

# Opinion: Suicide an issue with older people

By Laura Walny

Older adults and suicide is a topic not often discussed, yet suicides do occur among older people.

Eighty-eight people aged 60 and older died as a result of suicide in El Dorado County between 2003 and 2013. That is far too many. As a community, we need to begin talking about this so we can integrate suicide prevention into older adult programs and services.

For many years, suicide prevention efforts have primarily focused on young people. We'd like to enhance these efforts, as data shows that nearly 30 percent of people who die from suicide in California are older adults.

Suicide is not an easy topic to discuss and can be more challenging for older adults. Older adults may be reluctant to talk about personal issues such as depression or thoughts of suicide. It is important that family members, friends, caregivers and health care providers of older adults are aware of this issue, know the risks and signs, and have tools to offer support.

In 2013, a total of 3,990 people died by suicide in California; 1,152 of those people were aged 60 or older. Studies show that white males make up the largest percentage of deaths by suicide for all age groups including older adults, with a 3:1 ratio of male to female deaths by suicide. A large number of these suicides are committed with firearms. For this reason, advocacy organizations support restricting access to lethal means as one of the most important preventive strategies with all age groups, especially older adults.

Risk factors, warning signs and symptoms of suicide and depression can look different for older people than for young adults. Some risk factors increase with age, such as social isolation; chronic health conditions; disabilities; limited mobility and access to services and activities; substance abuse; and fear of prolonged illness. Symptoms of depression in older adults (such as loss of appetite, changes in sleep and disinterest in activities once enjoyed) can often be mistaken for “normal” signs of aging.

Older adults face challenges such as coping with retirement, smaller budgets, health concerns, and loss of friends and family. Research shows that as we age it is important to maintain a social circle of friends, engage in meaningful activities (such as volunteering or taking up a hobby), and stay as physically active as possible. These activities are good for our mental health and well-being, and are protective factors against suicide. If someone is severely depressed, it is important to reach out for help to a mental health professional or trained counselor.

The most critical warning signs of suicide are:

- Talking about wanting to die or about suicide
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live
- Looking for ways to kill oneself.

If you are concerned about a friend, relative or neighbor, don't ignore those feelings. Talk to them and ask direct questions. Call the Friendship Line at 800.971.0016 or National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800.273.8255 and talk with a trained counselor who can provide additional tips.

El Dorado County Mental Health and partner agencies offer trainings on suicide prevention. For questions about local suicide prevention trainings, contact Mental Health at 530.621.6130. Mental Health also operates a 24-hour mental

health crisis line at 530.622.3345 in Placerville and at 530.544.2219 in South Lake Tahoe for residents experiencing a mental health crisis. In an emergency, call 911.

September is National Suicide Prevention Awareness Month, an annual campaign designed to inform and engage the community and health professionals about suicide prevention. The campaign also aims to reduce stigma surrounding the topic, and encourage mental health assistance and support for people who have attempted or thought about suicide. This year in California, the campaign is focused on suicide among older people.

*Laura Walny is program coordinator for El Dorado County Mental Health.*