We must work together to reverse the plague of suicide

Wyoming is known for many things: our parks, great camping and outdoor activities, scenic beauty, and amazing people. Unfortunately, we are also known for leading the nation in the rate of suicide.

Reasons for suicide vary. Our state’s high rate has been attributed to a variety of factors, including such diverse ones as the somewhat cavalier attitude of “Cowboy Up” and don’t speak of problems, our relative isolation, abuse of drugs and alcohol, even our sometimes brutal weather conditions, most notably wind. However, it’s almost impossible for us to fully comprehend the reasons individuals see no viable option other than to take their own life. Frequently, the friends and family left behind struggle with feelings of guilt, anger, grief and confusion; often asking themselves how they could have prevented this horrible tragedy. These feelings are a burden that no one should ever have to carry.

It is my firm belief that by working together we can change this horrific public health problem plaguing our state. First, I encourage all faith groups to adopt the stance that suicide is not a sin but rather a tragedy. Sadly, some of us still associate suicide with unforgivable sin. In my experience of 30-plus years in ordained ministry, I have found that this way of thinking intensifies both the grief and the guilt for those left behind. Rather than being able to grieve and eventually reconcile their loss, they are left struggling with the horrible fear of whether or not their loved one has been embraced by our loving creator.

Second, we need to talk about suicide openly and honestly. Our willingness to talk about both suicide and the issues leading up to this tragic act helps to remove suicide's stigma, and thus removes some of its power. When we share our thoughts, feelings and emotions with others, we realize we are not alone, that others are dealing with the same issues, and that we do not have to bear our emotional burdens by ourselves. Talking allows us to educate others on the finality of suicide, while also providing others with the opportunity to share their personal experiences and reactions.

Third, I encourage Wyomingites to become trained in suicide awareness and prevention techniques. By being trained in this area you will learn the warning signs surrounding suicide, how to respond when someone exhibits these signs and how to offer additional resources and appropriate referrals. The Prevention Management Organization of Wyoming offers an excellent two-hour training specifically designed for laypersons known as “QPR” (Question, Persuade, and Refer). Find out more at http://pnowyo.org/.

Fourth, share what you learn with others. If you are looking for resources visit our website (www.diowyo.org) and click on the “Suicide Prevention” tab. This page is filled with a wide variety of resources designed to help individuals and communities explore and address suicide prevention and awareness. It is also home to two videos we have produced which address the specific topic of teenage suicide. These videos have been profiled by numerous news outlets and have been well received in the suicide prevention community.

Finally, I encourage all of us to reach out to people who have been affected by this tragedy. Learn how to provide them with a safe place to share their grief, to express themselves openly, and allow them to share their pain without fear of being labeled, judged or stigmatized.

Suicide affects us all. It knows no boundaries among race, age, socio-economic status, education level, or gender. It is too well known in every corner of Wyoming and has plagued us far too long. It is time for us to work together to effect positive change in our state’s approach to this issue, with the ultimate goal being to reduce suicide’s grip on our family, friends, and neighbors.

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