



## **St. Louis Post-Dispatch**

THURSDAY | JUNE 1, 2006 | FOUNDED BY JOSEPH PULITZER IN 1878 | STLTODAY.COM | 50¢

### **Break the deadly silence about DEPRESSION**

By Gail Griffith

Thursday, Jun. 01 2006

I should have known better.

In 2005, I published a book about teen depression. I wanted to write a thoroughly engaging portrait of a family in crisis (my own), struggling to come to terms with a quotidian ailment that affects roughly one in four adolescents during the pratfall from childhood to adulthood.

I was delusional enough to think my book would naturally draw an audience of parents, educators and practitioners, all jumping up and down to figure out how we get to the bottom of this scourge of teen suicide.

Wrong! The reality was that I saw people come and go at book signings, checking me out to make sure I didn't have tendrils of snakes for hair and to assure themselves that I appeared "normal."

Of the people I spoke to afterward, almost all wanted to relay stories of losing a child to depression and suicide. And, just when I thought I'd heard the worst story about a child who died by his or her own hand, there was another, in a different city, by a different means, more horrific than the one before.

These families were wrecked; they looked to any opportunity to talk to someone about their loss. They deserved my attention . . . and they broke my heart. I had discovered an ugly truth: Most American families are loath to acknowledge a "sick" child if the disease is depression; the stigma is pervasive to the point of paralysis.

In the interest of full disclosure, let me say that I suffer from depression, just as a person suffers from seasonal allergies. And I know this disease from the perspective of someone who lives with it every day, as well as from the vantage point of a mother whose teenager suffered a brutal bout of depression that nearly ended his young life.

Breast cancer survivors don't whisper; they shout. Prostate cancer has its vocal champions in the form of celebrities who are brazen enough to discuss their erectile dysfunction on television. And thanks to the bold activism of the early HIV/AIDS survivors, HIV/AIDS has become so common a public health topic that ads for treatment pop up on buses and subway cars all over the country.

But even within the community of believers -- people who understand and live with brain illnesses -- we have let the stigma get the best of our rage, to the detriment of the people who need our help most: our children.

It's confounding that in this day and age we do a decent job of teaching kids about the hazards of unprotected sex and the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, but not about mental illness.

While the messages range from "practice abstinence" to "take precautions," young people today are well aware of the risk factors of STDs. We also teach them how to examine themselves for breast and testicular cancer.

But the chances teens will contract AIDS or cancer are minuscule compared with their risk for depression. And tragically, only a handful of school districts incorporate mental health education into their curricula.

When one stacks up the dollars spent on research and treatment for depression, bipolar illness and schizophrenia against the funds available for cancer, heart disease or diabetes, it's a sorry equation.

Money spent on research for HIV/AIDS amounts to 85 times the amounts spent on research into suicide prevention. Yet every year, thousands more die by suicide than from AIDS, prostate cancer or Parkinson's disease.

To borrow the message of the powerful HIV/AIDS community, silence can equal death for the unluckiest of us who suffer from a mental illness. And our silence also contributes to a colossal loss of human productivity, a traumatic strain on families and a massive burden on the criminal justice system -- not to mention a galactic challenge to our nation's crumbling health care infrastructure.

Given that the stigma of mental illness is so deeply rooted, we are in for a long and wrenching slog to redress this crisis. We can shorten that journey by lifting our voices unflinchingly and urgently -- for the sake of our children and ourselves.

Gail Griffith is the author of *Will's Choice: A Suicidal Teen, a Desperate Mother, and a Chronicle of Recovery* (HarperCollins, May 2005). Readers may email her at [gailgriffith1@verizon.net](mailto:gailgriffith1@verizon.net).

Copyright Gail Griffith  
[www.gailgriffith.com](http://www.gailgriffith.com)

Distributed by Knight Ridder/Tribune Information Services