

Suicide and Domestic Violence

Of the 34,000 Americans who lose their lives each year to suicide, all too often, domestic violence is woven through their histories. A growing body of research focuses on this link and offers us hope that better outcomes can be found.

A strong link

Victims and children of domestic violence carry higher lifetime risk of suicide than the general population. Women who experience intimate partner violence are 12 times more likely to end their lives by suicide than those who have not. More victims of domestic violence die by their own hand than by that of their abuser. And, it is not just victims; research also indicates a two to five fold increase in suicidal behavior for children exposed to domestic violence (Dube et al, 2001).

One quandary for advocates and police alike is that victims are sometimes held hostage by the threat of suicide by their abuser. How do we sort out whether this is an empty threat designed to manipulate, an actual expression of imminent suicidality, or some mixture of both? Researchers at the University of Rochester are exploring this phenomenon by studying patterns of aggression. Aggression that is reactive, impulsive, carries high emotionality and leaves damaged relationships is more indicative of high suicide risk as compared to violence that is more controlled, with less emotional arousal, and calculated to produce some external gain. They believe that developing tools to better describe and understand these patterns of aggression, will lead to better predictability about suicidal threats. (Conner, et al, 2010)

Prevention is the key to intervention

Another commonality between suicide and domestic violence is that both are stigmatized; people avoid discussing having thoughts of suicide just as they avoid talking about being victims of violence. They are missed, dismissed and avoided because of the common barriers of shame, stigma and secrecy. Yet direct and open communication is critical to successful intervention. Public health strategies that change public perception, encourage screening and provide gatekeeper training for community caregivers are approaches focused on prevention, that make intervention more acceptable and possible. Interestingly, one of the largest suicide prevention studies ever undertaken was done in the 1990s by the United States Air Force. They integrated suicide prevention policies throughout their entire force, including gatekeeper training and destigmatizing help-seeking. As a result, not only did their suicide rates decrease, but also homicide and family violence rates decreased as well.

Tools and training available

The Suicide Prevention Center of New York is excited to be able to offer community gatekeeper trainings that prepare helpers of all kinds to be alert to the possibility of suicide and respond effectively.

SafeTALK is a three-hour training that prepares anyone over the age of 15 to identify persons with thoughts of suicide and connect them to suicide first aid resources. Powerful video clips, discussion and practice help stimulate learning.

QPR Just as people trained in CPR and the Heimlich Maneuver help save thousands of lives each year, people trained in QPR learn how to recognize the warning signs of a suicide crisis and how to **Q**uestion, **P**ersuade, and **R**efer someone for help. QPR can be learned in as little as one hour.

ASIST Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training is a two-day intensive, interactive and practice-dominated course designed to help caregivers recognize and review risk, and intervene to prevent the immediate risk of suicide.

Other Resources

If you or someone you know is thinking about suicide don't wait, get help. Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.

Abuse is never okay. If you or someone you know is being abused, please contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233.

Helpful websites: Suicidology.org, afsp.org, qprinstitute.org

To learn more or to find a trainer near you visit: Preventsuicideny.org

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