

Suicide Prevention

Easter weekend I received a text from a parishioner that couldn't be ignored. It said, "I'm hoping to be dead soon." I suggested we talk on the phone not wanting to communicate by texting but that wasn't her wish at the time. She went on to text she wasn't at home but she had left a suicide letter and her cat. Our texts went back and forth, her describing her pain and me trying to validate it and get more information. I knew that God had prepared me for this moment with the mental health classes we had hosted at church a few years ago. I was trained that we have to be direct and ask if they are thinking about killing themselves and if they have a plan. She described her plan as my anxiety increased. She confirmed that she did indeed have what she needed with her to carry out the plan. I knew that I needed to act quickly but I still did not know how to find her. We kept exchanging texts while I found the Suicide Hotline number in my contacts. Programming this number in our phones was one of the activities we did in class. I was so thankful it was right there without me having to search for it. The calming voice on the other end heard my story and affirmed my concern. He talked me through some options and gave me local numbers for the Sheriff's Department and the local Crisis Outreach Team. He thought the best option would be to have the sheriff go to her house in case she was actually still there. As that was happening, I phoned a friend who was one of the class instructors and asked for prayers. Less than a minute later, the parishioner called me. It was such a relief to hear her voice. She shared where she was and agreed to have me pick her up and take her to the hospital. When I arrived, she was ready to go. Before getting in my car, she handed me the bag that contained the means to end her life. Words can not express how thankful I was to see her safely escorted to the mental health unit. It was a powerful Easter weekend accompanying her on what I hope is her personal resurrection story.

I feel sorrow for the families and friends of the thousands of people who did not have a happy ending. According to the CDC, 44,834 individuals died by suicide in 2020. Research indicates that one in every four persons has experienced suicidal thinking at some point in their lives. It is time to recognize that it is not just "their" problem, it is "our" problem. We are all at risk for suicide! Our mental health is on a continuum and our biology, history and life experiences can move us along the line with wellness on one end and dis-ease on the other.

So what do we as parish nurses do about it?

- Be honest about your own needs. Determine who you would call if you begin to have thoughts about ending your life. Be a role model by regularly sharing your struggles with a trusted friend or a health care professional when needed.
- Add the National Suicide Prevention Hotline to your phone's contact list, 1-800-273-8255. Help is also available through the Crisis Text Line by texting TALK to 741741.
- Host mental health classes in your church (e.g. SoulShop™, Mental Health First Aid®, ASIST Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training)
- Be a person who is not afraid to say the word "suicide". Research shows just by saying "suicide" lives are saved; an environment is fostered that makes talking about suicidal desperation more likely.
- Reach out to parishioners that are dealing with life challenges or exhibiting changes in behavior. If you sense someone is struggling, ask them if they are considering suicide.
- Check out the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) website <https://afsp.org/> for information and resources.