

Ending the Stigma and Preventing Suicide by Sherre Yager

Can we pause a minute and try to imagine what it must be like living with mental illness and the romance of suicide to end our pain? It doesn't have to end that way. We can each be part of the solution. Professional help alone is not working. I live with mental illness and am surviving the loss of three family members to suicide. The aftermath of these suicides are a catastrophic trauma to me and my family. I have attempted twice myself. Living with the shock of those 3 suicides in my family, the questions why and the "what if's" are endless.

What I have found is that rather than just admitting I have mental illness, I have to accept my mental illness rather than fighting against it has made all the difference for me. That and supportive friends. With acceptance and support comes hope and the ability to cope with managing my life with bi polar and post-traumatic stress disorder.

When I was diagnosed I was given the impression by the medical professionals and by our society that I could be cured. I heard I could fight my disease and fix it. I could fix it with the right medication and treatment from the right doctors. Even my family said "be strong Sherre and fight; you'll be fine." Well my mental illness doesn't work quite that way. It's discouraging to keep fighting and hanging on only to find the storm return. What a failure I've felt like. Why isn't this working when I'm doing all they say and still no cure? I'm not fixed! I convince myself that I must be defective. I couldn't keep putting myself and my family through this returning hell.

I've lost 19 jobs. I have no relationships with my siblings, parent or aunts and uncles. My second marriage was suffering and I needed a final solution. I was exhausted empty and hated myself. I just wanted peace and joy. I had no fight left I wanted to die.

I overdosed and called my oldest daughter Tricia to tell her goodbye and why. She was understanding and compassionate and kept me on the phone as she sent a text message to summons an ambulance to my home. She saved my life. It didn't end with suicide as with my Mom's, my brother in law Tommy's, and my 27 year old son Justin's did. It doesn't ever have to end that way.

My family and I live with the aftermath of 3 family suicides. The shock and pain of it all is beyond what words can describe. I live with guilt and questions that can never be answered. What if? Why? What really happened? Mostly I wonder could I have in some way changed the outcome. I know now that we can all contribute to the outcomes together. It takes all of us, each of you. We must face and accept the truth about mental illness and suicide. We must get it out of the darkness and bring the topic into the light, like cancer, aids, heart disease and diabetes. Remove the stigma of shame. Learn how to listen skillfully, don't be afraid to ask questions and talk about it. Learn how to be non-judgmental and supportive to people with mental health issues. It's like CPR or the Heimlich maneuver, lifesaving skills need to be learned.

Suicide is the # 2 leading cause of death of our young people and growing in other populations as well.

Acceptance is the beginning to the answers to these problems. I stopped fighting with my disease and accepted the truth. I have a life threatening chronic illness that wants me dead. It is not who I am, it's just an illness I have. An illness that can be managed it doesn't have to own me. I know I can't do it alone I need the support of others. I take my medications, I participate in support groups, try to eat healthy and get some exercise. I go camping for fun. I have a service dog. I treat my mind, body and spirit. Medication alone is not enough. I'm learning to meditate. I can be an observer of my symptoms, my thoughts and behaviors; and rather than fight to change it I'm learning to work with it. I'm learning the value of accepting the present moment and to pause. Pause and listen to what's going on inside me and around me. Prayer, meditation, listening to my doctors, taking a walk in nature or simply helping others loans peace, a lasting peace in my mind, body and spirit. It moves the storm clouds. I need support in being willing to do these things.

May we all become our part of the solution? Learn the lifesaving skills, learn the warning signs of suicide, and learn what you can do and what not to do. Pause to listen skillfully and validate feelings.

Suicide Prevention Facts

What if I think the person might be depressed or considering suicide?

- • Make sure your friend or family member cannot get hold of any type of weapons, large quantities of medication, or anything else that might be dangerous. You may need to take away the person's car keys.
- • If the person is threatening suicide right then and there, or is in immediate danger, take him or her to a hospital or emergency room immediately. Don't try to handle a crisis alone. Call 911 or get help from other friends or family members.
- • Take any threats or casual mentions of death or suicide seriously. Don't assume the person is just trying to get attention.
- • Encourage your friend or family member to hang on, and help him or her get professional help right away.
- • Don't promise you will keep your loved one's thoughts or plans a secret. You may need to tell a doctor or family member in order to save your loved one's life.
- • Find out if the person has a plan. Talking about suicide will not plant the idea in a person's mind. He or she may welcome the chance to talk.
- • Offer your help. Offer to listen.
- • Suggest that your loved one call a suicide hotline such as (800) 442-HOPE if he or she is alone and in need of help.

Let your loved one know his or her life is important to you and others. Remind the person that suicidal thoughts are a symptom of a treatable illness

Warning Signs

- • Giving away favorite possessions.
- • A marked or noticeable change in an individual's behavior.
- • Previous suicide attempts and statements revealing a desire to die.
- • Depression (crying, inability to think or concentrate, or make decisions, increases feelings of guilt and worthlessness.)
- • Verbal behavior that is ambiguous or indirect. "I'm going away on a real long trip. You won't have to worry about me anymore. I want to go to sleep and never wake up."
- • excessive sleep or insomnia, loss of appetite
- • Purchase of gun or pills.
- • Alcohol or drug abuse.
- • Sudden happiness after a long depression.
- • Obsession about death and talk about suicide.
- • Decline in performance of work, school, or other activities.
- • Deteriorating physical appearance.
- • Irritable, empty, sad mood most of the day.
- • No interest in or pleasure from activities.

High Risk Life Events Associated With Suicide

- • Early stages of recovery from depression.
- • Divorce, separation, or broken relationship, child support, and custody issues.
- • Death or terminal illness of a loved one.
- • Loss of health (real or imaginary).
- • Anniversaries
- • Difficulties with school, family, the law.

What not to do

- • Do not point out to them how much better off they are than others. This increases feelings of guilt and worthlessness

- • Do not try to counsel the person yourself
- • Do not swear yourself to secrecy.
- • Do not act shocked or condemn. There may not be another cry for help
- • Do not offer simple solutions.
- • Do not suggest drugs or alcohol as a solution.
- • Do not judge the person.
- • Do not leave the person alone if you feel the risk to their safety is immediate

Depression is the #1 cause of suicide...

- • There are roughly 42,000 suicides annually in the USA.
- • Number one reason for suicides is untreated depression.
- • Every 16 minutes someone in the USA takes their own life.
- • For every completed suicide by a youth, it is estimated that 100 to 200 attempts are made.

It doesn't have to end this way

Hotline #s:

800-273-8255 (TALK)

800-422-4673 (HOPE)

Finally if you are suffering now is the time to reach for and accept support and hope. You are not alone. I am here for you. You are important to me. May I give you a Hug? You're not going crazy. We are here on this earth to help one another through. I hope I have helped you today I know sharing with you has helped me and I thank you.

Sherre Yager