

Suicide prevention is in the local and national spotlight

By **Charlie Kanzig**
Correspondent

High-profile suicides in the news recently, along with the death of a 21-year-old locally, have brought the topic to the forefront, leaving many care professionals pushing to find ways to further prevent people from taking their own lives. Mental-health professionals have been joined by other groups, including schools and universities, health providers and other organizations, to help identify those at risk and guide them toward quality care.

Oregon Health Authority (OHA) has responded to the rise in suicide attempts and completions with increased training and resources for prevention, particularly in regard to youth. OHA, following national guidelines on the subject, has implemented a five-year plan that includes four strategic points: Healthy and empowered individuals, families, and communities; clinical and community preventive services; treatment and support services; continued surveillance, research and evaluation.

These are lofty ideals, but local residents need to know more about actual resources, along with what can be done as individuals, to help turn the tide against suicide.

One of the main thrusts in all suicide-prevention programs comes from simply improving awareness, including learning signs and symptoms, debunking of myths, and speaking openly about the often-taboo subject of suicide.

On its website, OHA has a video titled “Breaking the Silence” which also includes a discussion guide, which is a good place to start in enhancing personal awareness of the subject of suicide. OHA encourages businesses, schools, health providers, religious organizations and other groups to conduct staff meetings to educate as much of the population as possible. The general public needs to be aware of the facts as well as become informed about risk factors and warning signs. There is also a movement to encourage parents to be more direct in asking their kids if they have had thoughts of ending their lives.

Some statistics from Oregon indicate noteworthy trends. Military veterans have a very high rate of suicide compared to other groups. Some four out of five suicides in Oregon are males, and one in five are veterans. At current rates, on average, between two and three Oregonians die each day by suicide. Suicide is the second leading cause of

death for people between the ages of 5 and 34. About 70 percent of suicides involved individuals suffering from mental-health problems, substance abuse and depression at the time of death. Over half of all suicides in Oregon involve guns.

Warning signs include isolation, withdrawal, agitation, lowered activity level, talk of dying, increased drug and alcohol use, and motivation loss. Additionally, transitions can be a troubled time for some people, including moving from teenager to adult, following a significant loss, or when major health problems, including those associated with aging, arise.

People who are contemplating ending their lives will often tell someone, sometimes indirectly. It is crucial to take any talk of this nature seriously and help the person access resources. If you hear someone say things like, “I am thinking about ending my life,” or “I don’t want to live anymore,” or “It would be better if I were gone,” it is time to speak up and intervene. These sorts of comments cannot be ignored, even if the person asks you to promise not to tell anyone else.

You don’t have to be a mental-health professional

to do the right thing in these circumstances any more than you need to be a doctor to administer first aid. It is recommended that you clearly ask the person, “Are you thinking of ending your life?”

People often hesitate to make this conversation happen because they think it is taboo, too private, or too direct. Or they believe that talking about it will increase the likelihood of it happening or that the person will be angry and break off the relationship.

The opposite is almost always true. There will likely be a sense of relief and a willingness to get help. Being a good listener, without judgment or advice — with empathy, rather than sympathy — is what friends, family, and co-workers can provide someone in distress.

Deschutes County operates a crisis line (541-382-7500), which can be used by concerned family members as well as individuals in emotional crisis. Resources will be shared.

In cases of imminent harm and danger, emergency services should be called or the person taken to the hospital.

At Sisters high and middle schools, “care and connect” cards are used to encourage

students to have a way to anonymously let an adult know they are worried about a friend, which is a step in the right direction, provided that action can be taken quickly. The staff underwent training last year in order to increase awareness and learn how to respond.

A resource for parents from the Deschutes County Mental Health site, www.deschutes.org/health/page/suicide-prevention, includes educational resources for parents produced by Lane County, www.preventionlane.org.

If someone in your home or care is struggling with suicidal thoughts and talk, it is also important to safeguard your home in addition to seeking care. Guns and other weapons must be removed or effectively secured, along with any prescription or over-the-counter drugs/medication that could be used to

overdose.

The stigma surrounding suicide is lessening, but often people don’t understand enough about it and may simply think people are weak or being overly dramatic. In some religious circles suicide is considered a sin, which may cause people to bury the truth. Like others in helping professions, clergy, as trusted helpers, need to have a complete understanding of suicide and its prevention.

People are encouraged to take reflection time and think about their closest friends and family members in regards to risk factors and warning signs. If you discover concerns, taking a few minutes to check in with them, eye to eye with sincere care, could truly save a life.

Charlie Kanzig has worked for 30 years as a school counselor, including 23 for the Sisters School District.

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