DON'T JUMP

UPASHANA SALAM

Around a week back, a report was published on two siblings committing suicide in their Uttara residence. Eventually, the reason behind their joint suicide was unveiled. They had seen posts and holiday pictures of their father, who had abandoned them seven years back, with his new wife on Facebook, and feeling deserted and betrayed, they decided to take the bold step of ending their lives.

We read increasing reports on suicide, and surprisingly most of these stories are about adolescents who, ideally, should not even be harbouring such thoughts. While the stories are heartbreaking and the rates alarming, such reports at least force us to focus on an issue that gets woefully little attention in our society.

The interaction patterns of adolescents have changed in the last 10 to 15 years, says social scientist Anis Pervez. "When I was growing up, we had more face to face social interactions. I, for example, grew up in a full house with five siblings in a joint family. That's the experience of most children growing up even 10 to 15 years ago, as they engaged in intimate clusters with a heightened level of interaction with friends and family."

With the advent of the internet and the dependence on social media, we obviously see a drastic shift in the way the youth interact with others. We joke about how the social media craze has stretched to an extent that people in the same house communicate with each other over Facebook. However, in today's world that often turns out to be an actual scene played out in a number of households "A young girl once told me that she usually communicates with her parents, who live in the same house, via Facebook. Their direct interactions are far and between," says Pervez.

The change in social interactions whereby people resort to different digital platforms to communicate with each other leads to a loss of human touch, explains Pervez. "Thus, young people in particular often feel alienated, leading them to feel withdrawn and frustrated. This feeling of complete isolation in the physical world can often incite thoughts of suicide in young people."

In a paper published by the University of Oxford, researchers claim that even though internet forums and social networking sites provide a support system for "socially isolated young people," the internet is definitely linked to an increased "risk of suicide and self-harm among vulnerable adolescents." On the internet, users, in particular young adolescents, feel a sense of anonymity, as they assume that their online behaviour has little if any impact on their actual lives. Thus, the social media and apps provide them with the illusion of fleeting and faceless interactions. Youngsters often create an imaginary world of their own which is very different from their real world. Hence, when they are forced to interact with the actual world, they face problems with balancing their social life and behaviour, explains Pervez.

He cites the example of 14-year-old Alim and 18-year-old Chirasree, the two siblings who killed themselves last week. "They saw their mother struggling to fulfil their desires, and then they saw the father who had abandoned them enjoying his new life. Through Facebook, they were forcefully reminded of the life that they had been deprived of. I think that this humiliation on a social platform was too much to take for such young minds," says Pervez.

Social media is not the only villain here. Recently we read a report about a girl committing suicide when she didn't get a dress that she wanted and about another girl who killed herself by taking her father's medicines after a quarrel with her mother who prevented her from watching a serial on an Indian channel. We can laugh at the foolishness of these two youngsters and moan about young lives lost too early because of their own recklessness. But these deaths and the subsequent reaction to them are a commentary on how little attention we give to the issues that affect our children, and how easily we disregard their anguish as immature and childish.

The media too has a tendency to glorify suicide cases.

The media too has a tendency to glorify suicide cases. After the tragic and widely publicised death of actress Marilyn Monroe, the headlines of the next day's newspaper screamed that she was "freed from the stresses of fame." A subsequent report in 1974 found that there was a 12 percent increase in suicide rates the month following Monroe's suicide. This blatant glorification of suicides tends to give a positive, glamorous spin to an act that is usually carried out in desperation. Thus, young people, who are often terribly informed, tend to perceive this as a means to hurt people who spurned them or as a way to garner social attention.