

Counseling combats suicides

By DIANE BACHA
Of the Emerald

Students can add a new item to their list of hazards.

Along with saccharin, cigarette smoking and asbestos-lined hairdryers, suicide is now considered by some to be one of the chief causes of death on American college campuses.

According to the Center for Information on Suicide in San Diego, suicide was the second leading cause of death among American college students in 1978.

Although the University of Oregon has one of the nation's lowest suicide rates for an institution of its size, suicide is a problem that "You've got to take seriously," says Saul Toobert, director of the University Counseling Center.

Nationwide statistics support his opinion.

According to Dr. Marv Miller, a consultant in suicidology based in San Diego, the student suicide rate has nearly tripled in 20 years.

Miller claims that college students have at least a 50 percent greater chance of dying by suicide than do their peers who don't attend college.

Miller described the trend as a "near epidemic of self-destructive behavior."

The problem hasn't reached "epidemic" proportions at the University, but Toobert says the Counseling Center handles "a lot of suicide attempts." However, he hesitates to specify the number of those who can actually be considered suicidal.

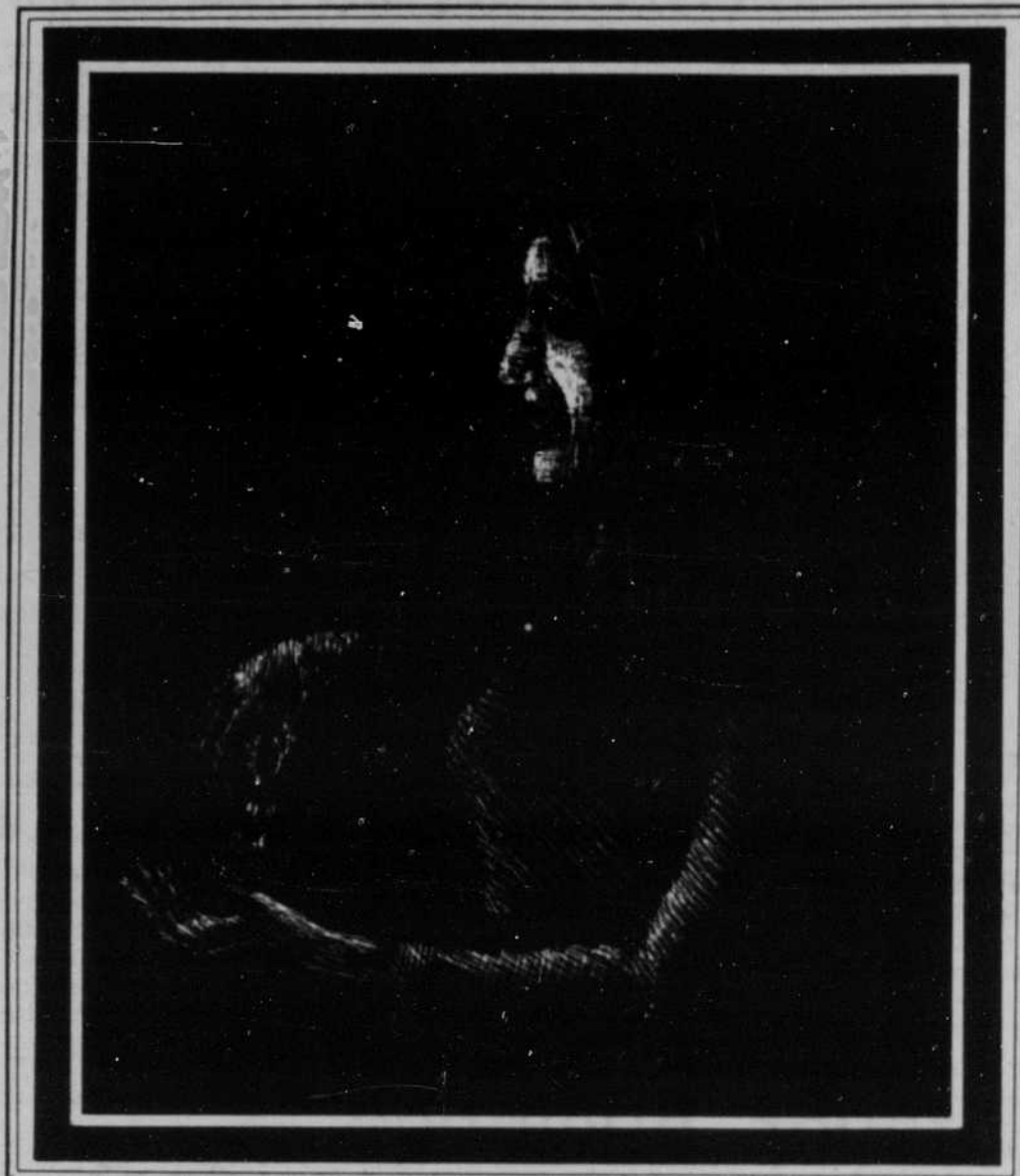
"It's so difficult to define," he says. "Everyone's thought about suicide at one point in life — is that an attempt?"

