

The Many Ways Suicide Has Touched My Life

Suicide has touched my family and friends in many different ways. In the early 1960s my grandfather lost his wife and shortly after was diagnosed with cancer. He went through a painful operation and had the prospects of wearing a colostomy bag for the rest of his life and the likely reoccurrence of the cancer. As he sat alone in the house depression must have overwhelmed him. When he was young he had fought bravely in World War I and had returned from those battles. But this battle with depression was more than he could handle. So Grandpa Henry went into his garage, started the car and sat there until the fumes took his life. At my young age I didn't understand the gravity of what had happened. It wasn't until many years later that I fully understood the tragedy and grief such an act had on family and friends.

Next, we fast-forward in time to the early 1980s. I was an Engineer Officer in the Illinois Army National Guard. I would occasionally go into the armory to check on my equipment and talk to the Unit Administrator concerning the battalion and any new orders that might have been received from headquarters. The Unit Administrator was a pleasant man who loved to talk. In fact, he would talk until you finally excused yourself and walked out of the room. This particular day he was talking about his family problems and his struggles in life. Finally seeing that I looked uncomfortable and bored he said: "Do you want to hear this? I half heartedly replied: "Yes I'll listen so go ahead." To which he replied: "That's OK, I know that you're busy. I'm going to take care of the problem. I'm going to quit my job, sell my house, and move to Florida." If I had been paying attention I would have realized that doing all of that really didn't really make much sense. But it gave me an opportunity to get away from the conversation and to go home. The man went home that evening, took a forty-five caliber pistol, put it in his mouth, and pulled the trigger. What I didn't know was that he was an alcoholic whose wife had been trying to get him help. She had moved out of their home and into his parent's home so they could work together to help him get his life back. Evidently he did not think that he could recover from addiction and instead chose suicide as a way to end his problems. I was in shock and upon learning of the full story I felt regret that I had not seemed more interested in what he had to say. Later in my military career I become a chaplain and taught suicide prevention. I would use that event as an example to teach others how to recognize the signs of a person's suicidal potential.

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Responding to Suicide in Princeton

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prevented? Of course not. The work goes on to educate the community and provide needed services to allow everyone to be safe from the tragedy of suicide, and another successful walk will help provide funding to do that.

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NOTE: Visit <http://www.livingworks.net> to learn more about ASIST, safeTALK and suicideTALK

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Next we come to the early 1990s. By this time God had "called me into the ministry" and I was now a battalion chaplain. A soldier from the unit was a security guard and had a loaded weapon he carried at work. It was an Easter Sunday and in his household there was great turmoil over some domestic issue. In the early afternoon a heated argument broke out and turned violent. At the peak of the yelling and screaming the man stormed into the house and took out his weapon. He then put it to his head and pulled the trigger. Shortly after that I officiated at a service held at the armory to honor the loss of a fellow soldier.

Again we move forward into the late 1990s and this time suicide touched close to home again. My wife's cousin was a friendly and gentle man. He dreamed of being a school teacher and had finally received the break he had wanted. He was teaching full-time and was working toward tenure and a secure position as a teacher. He had just purchased a new jeep and had a beautiful home in which he was living. One day his parents became concerned when they had not heard from him in several days. It was unlike him to not stay in touch. They went to the house and his father walked through the unlocked door. He found his son hanging from a rope which he had strung from the ceiling. None of it made any sense! Why when everything seemed to be going so good did he take his own life?

The last example happened just last year. I met a high school age young man who had recently started helping in our children's church. He was a kind and friendly person. He seemed very quiet and reserved for a person of his age. But I didn't think anything of it since he was now part of the church and helping with the children. What I didn't know is that he had a difficult family life. His father was long ago out of the picture and his mother had a problem with drugs and alcohol. What I also did not know is that this young man had become a follower of the "prosperity teachings" that some Christian organizations promote. He had been told that if he believed strongly enough, prayed hard enough, and was faithful in reading his Bible that everything in his life would turn out wonderful. I'm not saying that is exactly what the group taught him but that it is how he interpreted their teachings. This young man had put this teaching to the test and decided that God had failed to create those promised results. So for this young man life was empty and filled with nothing but disappointment and a feeling that he was being let down by everyone. In this regard even God didn't do what he thought God was supposed to do. So he sat down and drank a bottle of antifreeze. Many people on the organ transplant list were helped but those close to him had their spiritual hearts torn out because of what happened. The pain and loss, especially among the young people who were his friends and loved ones, probably continues to be almost unbearable at times.

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Note: Kent Svendsen is an ordained minister and retired Army Reserve chaplain. In the next issue of The Lighthouse Reverend Svendsen asks the question, "What do I do to find peace and understanding?" and provides steps which he has taken to answer that question. He may be contacted at: godrilla@accessus.net

From the Editor

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Good listening, either one-on-one or in a group, requires continuously being aware of how you are perceived as a "helper" and also seeking ways to improve your skills for being a good listener. Whether in a support group or not, our Ground Rules can be applicable for everyone.

Bud Wiener, editor