The Importance of Connection in Preventing Suicide

Suicide is a public health issue, both nationally and in Ohio. The growing epidemic impacts individuals and families of all races, ages, and socioeconomic status. The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention named suicide the tenth leading cause of death in the United States, with more than 47,000 Americans dying by suicide in 2017.

According to the Ohio Department of Health, the state’s rate of suicide increased 44.8% from 2007 to 2018, for a total of 1,836 reported suicide deaths in 2018. While suicide is most common among older males in Ohio, suicide is the leading cause of death among Ohioans ages 10-14 and the second leading cause of death among Ohioans ages 15-34. The suicide rate – the number of suicide deaths per 100,000 population – increased 56% among Ohioans ages 10-24 in the last decade.

Public health experts believe that suicide statistics underrepresent the actual number of deaths by suicide. Additionally, these figures do not account for the more than 1.5 million suicide attempts across the United States in 2017. A suicide attempt is a non-fatal, self-directed, potentially injurious behavior with an intent to die as a result of the behavior. While suicide attempts might not result in injury, individuals who attempt suicide should seek immediate treatment and ongoing support.

What causes suicide?

There is no one cause for suicide. Often, health and environmental factors, along with family history, combine to create overwhelming feelings of hopelessness and despair for people who are experiencing suicidal ideation – the thinking about, considering, or planning suicide. Mental health conditions, most commonly depression, and substance use disorders are often associated with suicide and suicidal ideation. However, not everyone with a mental illness thinks about suicide.

Warning Signs

According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, individuals who are thinking about or planning suicide tend to show changes in the ways they talk, act, and feel. Special attention should be paid to changes in behavior or the emergence of an entirely new behavior, like those mentioned below. Knowing what the warning signs of suicide are, especially following a major change, loss, or painful event, can help save a life.

**TALK**

Someone who is thinking about suicide may talk about:
- Killing themselves or wanting to die
- Feelings of hopelessness, pain, or unbearable despair
- Feeling like a burden to others
- Having no reason to live
- Feeling trapped

**ACT**

Suicidal thoughts can cause the following new or changed behaviors:
- Researching suicide and possible methods
- Isolating from family and friends
- Altering sleep patterns
- Increasing substance use
- Saying goodbye
- Giving away possessions
- Withdrawing from activities

**FEEL**

The following moods are common in people considering suicide:
- Depression
- Loneliness, even when physically surrounded by others
- Loss of interest
- Anxiety
- Anger
- Humiliation
- Irritability
- Sudden relief

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The Importance of Connection

The stigma around suicide and mental illness can prevent individuals from seeking help for the underlying causes of their suicidal thoughts. Suicide prevention efforts often focus on stigma reduction; increased education about the risk factors and warning signs of suicide for healthcare providers, community members, and families; and connectedness. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) named increasing connectedness – the degree to which a person or group is socially close, interrelated, or shares resources with other persons or groups – one of its key strategies for suicide prevention. Connectedness can include creating relationships with friends, neighbors, and co-workers; strengthening bonds among family members; participating in community organizations, like schools and faith communities; or forming social groups around cultural identity or hobbies.

**Positive and supportive social relationships and community connections can help buffer the effects of risk factors for suicide.**

Individuals can take action to create connectedness with people around them that may be considering suicide. It can be awkward or difficult to start the conversation, but it is okay to ask a person directly if they are thinking about suicide. Because those with suicidal ideation often feel like a burden to others, it is important to show them that you care about how they are feeling and listen to their thoughts without judgement. Regularly checking in with someone that you are concerned about creates lasting connectedness and could reduce their risk of attempting suicide. Offering appropriate resources to someone with suicidal ideation provides them with different options to stay connected to others.

Support groups are available all around the world for individuals who are thinking about or have attempted suicide and for individuals and families who have been impacted by suicide. These regularly scheduled meetings allow people who are thinking about suicide the opportunity to connect with others who are coping with similar thoughts and feelings. Individuals also have the opportunity to learn about new resources, treatment options, and social activities through such groups. In Ohio, many county Alcohol, Drug Addiction, and Mental Health (ADAMH) Boards (www.oacbha.org), the Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation (www.ohiospf.org), and the National Alliance against Mental Illness (www.namiohio.org) host and/or share information about support groups.

Crisis Text Line is an innovative service that connects individuals experiencing painful emotions to live, volunteer Crisis Counselors via text message. The service is free and available 24/7 for anyone whose phone has texting capabilities. Crisis Counselors are trained volunteers who respond to incoming text messages within minutes. By creating connection, Crisis Counselors are able to de-escalate painful emotions related to a number of issues, including thoughts of suicide, bullying, depression, and self-harm. Crisis Counselors can also refer texters to other forms of support in their area, if they determine that ongoing support is most appropriate.

Crisis lines give individuals the opportunity to connect with trained volunteers in the moment, using their telephones. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is one such option available nationwide. By dialing 1-800-TALK, callers are connected to a network of 163 crisis centers. In December 2019, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) unanimously voted to set up a new three-digit hotline number, effectively creating a 911 for mental health. A three-digit number will be easier to remember, especially for those in crisis, increasing access to services and reducing the stigma around seeking help for mental illness and suicidal thoughts. The new number, 988, will be fully functional in mid-2021, according to the FCC.

If you are in immediate danger, please call 911.