

Suicide is Preventable. Here's How You Can Help

By Karen Ellery-Jones, Assistant Director

September is Suicide Prevention Month where we encourage everyone to talk openly about suicide and mental health in our communities because, when we do, it helps reduce the stigma and shame that stops many people from reaching out for help. It's a time where we can learn about recognizing the risk factors and warning signs, and what to do if someone we love or know expresses they want to die.

On Cape Cod and the Islands, the suicide death rate of adults over 55 is troubling. Last year, 8 out of a reported 21 residents who died by suicide were over 55. And in 2021, that number was even greater; half of the documented 32 suicides were people 55 and older. This is not only a Cape Cod concern, but a nationwide public health challenge that will continue to grow. Though older adults make up approximately 12% of our total population, they account for 18% of all suicides. If you consider that by 2040 there is projected to be 80 million older adults, it is critical that we address the complexities of our mental health care system.

We know that several factors increase the risk for suicide in older adults including depression, loneliness, isolation, death of a spouse, chronic illnesses, loss of self-sufficiency, and financial insecurity. But we need to remember suicide is a complex psychological state where several factors collide to cause a person to think suicide is the only way to escape their immeasurable pain and is rarely attributed to one single factor.

How can we mitigate risk factors, so we keep ourselves and our loved ones safe? Make sure there are enough social connections; we need these to thrive. Our early human ancestors knew the value of moving in groups to secure safety, food, caregiving, and procreation. Take advantage of your community's offerings to socialize and connect with others. Knitting, cards, walking, reading, sharing coffee or stories, attending religious services, anything that strengthens a connection will help to reduce loneliness and isolation. If you have lost your loved one, think about joining a grief support group to share your grief and/or seek therapy. If you are feeling down, reach out to your primary care physician for help because depression is not a normal part of aging, and can be treated. Don't be afraid to reach out to friends or family for comfort. You'd be surprised how much better we feel when we share our worries. (The Samaritans' crisis line was founded on this very belief—that we all need to be heard, to be valued, to have that connection with another person, listening without judgement).

What are some of the most common warning signs that someone may be struggling and thinking about suicide?

- Talking about wanting to die or kill themselves.
- Believing they are a burden, and everyone would be better off without them.
- Substance misuse (alcohol or drugs)
- Pulling away from activities they once enjoyed

- Risky behaviors
- Giving away prized items (vases, rings, pets)

If you have noticed a loved one or friend showing any of these warning signs the best thing you can do is to ask them “Are you feeling suicidal?” Asking will not prompt a person to take their own life; most often relieves some of the pressures. “Hey, someone noticed how awful I am feeling.” “Someone cares about me.”

If the answer is yes, don’t panic. Listen with intention. Don’t interrupt. Allow them to talk. Expect silences, tears, fear, and many times gratitude that someone noticed their pain. If they have a plan, a chosen method, and a time then it is important to get help by calling 988—the new national suicide prevention number. You can speak with a counselor along with the person at risk to decide the next steps. They will complete a full risk assessment and supply valuable resources and support. Most calls coming into 988 end there—meaning there is no active rescue needed. Counselors can deescalate the risk level while providing immediate resources through new statewide programs designed to keep people out of the emergency department and instead receive help in their community.

You can ask your friend or loved one if there is anyone else you can call—perhaps a family member, friend, pastor, rabbi or therapist—for additional support. Connecting them with resources is key and following up improves outcomes. This could be a telephone chat, a visit, a walk—any activity that keeps them connected to you and other people. Encouraging them to call 988 if they need support is always a great option. Most folks believe you must be in a suicidal crisis to use the service but that is not true. In fact, most people who do call in are struggling with loneliness, isolation, a loss, and just need someone to listen to their worries. The Samaritans Senior Outreach Program pairs volunteers with older adults who would benefit from a weekly telephone chat. It’s a simple program that reduces loneliness and isolation.

We are best when we are connected to each other and our community and look out for those most vulnerable residents.

If you would like more information on any of our programs please feel free to reach out to me either by email: kellery-jones@capesamaritans.org or phone: 508-689-7489