



As suicide increases in the U.S., education is critical to prevention

By Melanie Dallas, LPC

The recent suicides of designer Kate Spade and chef Anthony Bourdain were a shocking reminder that no one is immune from circumstances that might cause them to consider suicide. Sadly, their deaths are part of a dramatic increase in suicide in the U.S., a trend affecting every segment of society.

But what is causing this trend? And more important, what can be done?

In 2000, the band U2 released a song called “Stuck In A Moment You Can’t Get Out Of.” The song was a tribute to Michael Hutchence, the lead singer of pop/rock band INXS, who had died by suicide in 1997.

In an interview with Rolling Stone about why he wrote the song, U2’s Bono said, “I just knew that if Michael had hung around an extra half an hour, he would have been OK.” At the time, Bono may not have realized how true his comment was.

Although many believe suicide is caused by mental illness, a new report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows that is often not the case. In fact, the CDC reports that of the thousands of U.S. suicides it studied from 1999 to 2016, more than half did not have a known mental health condition.

According to the report, other problems often contribute to suicide, such as those related to relationships, substance use, physical health, and job, money, legal or housing stress. This is important to remember.

But the CDC’s most tragic finding is how much suicide has increased in the U.S. over the past two decades: suicides have risen nearly 30 percent since 1999, and have increased in every U.S. state except Nevada. Georgia has seen an increase of more than 16 percent.

The study also found suicide increased among both all racial and ethnic groups, and almost every age group. With nearly 45,000 suicides in 2016 alone, suicide has become the 10th leading cause of death in the U.S. and the second leading cause of death for teenagers.

Although we know mental illness is not always linked to suicide, we also know several of the factors that can increase the risk for suicide – isolation, increased anxiety, hopelessness, among others – can also increase the risk of mental illness.

Likewise, we know those factors which can reduce suicide risk, such as family and community support, adequate living resources and access to healthcare services, are also protective of mental health and can help individuals with mental illness find recovery.

We also know there is no simple solution. All of the factors that affect suicide and mental health risk, for better or worse, involve communities, their residents and community institutions such as schools, churches, healthcare providers, emergency services, social service agencies, families and many others.

A vital component of course is suicide prevention education – because suicide is almost always preventable. This won't solve the problem, but it is a critical resource for communities and individuals.

Highland Rivers Health offers many suicide prevention resources, including a no-cost suicide prevention training that can be provided onsite at businesses, schools, churches, community organizations or almost anywhere else.

We also work with community partners across our service area to provide mental health services in schools and community locations, and with local suicide prevention coalitions. (Learn more at highlandrivershealth.com/suicide-prevention.)

There are suicide prevention hotlines available for individuals that might be considering suicide. The Georgia Crisis and Access Line can be reached at (800) 715-4225, and the national Suicide Prevention Lifeline is available at (800) 273-TALK; both are available 24 hours a day.

There is always hope. By working together as parents, providers and community members, we can help people who might be considering suicide, and ensure that no one becomes stuck in a moment they can't get out of.