



A memorial for a woman who leaped to her death from the parking structure in downtown Ventura sparked a discussion on suicide.

## The problem of pain

### Suicide is on the rise locally and nationally

By [Carla Iacovetti](#) 12/04/2014



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“Love may forgive all infirmities and love still in spite of them: but Love cannot cease to will their removal.” — C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*

Death is never a comfortable topic, and even more awkward when discussing suicide. It is disheartening and perplexing, and almost always leaves those family and friends who were left behind forever wondering if they could have done more to impede such a final act.

Suicide is no respecter of age, gender or socioeconomic status. From the young to the aged, from the rich to the poor, or the famous to the unknowns — self-inflicted death takes the lives of far too many.

According to a new report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), suicide rates are on the rise in the United States, especially among middle-aged adults. The most significant increase is among people ages 55 to 59 (a 49 percent increase) and ages 50 to 54 (a 48 percent increase) over the last decade. The larger majority of middle-aged completed suicides occur with males instead of females. Suicide also recently moved up to the second leading cause of death in youth here in America, and accidental death is the No. 1 cause of death in youth.

Here in Ventura County, suicide is the fourth leading cause of premature death, and it is the third leading cause of death for youth (ages 10-24). Ventura County Behavioral Health lists 10 to 14 years as the fastest growing age group for suicide and/or suicide attempts, and for every completed suicide there are between 100 and 200 attempts.

“There are many variables and factors that are present when anyone at any age would consider suicide,” said Erick Elhard, program manager for Ventura County’s Children’s Intensive Response Team (CIRT) at Casa Pacifica. “Sadly, it’s a growing trend in youth.”

Ventura County has numerous resources for people who are struggling with suicide. According to Elhard, there are two crisis teams: one serving adults and one that serves the youth.

CIRT is available 24 hours a day for all 365 days a year. This mobile crisis response service provides immediate intervention and in-home support to individuals and families of all Ventura County children and youth through the age of 21. By working in collaboration with any existing service providers, and working with the county mental health services, CIRT focuses on keeping children and families safe in their homes and communities with minimum restrictive setting.

“Initial response includes emergency mental health assessments,” Elhard said. “When the initial response call is taken, we often provide assessments over the phone, and CIRT services can last up to 30 days, depending on the need of the child and his or her families.”

Last year alone, CIRT received over 3,000 calls on its hotlines, an increase of 67 percent over the last three years. “The idea of hopelessness and suicide ideation is not just an adult issue,” Elhard said. “Twelve [percent] to 15 percent of our call volume every year is from youth under the age of 12. We’ve even seen 2- to 5-year-olds entertaining an active plan of suicide.”

Major depression is the No. 1 diagnosis for suicide, whether attempted or completed, and oftentimes depression is related to trauma, mental illness or the side effects of medication, which is especially concerning to mental health experts.

“After several public hearings, the FDA called for drug makers to put a ‘blackbox warning’ on all the depression and anti-anxiety medication labels, cautioning about the possibility of increased suicide risk in minors,” said Peter Schreiner, LCSW, a clinician at Ventura County Behavioral Health (VCBH).



Kim Vincent.

Mary Ellen Cullen.

Peter Schreiner.

The controversy over antidepressants inducing suicidal thoughts in some patients, particularly with youth, has been long-standing. RXlist.com lists the warnings and precautions that accompany antidepressant drugs:

“Pooled analyses of short-term placebo-controlled trials of antidepressant drugs (SSRIs and others) showed that these drugs increase the risk of suicidal thinking and behavior (suicidality) in children, adolescents, and young adults (ages 18-24) with major depressive disorder (MDD) and other psychiatric disorders. Short-term studies did not show an increase in the risk of suicidality with antidepressants compared to placebo in adults beyond age 24; there was a reduction with antidepressants compared to placebo in adults aged 65 and older.”

While the issue with long-term use of antidepressants might be legitimate factors, depression (for whatever reason) is at the forefront of the problem of suicide.

The recent death of actor Robin Williams has created quite a stir. What tragic irony — the man who made the world laugh chose to abruptly end his life and the only explanation we were given was, “He was battling depression.”

“Williams was the prime candidate for a suicide success,” Schreiner said. “He was a high-profile, middle-aged male, and according to the current statistic, most men in this category will succeed.”

But what message does this send to those battling depression, especially the youth? “Sadly, the impact of a celebrity committing suicide is huge,” said Schreiner. “I actually had a couple of youth say, ‘If a guy like Robin Williams can’t survive suicide thoughts, who am I?’ ”

Schreiner believes that when high-profile personalities like Robin Williams choose to take their own lives, it essentially gives permission to others battling depression who are looking for solutions for an unmet need.

