

'Not Broken': A Look At Suicide Prevention And Coping

BY SARAH WETZEL
For the Plain Talk

Though Suicide Prevention month, is past, most would agree that the need for awareness remains year round.

"Sadly, the fact that we even need prevention tells me that there is a problem," said Michele Turner, counselor at the Cook House on the University of South Dakota campus. "People may think that there is no hope, that they are worthless and the only end result is to take their lives. How do you prevent a situation like that coming up in someone's life? There are things that people can do."

Anyone experiencing the debilitating feelings which often lead to suicide should know that there is hope according to Turner.

"From the perspective of a counselor, recognizing that those feelings happen does not mean that you're broken if you're feeling depressed," she said. "Being depressed actually happens to a lot of us. It's more normal than I think people realize. If you're feeling that way there are things you can do to help you feel better."

One of these things is seeking counseling like USD students are encouraged to do at the Cook House.

"At the counseling center at USD we offer personal counseling to help with that," Turner said. "We also will help people connect to others in the community if that's needed. In terms of suicide prevention we have an on-call counselor for USD students so it doesn't matter what time of day these feelings might pop up. They can call and we will come and help them work through it."

There's the national suicide hotlines. There's always a place to call and talk to someone to work through it."

The on-campus resources include individual and group counseling, crisis intervention, education and prevention services, self help services, addiction counseling, the Cook House counseling center during the day, on call emergency counselors, and tabling in the Muenster University Center on suicide prevention with resources and pamphlets.

"Students can casually walk by," Turner said. "They don't even have to engage if they don't want to but they can see ways they can get help if they need it. Then of course there are student organizations. Lost and Found is the suicide prevention group on campus that is run by students. They're great about tabling, bringing awareness to the campus and community, and directing students as needed."

Even though the Cook House is only available to students, there are plenty of places to get help for members of the community.

"If you're talking suicide, 911 will probably call the police," Turner said. "They would want to take you to be evaluated by a Qualified Mental Health Professional."

Another option would be to call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1 (800) 273-8255.

"When you dial 1-800-273-TALK (8255), you are calling the crisis center in the Lifeline network closest to your location," the lifeline's website reads. "After you call, you will hear a message saying you have reached the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. You will hear hold music while your call is being routed. You will be helped by a skilled, trained crisis worker who will listen to your problems and will tell you about mental health services in your area. Your call is confidential and free."

According to Turner, those having serious suicidal thoughts are probably not having them for the first time and therefore should be prepared.

"Having a plan of action is always a good idea," she said. "If you're having those thoughts consistently then it's probably a good idea to have that hotline in your phone. There are apps too for regulating emotions. On those apps if you're feeling suicidal the suicide hotline will pop-up or it will guide you to other resources or support. We're in a very technological age. If you're feeling that way it's important to have those resources."

One of the apps used for these purposes is 'Relief Link.'

Relief Link gives you opportunities to record your feelings and see your mood trends. It also assists with your emergency plan by including an emergency button with 911 and important numbers such as your counselor, psychiatrist, friends and family along with live chat with a trained professional and finding locations of support groups.

According to Turner, people dealing with depressive feelings should not let feelings of worthlessness or pride get in the way of getting help.

"The biggest issue is recognizing that those feelings don't mean you're broken," she said. "It just means you're having a hard time. When we're having a hard time it's ok to get help."

The fact that suicide isn't a subject which is openly discussed doesn't help according to Turner.

"People are really scared to talk about depression as if it's taboo or there's something wrong with you," she said. "It would be great if we could get rid of that stigma and recognize that it's like anything else that we deal with in our lives. It's just something we have to work through and deal with. I think of it like getting a pimple. It will pop up in your life and when it does you do things that help get rid of it. Then it goes away. It might pop up in your life another time but it doesn't mean, just getting a pimple, that you're a terrible person."

It's looking like this is slowly changing though as awareness spreads.

"I think we're seeing a lot of that," Turner said. "People are a lot more open these days and it's a lot less taboo than it used to be."

