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Are You a Shining Light of Hope?

Becoming a Suicide Prevention Advocate

This is an excerpt from Dr. Spencer-Thomas' full article. Affiliates can read the full article in the BACCHUS mental health awareness campaign, "Building Bridges", they received in December 2007.

"In the night of death, hope sees a star, and listening love can hear the rustle of a wing." –Robert Ingersoll

Suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students, and yet, at almost every level, people are reluctant to address the issue directly. Some of this avoidance has to do with stigma, stigma that is rooted in the fear of the unknown. Mental health is still largely a mystery to many, and because many do not know better, they place all the blame on the sufferer, and unknowingly become a big part of the problem.

Another reason for avoiding the subject of suicide is that people are unclear who is responsible for what; that is, even if they do want to help, they do not know how to get involved or what to do. As someone who has experienced mental health problems, lost a brother to suicide, and is a clinical psychologist and mental health advocate on campus and in the community, I see suicide prevention from many different perspectives.

Personal Responsibility

While most people would never choose to be afflicted with a mental disorder, they can make the choice to manage their illness and enhance their mental health. Some estimate that as many as 90% of people who die by suicide have a mental disorder;¹ therefore, on one level, the problem of suicide has to do with taking care of your own mental

health. Just like we exercise and eat well to keep our bodies healthy and to avoid the heart disease, cancer and premature death, we also need to be personally responsible for taking care of another organ: our brain.

All of us have mental health issues, whether it is because of stress, family disruption, grief, or trauma or because of a biological predisposition of our brain leading to depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety, or other mental disorders. As such, it is important to care of our brains so that we can function to the best of our abilities. Below are a few ideas of what you can do on a personal level to promote mental health:

Be a role model for wellness. Sleep 7-10 hours per night. According to the Surgeon General, sleep deprivation can exacerbate cognitive difficulties leading to bigger mental health problems.² Monitor your own tendency to self-medicate – we all do it to some extent but our choice of drug may be different: alcohol, caffeine, cigarettes, work, shopping, achievement, food and others. Examine your life choices. Do they represent balance, moderation and variety?

Model help-seeking. Get support when you need it. Whether it is from friends, support groups, faith communities, or families, reach out when you are troubled. If the first person you find is not meeting your needs, be persistent in your search. Human beings are hard-wired to connect to others, and isolation is a significant risk factor in an escalating mental health problem.

Seek better help, when needed. When times become difficult, get treatment and stay with it. If you have

a mental disorder or if your issue is not being resolved through the support of loved ones, you may need extra help. One in five people³ at any given time have a diagnosable mental disorder, so you are not alone. However, it is up to you to seek treatment and fully engage in the process. Treatment does work⁴. When followed, appropriately 80% of those treated for depression get better, and the treatment usually involves some combination of medication and talk therapy.

But...Sometimes individuals are not aware of what a mental disorder is; sometimes the symptoms of their disorder (e.g., grandiosity in bipolar disorder or fatigue in depression) prevents them from seeking appropriate help. Sometimes there are significant barriers (e.g., financial, transportation, waitlists) that get in the way, and sometimes the shame is too great to take that first step. Just as you would not expect those suffering from cancer to recover on their own, individuals in mental distress need a circle of care.

So...in order to become a successful mental health advocate, you not only need to model wellness and, when appropriate, share your stories of recovery, you must also be the one to engage these larger spheres of influence. The change starts with you.

Classrooms and Communities

As a public health and social justice issue, suicide prevention should be treated just as any other problem facing our community. Suicide prevention today is where cancer prevention was in the 1950s. Because people do not understand it, they do not know how to handle it. Our colleges and universities

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are ideal places to disseminate knowledge and resources and to change the culture surrounding mental health.

Start a suicide prevention coalition. By bringing together different perspectives on the issue you can start to build a foundation that can have widespread impact on your campus. Public safety, counselors, health care professionals, faculty, students, administrators, university ministry and resident life staff all make great allies in this cause. The coalition can work together toward several goals including: 1) disseminating a campus-wide suicide prevention training, 2) creating a suicide awareness and prevention week, 3) examining policies related to suicidal students, 4) providing feedback and expertise for materials developed or 5) becoming politically active to address larger changes in the community.

Train to be a suicide prevention gatekeeper. There are several national programs that offer training for people who are likely to come in contact with someone who is suicidal (resident assistants, peer ministers, peer counselors, first responders, faculty, health care professionals, and more). Gatekeeper programs such as QPR (Question, Persuade, Refer), Yellow Ribbon “Be a Link,” and ASIST (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training) cover the basics of warning signs and risk factors and what gatekeepers can do to get a suicidal person to appropriate care. Once trained, work with the faculty and residence hall assistants to integrate the training in the classrooms and living communities. For more information on the different programs visit sprc.org/library/SPRC_Gatekeeper_Matrix.pdf

Develop suicide awareness programs and campaigns. There are several times during the year when suicide prevention programs might be highlighted. Consider the following:

During orientation include Suicide Prevention Lifeline (suicidepreventionlifeline.org) or Yellow Ribbon “Be a Link” (yellowribbon.org) wallet cards or magnets in students welcome folders. Both of these unobtrusive tools give students the means to reach out to a help line (**1-800-273-TALK**) during a crisis.

Recognize World Suicide Prevention Day (September 10) or National Suicide Awareness and Prevention Week (the second week in September) with a media campaign, booth in the student center, or healing ceremony for those who have survived another’s suicide.

Depression Screening Day (October)

Blue Holiday Service – For those who may experience grief or loneliness during the holidays because of losing someone to suicide.

Mental Health Movie Night – Each month show a film that highlights a mental health or suicide issue and have a panel or expert facilitate a discussion.

Put together a panel of faculty representing different disciplines (psychology, sociology, biology, philosophy) to talk about suicide from their different perspectives.

“The world is full of suffering. It is also full of overcoming it.”
–Helen Keller

Suicide is such a complex and frightening phenomenon; it often overwhelms people into immobilization. But there are many ways to make a difference. Mental health advocacy reminds people that suicide affects everyone, and we have a shared responsibility to prevent it. Let others know that getting help is good thing and that treatment works. Finally, tell them they are not alone and many resources exist to help them. You can be a shining light of hope to help those in darkness see their way to a better day.

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¹ National Institute of Mental Health 2007

² Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General from <http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/mentalhealth>

³ Surgeon General, 1999 from <http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/mentalhealth/toc.html>

⁴ National Institute of Mental Health;
Mental Health America Colorado



Friends Helping Friends

The Building Bridges-Friends Helping Friends Resource Guide is the first campaign issued by BACCHUS to support peer education outreach to promote mental health. It contains information and programming ideas to assist peer educators in creating a supportive environment and removing barriers for students seeking help for a variety of issues from depression to self-harm. The campaign arrived on affiliate campuses in December 2007. Visit bacchusnetwork.org to learn more.