

Suicide: Break the Silence to Save a Life

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Suicide is the ignored epidemic of our time. Even in this era of constant communication and extensive social networking, the pervasiveness of suicide hides behind a void of discussion on its cause and effect. There remains a stigma associated with what is one of our most preventable fatalities. To some degree, the absence of discussion allows suicide to proceed unchecked. Worse, the dearth of public dialogue has created a lack of information on how to recognize its attendant risks and mitigate its prevalence

Yet, it should not be so.

In 2008 2,723 Floridians died by suicide -- more than HIV-related deaths (1,746) and over twice the number of homicides (1,211). The elderly rate is unacceptably high and the rate among military personnel and veterans higher yet. The devastation of suicide impacts families throughout our state with each life lost visiting an unimaginable measure of pain and suffering to the loved ones left behind.

Suicide is a complex social phenomenon with over ninety percent of suicides associated with mental illnesses and/or substance use. According to the 2008 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), nearly one tenth (8.8 percent) of all drug-related emergency department visits made by adolescents aged 12 to 17 involved suicide attempts. Recently, drastic financial loss, home foreclosures, rising unemployment, increases in prescription drug abuse and other factors have contributed to increased suicides.

One of the highest risk factors for suicide is a feeling of hopelessness. The American Association of Suicidology highlights other warning signs such as rage or uncontrolled anger; acting recklessly or engaging in risky behaviors; increased alcohol or drug use; withdrawing from family, friends or society; anxiety, agitation, being unable to sleep or sleeping all the time; dramatic mood changes or feeling no purpose in life.

The strongest warning signs indicating acute risk of suicide are threatening to hurt or kill oneself, looking for the lethal means such as seeking access to firearms or medications and talking or writing about death, dying or suicide, when these actions are out of the ordinary.

How do you tackle preventing suicide? At the state level, the Statewide Office of Suicide Prevention (resident within the Office of Drug Control) oversees the implementation of a comprehensive strategy to reduce the number of suicides in Florida. It focuses on coordinating efforts, integrating key resources, providing a unified direction, seeking funding and supporting local suicide prevention groups.

Ultimately, success in suicide prevention depends on empowering people at the local level through a web of shared information, mutual support and awareness activities as a first line of defense against suicide. Throughout Florida, we have organizations and networks who accomplish this guided by survivors who have experienced the pain and sorrow that comes from losing a loved one to suicide. These passionate and dedicated angels work tirelessly to keep this tragedy from happening to others.

Their work involves lowering suicidality – a condition that includes suicidal ideation, desire, planning, behavior and attempts. Through raising awareness, promoting education and initiating intervention, these leaders seek to stop this scourge in our communities.

What can the average citizen do? Learn the warning signs so you can recognize them in others. Talk about mental health, break down stigma and help others in your community to view suicide as a preventable public health issue rather than something about which to be ashamed.

For a comprehensive list of resources in your area please visit the Statewide Office of Suicide Prevention website at www.HelpPromoteHope.com. If you or someone you know may be considering suicide, call 1-800- 273 - 8255 (TALK).

As we recognize National Suicide Prevention Week from September 5- 11, we seek to shine a light on this ignored epidemic. Suicide is preventable and there are almost always warning signs and indicators. It is up to us – parents, neighbors, teachers, friends, and family -- to educate ourselves on this issue. Break down the taboo and help start the dialogue. It just may be the conversation that saves a life.