

Guest commentary: As a community, what can we do about suicide?

Opinion [FOLLOW OPINION](#) | November 24, 2019

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Guest commentary

SEEKING HELP

If you or someone you know is struggling with suicidal thoughts, it is important to recognize the warning signs:

- Is someone talking about suicide or preoccupied with death?
- Are they seeking access to weapons?
- Do they have a general sense of hopelessness?
- Are they expressing feelings of self-loathing and worthlessness?
- Do they seem to be saying goodbyes to loved ones?
- Are they being reckless or self-destructive?
- Have they been socially withdrawn and isolated?
- Do they have a sudden sense of calm or relief from depressive symptoms?

REACHING OUT

If you or a loved one are contemplating suicide, seek immediate help by calling the Colorado Crisis Services Hotline 1.844-493-TALK (8255)/Text 'Talk' to 38255.

You can also find resources at the Mind Springs Health website:
www.mindspringshealth.org

Did you know that nearly twice as many people die by their own hands than in car accidents? Why do so many people take their own life? More importantly, what can we as community do about it?

As mental health professionals, we believe that the first step is to understand that suicide isn't somebody else's problem. It impacts all of us regardless of age, race or gender. According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 1.4 million Americans attempted suicide in 2017 and more than 47,000 took their own life. Females are more likely to attempt suicide, but males are more likely to die by suicide.

Suicide is also a major health problem in Colorado. In 2017, the Colorado Health Institute reported that a record 1,175 people died by suicide statewide, and Colorado had the 10th highest suicide rate in the country.

An analysis by The Colorado Independent found that the problem is even greater in rural areas, including ski and mountain communities, due to factors such as geographic isolation, financial stress, stigma about mental health, access to guns and a shortage of mental health and substance abuse providers.

Suicide is tragic. It's hard to talk about but we are all responsible for addressing it, and it will take a community-wide effort to develop community based solutions. A good first step is to expand mental health first-aid training programs to more people. Mental health first-aid training helps people identify someone in crisis and understand how to direct that person to appropriate resources including professional help. Thanks to funding from Aspen Skiing Co.'s Caring for Community Fund and Pitkin County, Mind Springs Health has been able to train more trainers in the Roaring Fork Valley. The more people we train, the more of our loved ones, friends and neighbors we can help. You can find out more about this program on our website (mindspringshealth.org).

If you or someone you know is struggling with suicidal thoughts, it is important to recognize the warning signs (see fact box).

If you recognize some combination of these traits in someone, speak up. If you are worried that speaking up will make it worse, don't be.

Evidence shows that raising the issue of suicide does not encourage it. It helps to stop it. Offer your help, especially if you think an attempt is imminent. Be prepared to act quickly by contacting an emergency crisis-counseling center, removing deadly weapons or other means of self-harm and staying with the individual until you can be certain that he or she is safe.

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline has identified the following steps we can take to help save lives.

Ask: “Are you thinking about suicide?” is a non-judgmental and supportive way to open the door for effective dialogue about their emotional pain. Other questions you can ask include: “How do you hurt?” and “How can I help?” Do not ever promise to keep their thoughts of suicide a secret.

Listen: Make sure you take them seriously. Give individuals any and every opportunity to unburden or vent. Offer patience, sympathy and acceptance, avoid arguments or advice-giving. Help them focus on their reasons for living and avoid trying to impose your reasons for them to stay alive. Do not judge.

Keep them safe: Does the person experiencing thoughts of suicide know how they would kill themselves? Do they have a specific, detailed plan? What’s the timing for their plan? What sort of access to do they have to their planned method?

Help them get help: Suicide prevention is not a last-minute activity. Doing whatever you can to reduce their pain as early as possible can reduce the risk. There are significant resources right here in our community, from the mental health professionals at Mind Springs Health and West Springs Hospital, to crisis support lines and online resources such as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. Help them connect, be patient but persistent.

Follow up: Call. Leave a message. Send a text. Studies show that following up can help prevent suicides. Respond to the part of the suicidal person that wants to stay alive.

It takes a community to save lives. Although the task is daunting, hope, help and recovery are within our reach if we just reach out and ask.

Michelle Hoy joined Mind Springs Health in 2004 as a therapist working with children and adults and was named executive vice president in 2015. She currently administers all behavioral health services across the 10 county region that MSH serves. Reach her at MHoy@mindspringshealth.org.

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