



▶▶ YOU DON'T HAVE TO DO ANY OF THESE THINGS PERFECTLY TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE. YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE A TRAINED PROFESSIONAL. SIMPLY CARING FOR AND CONNECTING WITH THE OTHER PERSON CAN HELP.



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Preventing Suicide

Simply reaching out and showing that you care can be someone's lifeline.

THE RATE OF DEATH BY SUICIDE

for lawyers is higher than that of the general population. Depression, substance abuse, and other mental illnesses are significant risk factors for suicide. Lawyers suffer from depression, substance abuse, and other mental illnesses at much higher rates than most groups of people. Every suicide has an impact on dozens if not hundreds of people. Clearly, for the well-being of our legal community, we must do whatever we can to help our colleagues who are struggling. Suicide is preventable. And prevention is not just for mental health professionals. Each of us can do something. Studies show that most people want to help but do not always know how. In this column, we will look at actions we can take now to help someone contemplating suicide.

In 2017, the most recent year for which complete statistics are available, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that 47,173 individuals died by suicide in the U.S. More than 1.4 million people attempted suicide. A more recent study by the CDC shows that 11 percent of people were seriously considering suicide in August 2020. This compares with 4.3 percent who were seriously considering suicide in 2018. It is hypothesized that the effects of the pandemic, particularly increased isolation, along with the other crises our society has faced in the past year, have exacerbated suicidality. It is most likely that there is a similar rise in suicidality among lawyers.

Someone who is contemplating suicide is feeling overwhelmed, helpless, despairing, and hopeless. Their thinking is paralyzed. They are often filled with self-loathing. They do not see how their excruciatingly painful present can improve in the future. It is not that they view

death as a desirable outcome. Rather, the pain of living another day is worse than the pain of death.

What can we do to help?

Doreen Marshall, a psychologist and vice-president at the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention says, "Trust your gut. If you're concerned about someone, take that step [to help]." Taking that step is not always easy. We may be concerned about intruding on or embarrassing the other person. Or, perhaps we are uncomfortable about discussing issues of mental health or suicidal thinking. We also may fear making the situation worse.

DeQuincy Lezine of the American Association of Suicidology tells us that it comes down to showing that we care. Start with simply reaching out. An important risk factor for suicide is a feeling of being disconnected. Ask the person if they are doing OK. Let them know you are there for them. Check in with them frequently. Do not be judgmental. Let them know that it makes sense that a lot of people are struggling with their feelings these days.

Be aware of the warning signs of suicide. The American Bar Association's Committee on Lawyers' Assistance Programs lists these warning signs:

- threatening to hurt or kill oneself or talking about wanting to hurt or kill oneself;
- looking for ways to kill oneself by seeking access to firearms, available pills, or other means;
- feeling hopeless;
- feeling rage or uncontrolled anger or seeking revenge;
- acting reckless or engaging in risky

- activities;
- feeling trapped—like there’s no way out;
 - increasing alcohol or drug use;
 - withdrawing from friends, family, or society;
 - feeling anxious, agitated, or unable to sleep—or sleeping all the time;
 - experiencing dramatic mood changes; and
 - Seeing no reason for living or having no sense of purpose in life.

These signs are not always clear or apparent. Look for changes in mood, appearance, or productivity (MAP). Be alert for signs such as increased anger, irritability, or sadness. Look for isolating behavior, increased substance use, or changes in sleeping or eating. Take seriously statements like: “I wish I could just disappear”; “I’d like to shoot myself”; “Everyone would be better off without me”; or “Nothing seems worth it anymore.”

People exhibiting changes in MAP are not necessarily suicidal. The signs are also consistent with depression, anxiety,

substance abuse, or other mental illnesses. However, even if suicidal thinking is not present, reaching out to someone who is struggling in these ways can lead them to the help they need right now. This may reduce future risk of suicidality for that person.

If you are experiencing any of these signs yourself, seek help. If you are concerned about a colleague, encourage them to seek help. Call the Lawyers’ Assistance Program if you need help yourself or have questions about a colleague.

When reaching out to a suicidal colleague, the National Suicide Prevention Helpline recommends the following:

- Be direct. Talk openly and matter-of-factly about suicide. (Talking about suicide will decrease, not increase, a person’s suicidality.)
- Be willing to listen. Allow expressions of feelings. Accept the feelings.
- Be nonjudgmental. Don’t debate whether suicide is right or wrong, or whether feelings are good or bad.

Don’t lecture on the value of life.

- Get involved. Become available. Show interest.
- Don’t be sworn to secrecy. Seek support.
- Offer hope that alternatives are available. Do not offer glib reassurances.
- Remove means, such as guns or stockpiled pills.
- Get help from persons or agencies specializing in crisis intervention and suicide prevention.

You don’t have to do any of these things perfectly to make a difference. You don’t have to be a trained professional. Simply caring for and connecting with the other person can help. We can all make a difference in our community by being aware of the elevated risk of suicide for ourselves and our colleagues and taking helping actions.

Please reach out to LAP if you or someone you know is experiencing mental health or substance abuse problems. Give us a call at 312-726-6607 or email gethelp@illinoislap.org. 