Kim Vincent, who works with neurolinguistic programming (NLP) and hypnosis therapy (reprogramming the subconscious), is the founder of Healing in America, a nonprofit 501(c) (3) located in Ojai. Vincent, who formerly worked in England with terminally ill patients, saw many recover completely after medical doctors sent their patients to her for energy healing.

“It’s all about the way you think,” said Vincent. “I am involved with a lot of people who have terminal cancer. When you are told you have no way out, this has impeding thoughts on your thoughts. You then buy into that reality.”

Since depression is the culprit, Vincent starts with the root of the problem — in other words, what is behind the depression? Vincent believes that depression is often linked to grief.

“Grief isn’t just about losing another person. It can be losing your own identity, which has negative effects on a person. For example, frequently children get depressed if their parents divorce, or if they have suffered at the hands of any form of abuse or trauma,” said Vincent. “When a person is depressed they have no sense of life purpose, and finding your life purpose will become the compass that directs a person.”

Jehu Sozo was born in Monrovia, Liberia, and currently lives in Thousand Oaks and is a musician. Sozo came to the U.S. when he was 10 years old. The son of a former diplomat was caught in the vicious civil war at 6 years of age, and he witnessed the most horrifying kinds of death first-hand. He stood and watched adults give up their lives just to protect him and his sister. He saw rapes in the streets and beheadings daily.

“It was so extreme that it was hard to comprehend at such a young age. In those moments, I looked for signs of love,” said Sozo. His parents were forced to flee the country, and because he and his older sister had no passports, they were left behind. “I switched everything around, and I realize now that I had to trick my mind just to survive. If I saw someone bleeding, the color red became beautiful to me.” Sozo watched babies being killed by rebel soldiers — soldiers who served Charles G. Taylor, warlord and former president of Liberia’s rebel movement.

“Suicide is always an option. When life isn’t thrilling, death is; but the reason I couldn’t lead myself to take my life is because I had something to die for,” said Sozo. “Reason to die is essentially a metaphor for having a cause or purpose — being so passionate about something or someone that you would give up your life, if necessary. I was living for my sister, and protecting her (even at the age of 6) made me live my life to the fullest, no matter what kind of circumstance surrounded me.”

Death became so common that it constantly toyed with Sozo and he “feared” death, but “Death is not something to be afraid of. Living without a purpose is far worse. Martin Luther King lived his life to the fullest; he had a purpose and it cost him his life, but his death actually made him immortal. He is still more alive today than ever and his ‘dream’ is being lived out. I am alive today because I had a reason to die. My sister became that reason,” said Sozo.

Having a reason to die gave Sozo a sense of purpose for his life. “Life is a gift. We already have a reason

to live, but having a reason to die changes our perspective,” said Sozo.

Ventura therapist Mary Ellen Cullen believes that change is possible, and she looks for every opportunity to bring awareness so that people can begin to enjoy their lives more. “Self-actualized people enjoy their lives more, and I believe it is so important for people to connect to an innate, creative expression of themselves. While the love and support of family and friends is vital, it is equally important to find love and joy within yourself, to discover your purpose. Sometimes, it takes the help of a professional to help bring this kind of awareness,” said Cullen.

According to Cullen, no one just decides to commit suicide. There are warning signs along the way: negative self-talk, irritability, increased anxiety, risk-taking behavior, mood changes, substance abuse and fixating on death, which is very common with younger kids.

Cullen believes that depression can be addictive, that it is a distorted form of self-love and sometimes a negative way to get attention. She also questions the amount of anti-depressant and anti-anxiety medication that is being divvied out today. In today’s world, a person can just walk into a general physician’s office and get a prescription for an anti-depressant.

“Medication is valuable to a point. However, once the person begins to feel that sense of balance again, they need to focus on getting off the drug. Many antidepressants cause suicidal thoughts,” said Cullen.

Cullen also battled depression when she was younger, and often thought about dying. “I just wanted to end my pain. There are times in life when we all have pain and may experience the feeling of wanting to die, but that doesn’t mean you have to die. It’s only a feeling. Feelings change, but suicide is forever. Once you walk down that path, you won’t change your mind. Pain is not forever. It is changeable,” said Cullen.

Cullen believes that this kind of hopelessness has spiritual roots and is incorrect thinking. “Learning to connect to yourself and loving yourself is crucial. Isolation is an issue, so finding community is important. Whether it’s a church or a community group, it will make a difference.”

Feeling unhappy or despairing about life situations for long periods of time can be a sign of something deeper. “Clearing behavior patterns and belief systems taps into every arena of life. Finding purpose and re-creating your life the way you want it is possible,” said Vincent.

Remember, the darkest hour is just before the dawn. “Only in the darkness can you see the stars.” – Martin Luther King Jr.

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