

## SUICIDE AWARENESS/PREVENTION

SUICIDE: Act of killing oneself purposely

The month of September is Suicide Awareness/Prevention Month. This is another of those topics that we would like to just turn our heads away from and pretend it does not exist. But the reality is that every one of us has been touched in some way by suicide. Either we have contemplated or attempted it ourselves or we know someone else who has contemplated, attempted or even succeeded at it. What a strange phrase, to “succeed” at suicide.

Mostly we tend to avoid the topic and pass it off as a joke when someone brings it up. How many times have you heard and read that someone “succeeded” in committing suicide and others had known of their intention and yet did nothing to prevent it. It is so easy to stand in judgment of someone else even though we may do the same thing in the same situation. I think that denial is a really big factor here; we just can't believe that a friend or loved one is serious when they talk about killing themselves, we just do not want to believe it. We tend to tell them not to talk like that or dismiss what they are saying as a poor joke. There are other times when the signs are more subtle and we just ignore them; for example when a friend says something like: “I don't care whether I wake up tomorrow or not” or we see a friend or loved one take reckless, life threatening risks which are out of character for them. These can be warning signs and should be taken seriously.

So what prompts a person to contemplate taking their own life? We all feel a sense of depression now and again and most of us have flirted with the idea of suicide, we usually think it through and identify the consequences and make a decision to keep working on the problem rather than making any kind of suicidal gesture. The easiest answer is depression; yes that is quite true, deep depression can lead to suicide but not all depressed people are suicidal. Somewhere, somehow a person reaches a point of losing all hope, seeing no way out of their current situation and feeling a deep and abiding sense of despair. This intense feeling can also be compounded by the use of mood altering chemicals, alcohol being the most frequent, and by a variety of mental illnesses which increase the depressive state. Here on this island I think I can safely say that a good 80% of all the suicidal folks I have evaluated have been under the influence of alcohol. Of that number, about 75% were no longer contemplating suicide once they sobered up. So should you take someone seriously when they are drunk or high and threatening suicide? Absolutely!! People under the influence of mind and mood altering chemicals frequently act impulsively and do things they would never do straight and sober. Always take them seriously and get help! A person in this condition needs to be in a very safe place so they cannot impulsively harm themselves.

There are some other reasons why a person would attempt suicide, these include anger/ revenge, shame, multiple life problems, loss, serious illness, victimization and as a last ditch cry for help. The cases in which people have committed suicide as an act of anger or revenge, “I'll show you”, or “I'll get you”. They don't think beyond their own anger and need to have revenge to the ultimate consequences for themselves. In some cases intense shame or loss of “face” precipitates a suicidal gesture. Look at high level folks who are caught embezzling or breaking the law, selling sensitive information to foreign nations, and serious financial difficulties. There are people who are unable to live with the shame, humiliation and sense of being a loser that results from acts of having violated their own moral values while under the influence of alcohol and drugs who will attempt to end it all rather than face family and friends. Anyone who has been horrendously victimized by: rape, molestation, domestic violence, child abuse or lived through the murder of a loved one are at great risk of attempting to harm themselves. The psychological pain from shame and guilt totally overwhelms them.

Sometimes a person will attempt suicide because they are experiencing multiple life problems that they perceive as so overwhelming that they are insurmountable. Sort of the straw that broke the camel's back. They may feel worn out and hopeless, lacking in the energy or inner resources to solve any of the problems.

So many reasons why someone might want to kill themselves, how do we know they are contemplating this? What are the signs to watch for? Most people give some indication of their feelings if not the intention. Warning signs to watch for include: not eating, not sleeping, social withdrawal, saying goodbye/giving away possessions, depression, severe guilt/shame, intense anger or rage that does not decrease or resolve over time, loss of interest in usual activities/pleasures, sense of worthlessness, cannot envision future for self, recklessness, violent or self-destructive behaviors, increased alcohol/drug use, or suddenly seeming to feel “better”. One really dangerous time for a person is when they have finally made the decision to proceed with killing themselves, they will appear relaxed, at ease, the depression they were feeling may seem to have lifted. At this point they will be in the most danger and this is the time that family and friends are really shocked, “he/she seemed so much better”, “I thought the problem was resolved”, “He/she seemed to be happy again” then he/she committed suicide.

With children and teens some other signs may include: being bullied, teased at school, not accepted by peer group, different from peers either physically or emotionally, doing poorly in school, avoiding friends and social situations, decreasing or ceasing normal activities and abusing alcohol or other drugs. Sometimes there will be a rash of suicides among teens whether from having made a “pact” amongst themselves or whether it is a copy cat situation in which another teen or famous person has committed suicide.

What can you do? Listen to the person, talk to them, take the threat seriously; get help for that person. Stay with them and encourage them to seek counseling or at least talk to their doctor. If they have a religious belief, try and contact a clergy person or member of their faith community to talk to them. If the person persists and refuses help, call the police. If you are not physically with them call the police to do a welfare check to make sure they are safe. The police officers in Unalaska are well trained and very sensitive to handling these situations with respect and dignity for the person involved. It is much better to have a friend or loved one angry with you for calling than have them dead from a suicide which may have been preventable. If the person involved is a child or teen, discuss your concerns with the parents, a school counselor, school nurse or their medical provider.

I so often hear people saying “I didn’t know what to say”. Just let the person know you care, try to instill hope; talk about the future and what they have to look forward to. Help them to identify the things they have to live for. Let them know they are not alone, try to help them see that their problems are temporary and are not insurmountable and emphasize getting professional help.

For someone who has made a suicidal attempt/gesture: seek counseling; avoid alcohol/drugs unless prescribed by psychiatrist., work on acquiring and maintaining a positive attitude, make a daily gratitude/appreciation list, use daily affirmations, make a choice to be emotionally healthy, listen to upbeat music, see funny or inspiring movies, and read funny or inspiring books. Last of all stick with the winners not the whiners! Stay away from negative people.

In Unalaska/Dutch Harbor if you are feeling suicidal or know someone who is you can contact the following agencies:

IFHS Clinic – 581-1202

APIA Clinic – 581-2751

USAFV – 581-1500

UPD – 581-1233 or 911

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