A call for action: Let’s unite to prevent suicide

BY STEPHEN ROGGENBAUM
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The recent death of celebrity Robin Williams has led to numerous news articles, television news stories and tributes and water cooler conversations. Where is that concern and reaction when Floridians lose almost eight individuals a day to suicide in our state? Despite the statistical rareness of death by suicide and knowing Florida ranks 20th in the nation in its rate of suicide deaths, one death by suicide is one too many. This is especially true for survivors left behind: family, school, faith community, neighborhood and community. Family and friends may experience a range of painful emotions following their loss, such as shock, anger, guilt and depression.

Sept. 8 to 14 is National Suicide Prevention Week, an awareness campaign of significance and importance.

Local community prevention efforts can have a positive impact on suicide prevention. Part of those efforts is to ensure that everyone knows the warning signs so we can all reach out to friends, neighbors, coworkers and relatives who might be struggling. Sept. 13 is World Suicide Prevention Day and represents a call for action and involvement for our Tampa Bay area community to contribute to the cause of suicide awareness and prevention. On this day, the Tampa Bay Suicide Prevention Task Force is hosting an event from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. for adults and youths interested in making a difference and discovering healthy practices for coping with everyday life challenges at the Carnwood Cultural Center, 4537 Lowell Road, Tampa, 33618.

National and local organizations participating plan to increase suicide prevention awareness and will feature coping technique activities and hands-on art activities.

Calling for help
Anyone who is considering suicide, or knows someone who may be at risk for suicide, can call 1-800-273-TALK (8255) 24/7.

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focusing on hope; refreshments and networking and resource materials.

The event concludes at 8 p.m. with a candlelight vigil for those lost to suicide.

Suicide is preventable. In fact, a recent panel discussion in Tampa with college students led to help for one individual showing warning signs. Without these supports, we don’t know what would have happened, but we do know the intervention available may have prevented a heartbreaking tragedy.

Experts believe that most suicidal individuals do not want to die. They just want to end the pain they are experiencing. Experts also know that many suicidal crises tend to be brief. When suicidal behaviors are detected early, lives can be saved.

Asking someone about suicide does not plant the idea. Asking someone directly if they are thinking about suicide in a caring manner can help a person realize it’s OK to be struggling and seek help.

Although there is no single test to see if someone is suicidal, there are warning signs.

By knowing the warning signs, we can be better prepared to intervene when we see a friend, coworker, neighbor or relative in distress. Don’t be afraid to tell your friend that you’re concerned; you’ve been noticing changes — something is not quite right, and you’re worried.

This open dialogue can help individuals feel relief; know that someone cares, maybe seek professional help and, ultimately, we can help save a life. Don’t keep it a secret; get help for someone at risk.

We should respond immediately if an individual shows the following warning signs:

- Talking or writing about suicide, death or dying.
- Giving direct verbal cues, such as “I wish I were dead,” or “I’m going to end it all” (suicidal threats).
- Looking for ways to kill himself, herself or a pet; seeking access to pills, weapons or other means.
- The following warning signs also warrant attention, especially if in the presence of any of the above signs or other known risk factors:
  - Hopelessness
  - Increasing alcohol or other drug abuse
  - Problems sleeping or falling asleep for more than one night in a row
  - Isolating himself or herself from family and friends
  - Dramatic changes in mood
  - Neglecting his or her appearance and hygiene
  - Acting reckless or engaging in risky activities
  - No reason for living; no sense of purpose in life
  - If observed, seek help as soon as possible by contacting a mental health professional or calling 1-800-273-TALK (8255) for a referral.

Take action. Anyone who is considering suicide, or knows someone who may be at risk for suicide can, again, call 1-800-273-TALK (8255) 24/7, the National Lifeline, or contact a family physician, psychiatrist, medical emergency room, or community mental health center listed online or in the yellow pages.

Everyone can play a role in suicide prevention. Many suicides can be prevented, and each of us can help by learning the warning signs and responding when concerned.

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