

It Takes a Community to Prevent Suicide

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Many of us have heard the stories. They circulate on email regularly. My favorite is the one about the young man who was heading home from school one Friday looking forward to the coming weekend. He's high-fiving his fellow football team members, he's making plans for the eventful weekend, he's elated and excited. On his way home, he comes across another young man with his arms full of books. He is awkwardly making his way home, dropping books and papers regularly, stooping to pick them up. He's sweating, exhausted, and he looks sad. In an impulsive moment, the young man stops, makes a wisecrack about all the books, and takes about half of them to carry himself. The two find out they live pretty close to one another. They even have a few things in common. They're able to carry on a conversation. As they part at the door of the book-laden kid's house, the other young man makes another impulsive but perhaps intuitive move. He invites his new-found friend to join him in his plans for the weekend, a few pick-up football games, a little cruising around, maybe a movie. Hesitantly, the offer is accepted. As the story goes, these two young men become the best of friends through their years in high school. When graduation time comes, the one who was carrying his entire school book collection home that day is Valedictorian of his class. In his valedictory speech, he reminisces about that day on which he made friends with the football star. For the first time ever, he discloses that he cleared his locker out that Friday in order to save his parents the trouble of going to school to clean out his things after he was gone. You see, he had every intention of going home that day and killing himself. The letter was written, the pills were ready, and he had reached ultimate hopelessness. It was a simple friendly gesture by a fellow human being that stopped him. The Valedictorian's angel wasn't particularly special; he didn't have lots of money or power. He was just a kid who was in the right place at the right time and reached out to another human being who was struggling. He simply took on some of the burden the other was carrying and walked with him. But in doing so, he saved a life.

Maybe your first instinct is to wonder about the truth of this story. You may think, it's too simple. That can't be all there is to saving a life. In my experience, both personally and professionally, I can assure you that a million stories, just like this one, are indeed true. I've met many young people who can relate all too well with the sad, lonely bookworm in the story. Although most people wouldn't argue that the desperate young man in the story fits a stereotype of suicide, real kids who are at risk and don't fit into any particular category. They represent a variety of races, classes, and

walks of life. Some of them get excellent grades, others don't; some are popular while others are outcasts. Some always wear a smile; others wear sadness and despair on their sleeves. They come from a variety of social groups and their families reflect a diversity of lifestyles.

As I was writing this article, I decided I would get some advice from an expert, a young lady I've had the privilege of knowing for the last several years. She's a straight A student, has a great sense of humor. She is a gifted member of her school's debate team and has a particular flair for public speaking. She's an athlete, and an overall joy to know. She doesn't fit into a mold that anyone would equate with suicide risk, but she's a survivor of a serious suicide attempt that occurred during a long bout of depression and unrelenting thoughts of death. I can't imagine the potential that would have been lost to this world if she had been successful in her attempt. She tells me the deciding factor that saved her life was nothing more than having someone to talk to. I'm honored that I got to be that person, because she has enriched my life at least as much as I helped in hers. The rest of this article is based on this young lady's sound advice.

Remember with me, for just a minute, a time when you felt really awful. Perhaps you even thought about dying. Maybe that time was many years ago or maybe it's a lot closer. I now want you to remember the circumstance that turned the tide for you...the point at which your despair began turning to hope. For many of us that circumstance was a person. I want you to realize today that you can be that person for someone else in your family, your social group, your community; YOU can be that person, just by being yourself.

A therapist is nothing more than a person whose presence is therapeutic—healing in some way. A therapist uses his or her own strengths and reminds another person of theirs at a time when they've forgotten. These are my definitions, but Webster concurs for the most part. He says to be therapeutic means to have the POWER to heal or cure. Each one of you in this community has that power. It's in your sense of humor, your compassion, your time, your ability to listen, empathize, tutor or intuit. It's in your ability to inspire. It takes a community to tackle the problem of suicide, and each of you, regardless of the strengths and skills you bring to the table are part of that solution. Reach out, really listen, support, bring your community together – all ages and walks of life, provide a safe place to hang out, volunteer at your school, be a big brother or sister, really get to know a kid. Remember that you are part of the solution, and we don't have to wait for the next tremendous loss in the community to act.

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