

Dying for a High

The “Choking Game” Epidemic

Clearwater, FL; August 6, 2008 – Adolescents have discovered a new way to get high for free. Nationwide, adolescents are ‘playing’ the “Choking Game” and using strangulation to achieve a high. While many youth consider the game to be a safe way to get high, increases in accidental deaths across the United States prove differently.

The “Choking Game,” as defined by the CDC, uses self-strangulation or strangulation by another person with the hands, arms, or a ligament (noose). The result is cerebral hypoxia, or oxygen deprivation to the brain. Restriction of blood flow deprives the brain of oxygen and brain cells start to seize, which begins the process of permanent cell death. A brief euphoric feeling is created by oxygen deprivation and subsequent rush of blood back to the brain.

The Choking Game has been around for generations, but was first identified and studied about 20 years ago, according to **Nancy Gordon, LCSW, Clinical Director of Directions for Mental Health in Clearwater**. However, there has been a dramatic increase in deaths attributed to the “Choking Game” since 2005. Internet chat rooms and websites dedicated to the topic have made the information available to any child with internet access. The combination of the information, addictive nature of the behavior, and pressure from peers can result in a deadly outcome.

In a report by The DB Foundation, a non-profit educational organization dedicated to raising awareness about dangerous adolescent behavior, 75% of adolescents ages 9-16 know how to ‘play’ or have ‘played’ themselves. Most Choking Game participants are well-adjusted, high-achieving students. The need to experiment with risk-taking behaviors during adolescence has lead to ‘playing’ the game at parties. In these circumstances, friends will ‘play’ together by taking turns strangling each other. The high, just as drug-induced highs, can become addictive, leading adolescents to begin ‘playing’ alone by finding ways to choke themselves until they almost lose consciousness.

The CDC, in a recent study, attributed the Choking Game as the cause of death in 82 cases since 1995. The majority of these deaths occurred when a child was unable to free themselves from the restraint before passing out. A more accurate estimate attributes 250 to 1,000 deaths per year to the “Choking Game,” but statistical tracking is difficult as many of the deaths are reported as suicides.

The most effective way to fight the Choking Game epidemic is education. Parents and teachers must educate themselves and their children about the dangers associated with the Choking Game. Nancy Gordon warns that parents

should not fear that a discussion about this issue will inadvertently teach the behavior. Discussions should aim to educate adolescents about the potential side effects of asphyxiation – short term memory loss, permanent brain damage, and death. Parents should be aware of potential participation indicators, including marks on the neck, bloodshot eyes, an increased desire for privacy and secrecy, and randomly placed/misplaced belts or ropes. To learn more about some of the warning signs, please visit www.gaspinfo.com.

Alternative opportunities to participate in risk-taking behavior should be offered to children. Gordon explains that adolescents should be able to experience the highs associated with risky behavior in a controlled, safe environment. Sports, recreational activities, and Outward Bound programs are great ways to channel risk taking behavior.

If you know a child who is involved with the Choking Game, do not hesitate to get help from a counselor advises Gordon. She explains, “A professional can help you asses whether this is a passing curiosity event or if there are other underlying issues.” Without treatment, these underlying issues can perpetuate this and other similar unhealthy behaviors.

Most adolescents have no idea how dangerous the Choking Game is until someone close to them suffers brain damage or dies. Taking the first steps to eradicating this deadly epidemic involves educating parents, educators, and adolescents and providing youths with healthy ways to experiment with risk-taking behavior.

About Directions for Mental Health, Inc.

Directions for Mental Health, Inc., established in 1982, is a non-profit organization committed to helping heal the hurt in the lives of thousands of Pinellas County residents suffering from – or at risk of – mental illness. With nationally accredited programs, Directions sets the standard for best practices in mental health treatment, while making mental health care affordable and accessible to individuals and families, and building a safer, healthier community. Serving more than 8,000 people per year, Directions is dedicated to developing innovative programs that change lives, while reducing crime, homelessness, drug abuse, and child abuse.

For questions about metal illness and programs, visit Directions for Mental Health’s website at www.healthehurt.com or call (727) 524-4464 extension 1700.

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