



PASTORAL CARE OF HUMAN LIFE

Webinar 18 april 2024

Cyber Bullying, Addictions, Suicides: Pastoral Tools to Help Young People

JOSEPH TEYU CHOU e CLARE JIAYANN YEH

Chinese Regional Bishops' Conference- Taiwan

Cyberbullying, Addictions, Suicides: Pastoral Tools for Helping Young People

Introduction:

Clare: As the founding Director of the Marriage and Family Pastoral Center in the Chinese Regional Bishops' Conference, I am overwhelmed by more and more worrying parents who search for urgent consultation and help when their young children are having tremendous problems in cyberbullying, addictions (internet gaming and social networking and drug abuse), and even suicidal attempts. I find myself and my colleagues short-handed, lacking resources, and in dire need of an integrated toolkit for this pastoral crisis.

Joseph: I could not agree more with Clare's testament to our young people's challenges in their precious lives. In my long career in the university and recent service in the business sector, I have been forced, through witnessing some of the young people's tragic incidents, such as deep depression and suicides, to come to acknowledge the realities of the complex and ever-changing world young people navigate. They are confronting issues like increased economic insecurity, overly competitive working conditions, social media pressure, and climate change, which older generations, like most of us attending this webinar, might not have encountered to the same extent. The world's growing secularization leaves many young people grappling with existential questions about life's meaning and purpose.

This is a serious issue, as suicide and self-harm are tragically the leading or second leading causes of death for young adolescents. An even more alarming truth is that these fatality rates are skyrocketing at a double-digit pace. This calls for immediate attention and action to curb this trend.

Today, we will look into two critical factors robbing our youth of life's meaning and purpose: cyberbullying and addictions.

How prevalent is cyberbullying, and how much damage does it inflict on our young people?

Cyberbullying is a GLOBAL problem with devastating impacts.

Common cyberbullying behaviors include criticism, insults, and mockery. The emotional impact on victims includes anxiety, depression, loneliness, self-harm, and even suicidal attempts. Victims often feel isolated, powerless, and constantly under attack. What makes it even more damaging is that it can be done anonymously and is often difficult to escape. This makes it a far more menacing form of bullying than traditional forms. A quick look: The 2020 Taiwan Student Cyberbullying Survey showed that nearly 47% of children and adolescents have been involved in cyberbullying incidents, a trend increase from the 22.2% reported in 2016. This is a 111% increase! Altogether, it paints a concerning picture of cyberbullying's impact on our youth. Remember that this is not limited to young adolescents aged 10-24. Those who have stepped into their working life as young professionals also experience similar challenges. In China, young people are pushed into two extremes: "involution" – endless competition among peers- and "lying flat" – completely giving up.

Similarly, young people's addictions to gaming and social networking are also prevalent and life-damaging.

It is truly a GLOBAL crisis. All around Asia, governments in China, Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and many others are scrambling to restrict or regulate internet gaming and content shared on social networks, especially among young adolescent users. Because studies show that, compared to those without Internet Addiction, internet addicts had higher rates of psychiatric disease (65.0%), suicide ideation in a week (47.0%), lifetime suicide attempts (23.1%), and suicide attempts in a year (5.1%). These combined effects, cyberbullying, and addictions, sharply increase the adolescents' suicide rate by 2 to 3 times!

A case here:

Let me call her Lily. Lily used to be a happy and vibrant young high schooler with a lot of love for art. Now, she was a shadow drifting between unfamiliar schools. All it took was one photo, a few comments on her body shape, and a viral meme to break her confidence. Leaving her first school ripped her family apart – a family used to envision a plan for everyone’s success. Each new school was a fresh start, but those hopes were dashed with every whisper and corner chatter. Graduation photos on social media were a constant reminder of her stolen future. Lily retreated to her room, spending hours online, lost in a dark web of despair. Her suicidal attempts, not once but many, sent shockwaves to her parents, tearing apart the fabric of their happy home. Her father, consumed by grief, fell into heavy depression, unable to work. Desperate but resilient, Lily’s mother sought help at our marriage and family center. There, we began working with Lily, patiently guiding her like a lost toddler, with the professional assistance of a certified therapist. Later a Parish youth group invited her to join, and, in the shared life stories, prayer, and worship, she found the mirror reflecting her true self, not the distorted image online. Slowly, Lily rediscovered the spark of joy in helping others, volunteering at a Catholic hospice. The laughter lines on the faces of the elderly were more beautiful than any “likes” on social media. Lily learned that true purpose bloomed in service, not seeking validation from strangers. The path to a diploma might be longer, but a meaningful future seems possible. This is a four-year pastoral care journey that has not yet been completed.

By now I hope we all see why families are ever so important!

The Tools:

Are there holistic pastoral tools that provide spiritual guidance to help young people find meaning and purpose within the framework of faith, fostering self-worth and a fulfilling life?

Pastoral care of human life is also pastoral care of family, and vice versa. It starts with providing the sense that there is a purpose to life from home. To this end, we are calling for:

Walking with Families:

- **Parental involvement:** Encourage open communication between parents and children about online activities and any challenges they might face.
- **Collaboration with families:** Work together with families to create a consistent and supportive network for young people.

Building a Safe and Welcoming Community for Young People:

- **Create a youth group environment:** Foster a supportive space where young people feel comfortable sharing their struggles and experiences without judgment.
- **Adult mentors:** Train and mentor caring adults within the church community who can be trusted confidantes for young people facing challenges.

Becoming Capable in Addressing Suicidal Ideation:

- Offer messages of hope and God's love, emphasizing the value and purpose of each person.
- Train pastoral caregivers to actively listen, support, and recognize signs of suicide risk.
- Provide accessible mental health resources and helplines for further support.

This initiative to increase the effort in the pastoral care of human life for young people needs everyone's contribution—bishops, clergy, religious, lay parishioners (who are responsible young adults, parents, and grandparents), therapists, social workers, policy activists, legal practitioners, and many more.

We truly need you!