Dr. Peter Lewinsohn of the psychology department agrees. "All of us have thought of being dead — relatively few people have developed a plan."

Lewinsohn, who has done extensive research on depression, is skeptical about the figures that say student suicides are on the rise.

Instead, he says, "what may be changing is our awareness of suicide, or the researchers' criteria" for judging what a suicide is.

One way of dealing with the fine line



Graphic by Tom Eitel

dividing severe depression and suicidal tendencies is to distinguish between "ideation" and "attempts." Dave Berman, acting director of CARES, Lane County's crisis intervention center, uses this classification for the people he and his colleagues counsel.

Berman says that in February the center received 50 "ideation calls" — calls from those who indicated they had thought of killing themselves but had taken no action. Thirty callers were listed as attempts because they had indicated or implemented a suicide plan.

Last month the figures were up. Idea-

tion calls jumped to 81 and the attempts to 35, says Berman. Of those callers, 11 were under 18 and 60 were aged 18-29.

Berman can't explain the rise, but said that because CARES is relatively new, it could reflect increased public awareness of its service.

Although Berman's figures don't apply exclusively to students, they indicate a legitimate cause for concern.

That concern is not only for the frequency of suicidal tendencies among students, but for the problems that can lead to them.

"There are many, many more lonely

and isolated students around than people are aware of," says Barbara Honeyman, director of the University Crisis Intervention Center.

The center receives suicide — related calls "at least once a week, maybe twice," says Honeyman. Of those, she says, only four to six each year result in action such as sending out emergency medical aid.

But, Honeyman adds, "most people who threaten suicide eventually do kill themselves. We always take them seriously."

Honeyman says she has noticed an increase in suicide-related calls this year, and adds that there seem to be more male callers than in the past. "Men are having more permission to express themselves," she explains.

She says the calls increase just before and after vacations, when a student's sense of isolation and loneliness is usually heightened.

Both Honeyman and Toobert have opinions about why students are so vulnerable to crises that can lead to suicide.

"These are definitely years of struggle," says Toobert. "It takes you 'till you're 30 to find out who you are." Until you do so, he says, you're more vulnerable to feelings of failure and upsets over "unrequited love," which he considers the two most frequent reasons for student suicides.

Toobert also agrees with Honeyman, who stresses the impact of being disconnected from one's familiar environment for the first time. Students who are without their familiar support system — the family, friends and environment they grew up with — are much more susceptible to severe depression, they say.

Honeyman considers extreme isolation and the pressure to perform the two main reasons behind emotional problems that can lead to suicide.

"There can be a person who has gone through this University and has never spoken to anyone," she says.

Honeyman says some of the drawbacks of campus life are understaffing of counselors and resident assistants,

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