Even if someone isn't experiencing feelings of depression themselves, it is still important to be aware of the issue and solutions to better help those around us and possibly save a life.

There are some signs to look for according to Turner.

"Some of the red flags of a person who is depressed and maybe going to that point are they tend to withdraw, they tend to isolate themselves," she said. "They might even just start giving away things. It's almost a way to say goodbye, giving away their possessions. They start not taking care of themselves and you might notice their hygiene start to change."

The best course of action according to Turner is quite opposite of avoiding the topic.

"You be direct," she said. "The best thing you can do is say, 'Look, I'm noticing this. Are you depressed? Are you having these thoughts? Are you thinking about suicide?' Being direct and not being afraid to ask questions and actually saying the word 'suicide.' If they say yes they're probably relieved to be able to tell someone."

Being there for them without trying to

be a counselor is important according to Turner.

"You can say things like, 'I'm not a mental health person but I'm your friend and I want to help you,'" she said. "Let's get you some help. Here's a hotline we can call together. Did you know that USD has a counseling center. Why don't we walk over there together?" Most of us aren't mental health counselors and we can't be that for our friends and family. Even if you're talking to a person who's in my profession. If my family member or friend is going through this, I can be the person that helps them get to someone who can help them."

In a private moment ask them and talk to them."

If prevention is not an option and someone you love has already committed suicide there are some important things to remember as well as Turner knows from personal experience.

"If you're a person who has lost a friend to suicide, and I'm sad to say that I've lost several people that are close to me, it's hard not to look inward and it's hard not to think, 'What could I have done differently?'" she said. "It's hard not to feel guilt when you care about someone and they take their life anyway. When we look at those we have lost unfortunately and tragically to suicide, if we really had any power to change the situation we would. That is our hearts. If I knew that my friend at this time was going to do this, if somehow I had omniscience and knew, I know my heart and I would have done everything to protect my friend."

"None of us are omniscient and we cannot blame ourselves for not having prior knowledge of someone's actions," Turner continued. "It's not that we did anything wrong. Your heart is that you cared about them and yes it hurts. We don't truly know what was going on in their minds. They were not truly themselves so no one can judge or blame."

Though in some cases there is not much to be done, Turner said there is ample time to make a difference in many others.

"When you can recognize it seek help before it comes to that point," she said. "What I have found is it doesn't just happen. We don't just have thoughts and all of a sudden we take our lives. It's something that has popped up in our life enough and has gotten worse and worse over time that we feel like suicide's the only escape. If we're feeling that over time then there are opportunities to get help and change the way we feel."

For more information visit www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org or call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1 (800) 273-8255.



Growth

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the date they are starting, because I was aware of them going on, but it is nice to see them continuing and not slowing down in October. Better yet, to see them say 'I am not going to let the option or fear of cold slow me down.' That is a fun thing to see."

Welch said another fun thing to see is the growth in all sectors of the community.

"When you look at all the different industries and construction, some of them are built with specific purposes, some of them are built for expansion and some of them are built with the specific purpose of expectation and forward thinking that we will be able to fill it," he said. "With all of that mix it helps us so next year we will see the results of that and, hopefully, have more projects going."

Sharing The Success

Welch said a unique aspect of the community of Vermillion across the region is that almost everyone has a reason to have visited the community.

"When you think about it, Vermillion is one of the few communities in South Dakota that everyone has an experience with because of having the University of South Dakota here, because of having the DakotaDome, because of having state high school football, there is a reason to visit Vermillion, not to mention all the graduates that USD produces," he said. "So many people in South Dakota have a perception of Vermillion. Our job is to update that perception and as we update them, we are surprising them. They don't know all the changes that have been going on."

He said sharing the

changes and how the community has grown is one of the fun aspects of his job.

"Think of how many people go on Highway 50 and all the little changes they get to see," he said. "When all of a sudden they really notice and see the changes. When Walmart goes up and all of a sudden Polaris is here, your perception of Vermillion changed and you realized you needed to update your opinion of Vermillion. It is really fun not only to see a lot of in-town changes, but it is fun when you have activity on the north side of town because it isn't just a sign of growth, it is also a great way for people to see the changes in Vermillion."

