



the ripple effect OF SUICIDE

By Elana Permack Sandler, LCSW, MPH

A suicide is like a pebble in a pond. The waves ripple outward.” This quote has stuck with me. Visually, when you see a pebble drop into a pond, it’s something small that makes a big impact.

The first “waves,” close by, are big, and as they move outward, they get smaller and smaller. The reach of the pebble’s waves is much greater than the size of the pebble itself.

When someone dies by suicide, the people impacted most dramatically are those closest to the person who died: family, friends, co-workers, classmates. As a result, the people who interacted regularly with the individual who ended their life will miss the physical presence of that person and typically feel the loss most intimately.

But those people represent only the first wave, or the initial level of impact. Those people who are members of an individual’s community, such as members of a faith community, service providers, or teachers, staff and other students in a school may also be affected by a suicide.

Some of these people may feel the impact in a way that feels similar to those closest to the person who has died. In a situation where the individual has struggled openly with mental health concerns, those who knew of the struggle will feel the pain of the loss – likely wondering if they could have done more.

People who may not have even personally known the individual who died can also be impacted, such as emergency medical personnel, law

Ripple, page 2



COUNSELOR COLUMN

Darren Carter
MS, M.Ed., LPCC, NCC
EAP Clinical Supervisor
The Village Business Institute

Q: What are the warning signs that a loved one may be suicidal?

A: We often associate the spring season with warmer weather, melting snow, flooding, blooming flowers, and improved mood after a long winter. Although this may be true for many individuals, it is not the case for everyone. Spring is when death by suicide is statistically the highest during the year.

One warning sign that a loved one may be contemplating suicide is withdrawing from friends, family, responsibilities, and interests. If you notice that your loved one is isolating themselves from their social circle, is not able to get out of bed to make it to work or school, is not taking care of personal or professional responsibilities, or lacks interest in activities they would typically find

Continued on page 2

COUNSELOR COLUMN CONT.

enjoyable, it may be a sign they are struggling with depression and thoughts of self-harm.

Look for sudden changes in behavior, such as impulsive spending, giving away of possessions, not keeping up with daily hygiene, or any harmful behaviors that can potentially cause bodily harm (i.e., increased physical fights, drug or alcohol use, purchasing a lethal weapon, etc.).

Another warning sign is hopelessness. Hopelessness entails having the belief that one's circumstances are permanent and will never get better despite their hardest efforts. Similarly, those who feel hopeless may also perceive themselves to be a burden on their loved ones. This perceived burdensomeness prohibits

them from seeking help and talking about their mental health. They do not want to inconvenience their loved ones, so they suffer silently instead. If this may be the case for someone you know, remind them how much you care about them and that you are there to support them.

Please take it seriously if someone makes a "joke" or comment about dying. This may be their way of reaching out for help. If you notice a loved one making jokes or comments about dying, offer to talk with them.

If a loved one has been exhibiting any of these warning signs and suddenly has found themselves to be full of energy and in a great mood, it could be a sign they have come to peace with dying by suicide and have

made up their mind. This is not to be confused with those who suffer from seasonal depression, where mood and energy gradually increase over time, as opposed to a sudden, unexpected increase.

One conversation can save someone's life. You can be that person to your loved one. Asking someone if they are thinking about suicide will not make them more likely to attempt suicide. That is a myth. Please encourage them to seek professional help and let them know you can continue to be a support for them. If you have any questions or would like to speak to a counselor, please call The Village Family Service Center at 800-627-8220 and schedule your appointment today!

Ripple, from Page 1

enforcement, clergy and others who respond and provide support to the family and community, either at the time of death or afterward.

Ultimately, in the way that a pond is changed because of a pebble, an entire community can be changed by a suicide. According to a 2016 study, it is estimated that 115 people are exposed to a single suicide, with one in five reporting that this experience had a devastating impact or caused a major-life disruption.

So, what can be done to manage the impact of a suicide, and work toward future prevention?

WORK TO DECREASE STIGMA

Stigma only leads to silence. And silence about a suicide loss does not contain the ripple effect – it just leaves people feeling isolated, as if they are facing this tragedy alone. When someone dies by suicide, the aftermath opens up an immediate opportunity to talk about suicide as a public health issue that affects all of us. We all have a role to play in prevention and decreasing stigma by sharing our stories.

INCREASE SUPPORT TO THE COMMUNITY

The impact of a death by suicide can be vast, as people hear about suicides through the proverbial grapevine. Community hotlines and the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-8255) should be advertised, and community groups, such as faith communities, may want to convene opportunities for people to come together to mourn and receive support. Peer support from people who have lost a loved one to suicide can be healing – it can be very powerful to know you are not alone and to connect with others who have also experienced suicide loss. The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) maintains a registry of support groups, including a specific list of survivor support groups.

HELP PEOPLE IN NEED ACCESS MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

For those struggling with suicidal thoughts, access to mental health treatment can be key to saving a life. If you personally know someone struggling, encouraging them to seek

help – even helping them get to that first appointment – shows that you support them.

In the bigger picture, advocating for better insurance coverage for mental health treatment will allow more people to be able to access professional help. Schools, primary care offices and community programs serving people at risk can organize screening programs as long as there are resources in place to be able to effectively refer those at risk to appropriate treatment.

For those who have lost loved ones to suicide, hearing of another death by suicide can be triggering and emotionally draining. For people who have survived suicide attempts themselves, media coverage of suicide may increase their own feelings of suicidality. And yet, paying attention to these deaths increases our collective awareness of suicide as a problem and highlights suicide prevention as a need.

When we grieve together, we realize the impact of one single life – one pebble in a pond.

Information reprinted from National Alliance on Mental Illness. Visit NAMI.org/blogs for more information.



TO RECEIVE THIS NEWSLETTER IN YOUR INBOX, SEND AN EMAIL REQUEST TO VBI@THEVILLAGEFAMILY.ORG