

24 Hour Suicide News Cycle Community Comment: Mike

Goldsby June 14, 2018

Suicide rates have steadily increased for the past 20 years. And suicide is one of the leading causes of premature death in the United States. This is easy for most of us to ignore in our day-to-day lives, because death by suicide is always so personal and private, even hidden from view.

That was not the case this past week, with back-to-back celebrities dying by suicide. Especially with the death of Anthony Bourdain, media was flooded with coverage and questions.

And we react as a nation in the same way we react as individuals; shock, disbelief, despair, questioning. How could a successful celebrity even contemplate suicide? From the outside, it seemed like he had it made. And that points out the complexity of suicide.

Rates of suicide have increased in every State except Nevada, but their rate has stayed exceedingly high. Montana experienced about 29 suicides for every 100,000 people — the highest in the nation — compared with about seven people out of every 100,000 in the District of Columbia — the lowest. As a whole, the nation saw 15 people dying by suicide for every 100,000 in 2016. The rate in Humboldt County far exceeds the State and National average and it has exceeded those rates for at least a decade.

Firearms are involved in half of all suicide deaths, followed by suffocation or hanging and drug overdose. This is complicated because there is also a sharp nation-wide increase in unintentional overdose deaths as well.

People search for answers to explain the unexplainable. These have been termed “Deaths of despair.” In a recent report from Humboldt County DHHS, Public Health, local statistics were laid out by Epidemiologist Ron Largusa. One common factor for suicide risk is “...cumulative disadvantage over life, in the labor market, in marriage and child outcomes, and in health, triggered by progressively worsening labor market opportunities at the time of job entry...combined with low levels of education.”

Other risk factors for suicide include family history of suicide, family history of trauma or child abuse, past suicide attempts, history of mental disorders, alcoholism and substance abuse. Also, feelings of hopelessness, recent loss and grief, and isolation, cut off from others.

So following last week's suicide media coverage, calls to suicide hotlines increased by 65%. There was a similar increase in 2014 following the death of Robin Williams. These services are essential, yet many people never reach out when they are contemplating suicide.

We have got to make it easier for people to ask for help. Calling a counselor is not a sign of weakness. It is proof of strength. It is important to check in with each other, especially folks you haven't heard from for awhile. Encourage each other.

If you feel extreme distress, you can call 1-800-273-8255, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, to speak with someone who will provide free and confidential support 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If you want to learn how to help someone in crisis, you can call the same number. That hotline will put you in touch with local resources that can help.

This is Mike Goldsby for Community Comment