Welch noted that people are pleasantly surprised by what they are seeing.

"One of the reactions that we are seeing - that I wasn't expecting - has been genuine happiness for the town," he said. "You meet so many people who see the potential of the community and when they see that growth they get genuinely happy for you. It is like seeing that person you were cheering for succeed and grow. When you have people who have a special place in their heart for Vermillion and they see it growing, not only are they pleasantly surprised, they are genuinely happy for you."

Looking To The Future

"I think that Vermillion has had fantastic potential, it has had great leaders that have had a great vision for the community, but what is great is we are starting to realize that potential and starting to believe that we can do it," Welch said. "There is real validity to believing that you can do it. You have to be able to execute, to have that strategic plan to look forward, but sometimes it starts with believing we are a town that has a lot of potential."



ELYSE BRIGHTMAN/FOR THE PLAIN TALK

Plans for an addition at the Hillside Community Church in Vermillion began last spring, but construction began in September.

Adding that development of people is a huge component of growth, Welch said Vermillion is in a very unique position.

"We do have a unique community with the University here where it brings a lot of people in, but at the same time a lot of people leave the community each year," he said. "So, how can we set up a system when someone comes to town for whatever reason it might be, that they can be engrained into the community as quickly as possible and want to stay. That will make a difference."

He said a key to that success will be identifying what roles are needed.

"In a community different people serve different purposes," Welch said. "You do have to have a community of optimistic engaged citizens. They have to be able to see the challenges and surmount them. That really starts with engagement and really having people feel engaged, whether that is with a church or a community organization. On the Chamber side, we want to be that nucleus for the business community, for the professional community, because we like carrying that burden

of helping promote the community. The development really does start from within and it is not a quick turn. It isn't a year change, it is a progress step-by-step change that takes commitment and it takes everybody understanding what their role is and committing to it."

After identifying the needs and roles of the community then it is time to help businesses grow.

"When it comes to the development of the businesses entrepreneurship, it is helping people figure out what businesses do you want to start?" Welch said. "What business do you want to grow in? How do we get good, strong businesses that can grow for them and take care of their employees and be great places to work? That is what it comes down to. We are not going to be able to create 10,000 CEOs out of here, but we are going to be able to create good, strong companies that we can support both them and their employees. We want to invest in those companies that are going to invest in their employees because it is their employees that will be the members of the community and will give back to the community."

He said VCDC is trying to determine what are the best strategies for growing entrepreneurship in Vermillion.

"We are, right now, looking at what is the best way to make this a very entrepreneurial friendly, start-up friendly community," Welch said. "The city and the state are both very business friendly, so we have that going for us, but we have to ask how can we support the businesses and help them be successful."

"A study that was done out of the University of Minnesota did a density study of each county in the country and if you look at the map, the denser the growth the darker the color. As you can guess if you look at the overall growth in the country, the denser growth

was on the coasts. But, if you look at the 30 to 35 year-old range, it completely inverted the map. Which means that range is when people are starting to settle down, they are moving back home. They recognize the quality of life is the best part about it. That is what we have. What we need to do is not only create it so that when you are welcomed and engaged to a community, there is a lot less chance they are going to move on. That is the type of stuff that is going to help us grow."

While the population of Vermillion is Stable, Welch said he would like to see it grow in that critical age group.

"I see this as an opportunity to go back to the 30-35 year olds who want to move back and tell them our story," he said. "We have the feeder system here; we want to figure out how do we keep them in the community. We have refocused on trying to find jobs for the students that the university has trained them for. Now is an opportunity to go try to find those jobs so they stay right here."

"The VCDC in general is doing very well, we have had challenges but have also had great investments and successes coming into the community. I am very excited about the future of Vermillion and am glad to be a part of it."

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WOW, "My 14th Birthday" I'll never forget!!

Thank you all, Nathan Gilbertson

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