

Dear Chief: How can we work together to keep families safe and healthy?

Dear Concerned Citizen: For this question I have enlisted the insight of local subject matter expert, Dave Hayden. David Hayden has worked at the Mental Health Center for 14 years as a clinician, a clinical supervisor, and now as an administrator of various programs. He also teaches addiction counseling classes for the Psychology Program at Trinidad State Junior College.

Five years before Jane took a bottle of prescription sleeping pills -- planning to end her pain and never wake up -- she was a college athletics star, pursuing a teaching certificate and planning to coach in the sport that she loved. Then a string of knee and back injuries led to chronic pain and an eventual dependence on prescription pain killers. Jane eventually dropped out of school and increasingly distanced herself from loved ones, until even her fiancée gave up, telling her that he wanted to break off their engagement.

“I didn’t see that there was anything left. I thought my life was over.” But instead of dying after swallowing a bottle of pills, Jane woke up in the emergency room, greeted by her terrified parents and a mental health worker, who provided support and eventually helped her gain admittance to a substance abuse treatment program.

“When I saw how scared they were, I realized how badly I would have hurt them if I had succeeded.” Two years later, Jane is free of her opiate addiction, back in school, and back in training for a marathon with her new boyfriend. It is unfortunate that for every person like Jane who attempts suicide and recovers, many more die, with devastating effects on their loved ones and their communities.

The statistics describe a multitude of family tragedies. Colorado consistently has one of the ten highest suicide rates in the nation, sharing this burden with other mountainous states such as Utah, New Mexico, Montana, and Alaska (researchers identify correlations with higher altitudes and independent, outdoor cultures in these states). In 2011 suicide was the second leading cause of death and homicide was the third leading cause of death for Coloradans ages 15-34. From 2004 to 2011, suicide accounted for the greatest number of injury deaths in the state, outnumbering deaths from motor vehicle accidents, unintentional poisoning, falls, and homicide.

While people may attempt suicide for any number of reasons, almost two-thirds of those in Colorado who die by suicide are suffering from depression at the time of their deaths. When depressed, persons are not thinking clearly and are not able to see the impact on their family and loved ones -- or that their problems and illness can be overcome. Drug and alcohol dependence are also major risk factors for suicide, especially when accompanied by mental health issues. Another common factor in suicide attempts is the occurrence of a major life setback like the loss of a job or break-up of a marriage.

A source of hope is that these conditions are not permanent and can be resolved with the right interventions. Depression for the vast majority of people is a temporary condition that can be treated with counseling and medications. Addictions are curable as well, with good addiction treatment providing the means for people to recover and lead fulfilling lives.

Warning Signs:

- Thinking or talking about suicide
- Uncontrolled substance abuse
- Feelings of purposelessness, anxiety, hopelessness, withdrawal or anger
- Behavior patterns of recklessness and sudden mood changes
- Feeling trapped, seeing no way out of a dilemma
- Changes from normal behavior patterns

What to do if you see these signs in someone you know:

- Ask them directly if they are thinking of killing themselves (this will not increase the likelihood of it happening)
- Encourage them to seek help. Even if they deny intent to commit suicide, the issues that are upsetting to them can be addressed by competent professionals. Valley residents can seek counseling from a private therapist or from the San Luis Valley Mental Health Center at 589-3671.
- Help the person connect with and build up their support system. We are resilient when we have deep support systems.

Signs of immediate risk:

- Threatening to hurt or kill him/herself, or talking of wanting to hurt or kill him/herself
- Looking for ways to kill him/herself by seeking access to firearms, available pills, or other means
- Talking or writing about death, dying or suicide, when these actions are out of the ordinary
- Giving away possessions, saying goodbye to loved ones, or putting his/her affairs in order

What to do if you see these immediate signs in someone you know:

- Do not leave the person alone before you have resolved the issue or obtained professional help (unless you are in danger yourself)
- Remove any firearms, alcohol, drugs or sharp objects that could be used in a suicide attempt
- Call 911 or 589-3671 day or night to request assistance from an Emergency Services worker from the SLV Mental Health Center. Another resource is the U.S. National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-8255.

This article was written by guest contributor, Mr. David Hayden.