targets, answer the following questions about it.

*What is the biggest challenge you face in dealing with this issue?*

*What resources can you draw on as you face this challenge?*

*What do you need that you don't have to overcome this challenge?*

*What would the best possible outcome of this situation look like?*