

Men and suicide: Breaking the silence in EDC

By Laura Walny

Suicide in men has been called a silent epidemic around the world because of limited awareness. Yet according to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, men die by suicide 3.5 times more often than women and account for the majority of suicide deaths in most nations, including the United States.

El Dorado County is no exception. A study of health data in El Dorado County between the years 2005 and 2015 showed that 347 people died from suicide in the county, and 78 percent of these deaths were among males. In addition, 73 percent of the suicide deaths were among people aged 40 or older.

As a community, we need to be talking about suicide. It's important that everyone knows the risk factors and signs to look for, as well as protective factors that can help reduce the risk of suicide.

When it comes to suicide and suicide attempts, there are some big differences between men and women. Research shows that while females tend to make more suicide attempts than males, their methods are generally not as lethal as men. Men, by and large, tend to act more quickly on suicidal thoughts and to use more lethal means, such as firearms. Of the 347 suicide deaths in El Dorado County between 2005 and 2015, over half (54 percent) were committed with a firearm.

Risk factors and warning signs

Certain factors tend to put individuals at risk for suicide. These include social stressors such as social isolation, family breakdown (divorce or separation), overwork, and

employment insecurity. These stressors can be especially difficult for men because they often do not have the same social supports as women. In addition, men may be less likely than women to seek out help when they are depressed or experiencing emotional problems. The stigma males may feel in asking for help with mental health problems can be very powerful.

In addition to social stressors, a history of alcohol or other drug use can be a significant risk factor for suicide. Social factors are often combined with alcohol or drug abuse, particularly in men. In fact, many suicides are committed while the individual is under the influence of alcohol or other drugs.

As men age, their risk for suicide can also increase. 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 chronic health conditions; disabilities; limited mobility and access to services and activities; substance abuse; and fear of prolonged illness. Older adults face challenges such as coping with retirement, smaller budgets, health concerns, and loss of friends and family. 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.

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 someone, 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.

Protective factors

Research shows that there are certain protective factors that can help to reduce the risk of suicide. These include having a strong social circle of friends, engaging in meaningful activities such as volunteering or taking up a hobby, and staying as physically active as possible.

Major protective factors to help reduce suicide include:

- Effective behavioral health care
- Connectedness to individuals, family, community, and social institutions
- Life skills (including problem solving skills and coping skills, ability to adapt to change)
- Self-esteem and a sense of purpose or meaning in life
- Cultural, religious, or personal beliefs that discourage suicide.

Ideally, a person will have multiple protective factors. If someone is severely depressed, it is important to reach out for help to a mental health professional or trained counselor.

Learn more

El Dorado County Behavioral Health and partner agencies offer trainings on suicide prevention. For questions about local suicide prevention trainings, call 530.621.6130. Behavioral 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.

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