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# PEMHS' PULSE

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## FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK – Experts Say Elderly, Teens Most At Risk For Suicide



I would like to highlight this article for staff. Joe Stumpo was interviewed for the article and did an amazing job!

By NICK MILANO; Sun Correspondent

Joe Stumpo was hanging on every word that came through his telephone. As an operator at a suicide prevention hotline, he was speaking with a woman who was sitting in her garage, car running, contemplating what she was about to do.

Stumpo is trained for situations like this and used every bit of that training to save the woman's life. After what seemed like an eternity, the woman took the key out of the ignition. She soon after checked into a facility to get the assistance she truly needed. "That was a hard one," said Stumpo. "But I ended up getting a call from her a week later, thanking me."

This is Suicide Prevention Week and statistics show that there is an increasing need for awareness and services aimed at stopping people from taking their own lives. According to those statistics, the elderly and teens are most in need of those services.

The statistics, both nationwide and locally, are harrowing. In Florida, suicide is the ninth leading cause of death, taking thousands each year. Among 15 to 25-year-olds, it is the third leading cause of death in the state. And every year, according to suicide prevention experts, the numbers rise. The key to lowering those numbers, those experts said, is open communication.

"If people are feeling depressed or having suicidal thoughts, just talk," said Stumpo, who works for Personal Enrichment Through Mental Health Services in Pinellas Park. "Don't hide it." Unfortunately, not everyone with those thoughts is talking about it.

"There's really not just one reason or explanation," said Laura McGinnis, the communications director with The Trevor Project. "It's different every time."

The Trevor Project is an organization that has, for years, helped reduce the number of suicides among young people through education. Project staff members are using this week to educate people about suicide and how to get help to those who need it.

Sometimes that help involves seeing a psychiatrist or other mental health professional. Sometimes it simply means just finding a depressed person someone to talk to.

Suicide, unfortunately, is not a simple issue. It effects nearly every age group, social class and sexual orientation in a different but profound way, according to mental health experts.

"Suicidality is not prejudiced. You see it in everybody," said Stumpo. "I get callers as young as 11 or 12 and I had a call from a gentleman all the way in his 80s."

Older adults seem to be especially vulnerable to suicidal urges. In Sarasota County, for example, 23 men and women between the ages of 51-75 years old have already committed suicide this year. In Charlotte County, which has had a higher overall suicide rate than the state average every year since 1999, men and women between the ages of 45 and 54 are the most vulnerable. According to the 2010 Charlotte County Community Health Assessment, compiled by the Health Planning Council of Southwest Florida, 28 percent of all suicides between the years 2006-2008 were adults in that age group.

Nationally, according to [www.suicide.org](http://www.suicide.org), 18 percent of all suicides are elderly people. The causes are unique compared to other groups, Stumpo and other experts said. Many different diseases can cause severe depression, for example, and the medications used to treat many illnesses can have dangerous psychological side effects.

“Not much attention is paid to it,” said Larry Baxter, the Elder Rights Bureau Chief with the Florida Department of Elder Affairs,” unless you’re personally touched by it.”

Stumpo said a significant portion of the calls he receives are from senior citizens who tell him about sicknesses or chronic pain that they are experiencing. “It’s to the point where they can’t deal with the pain anymore,” he said.

According to Baxter, the best way to prevent these tragedies is to get older adults out of their homes and into social settings. “If there’s anything that the everyday person can do, it’s seeking out the senior that’s living alone or isolated,” he said. “That would go a long way.” Baxter said that he wants older men and women to get involved in groups and organizations that give them opportunities to interact with their peers and discuss the issues that specifically effect them.

The most alarming rate of suicide is among gay, lesbian, transgender and bisexual youths, who are at four times the risk of killing themselves when compared to their straight peers, according to McGinnis. “It comes as a matter of acceptance,” she said. “If you don’t have a family or community that you feel you can trust, your risk goes up.” In this group, changes have been made and are being worked on at the most fundamental level. To prevent suicides among these youth, McGinnis said, the stigma that comes with their lifestyle must be changed and accepted.

That’s why The Trevor Project has been working its way into schools and youth organizations, giving presentations on the topic, she said.

Just a month ago, The Trevor Project was one of many equal rights and educational organizations that backed U.S. Sen. Bob Casey’s Safe Schools Improvement Act. The act, if passed, will provide federal funding to schools to effectively change codes of conduct and set preventative measures to stop bullying based on gender, race, sexual orientation and any other prejudice.

Though Stumpo speaks with suicidal people nearly every day, he hasn’t lost hope that life is worth living. In his opinion, one friend, family member or even a kind stranger can save a life through listening and talking to a person on the verge of suicide. “If people are having these thoughts,” he said, “they need to get to their friends or families and talk about what’s going on.”

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**Suicide Hotlines**

There are a number of hotlines available for anyone with depressed or suicidal thoughts. They can be reached at:

- 1-800-273-TALK
- 1-800-SUICIDE
- 1-866-4UTREVOR (The Trevor Project hotline)

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