

Suicide: The War Within
By
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It was October 2015. I had just finished working towards my college degree for the last four years and was preparing for my board exams to get my nursing license. I had just started seeing my best friends back home from high school, oblivious to the fact that one of them was having a hard time in life. Recently, many personal problems were appearing to him in both work and social aspects of life. The more I spent time around him, the more I began to notice something was wrong. He became withdrawn, drank more, and became angry and depressed with even those closest to him. I kept trying to reach out to him to see if he was okay, and wondered whether I needed to step up or not. One day, he gave me a phone call about how he felt and wanted to end everything. I calmed him down and after a very long talk, we ended our conversation. Later that night, I got another message from him saying his goodbyes to me. I knew immediately after that, something bad was going to happen soon, and I had to do something fast. I called 911 and his parents. Eventually, the police found him just in time and took him to the hospital.

What I had just experienced, was an account of a suicide attempt of one of the people closest to me. Someone who wanted to end his own life because the weight of the world became too much for him to bear. This is one of many stories out there in the civilian and military world. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the suicide rate rose from 1999 to 2014 across the U.S. Twenty-five states reported an increase in the suicide rate of greater than 30 percent. In 2016, close to 45,000 Americans died by suicide. In 2015, the year my friend attempted suicide, the CDC said that suicide was the second leading cause of death in people aged 15 to 34 years old. Today, this age group covers a large sum of our military personnel worldwide. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, each day there are around 20 veterans who commit suicide. Even worse, they report that their suicides account for 18 percent of the suicide deaths in the country. A study from Oxford University also states that in 2012, for every 100,000 soldiers in the Army, 30 of them committed suicide, well

above the national rate of 12.5 per 100,000 in that same year. In the last several months, we have had a large number of suicides and suicide attempts reported all over Fort Bliss across many units. I feel that it is time to talk about the causes, signs, and symptoms that are easily missed by even the closest friends and families of these civilians, veterans, and service members.

What can drive someone to suicide? There are many causes that can lead to suicide. According to the Mayo Clinic, some of the common causes for someone to be suicidal are mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia. A stressful event like a breakup, loss of a loved one, war, financial problems, and abuse are also common causes. People under stress recall the occurrence of the event or the weight of the loss to be too much to bear and they want it to end. Another common cause is a history of a suicide attempt and access to firearms. If they attempted it before, they may do it again, because it feels easier to do it the second time around. Growing up negatively with a family or relentless bullying at school has been known to be a major cause as well. These people are capable of succumbing to substance abuse, like drugs and alcohol to help numb that feeling and making them more impulsive, thus giving them what they need to carry out the suicidal act.

The symptoms of suicide can be hard to notice. They all vary with each person. The Mayo Clinic states that verbally saying a statement such as "I want to kill myself," saying "goodbye" or anything of the sort is a red flag, even in a joking manner. A sudden change in the person's behavior is a big sign too. Someone who is usually happy and is now suddenly depressed and withdrawn is something to take a look at and vice versa. This person can also feel trapped and hopeless many times, talking about death and violence. The desire to be alone increases with these thoughts and feelings. They are susceptible to having mood swings where one moment they're happy and the next sad or angry. If someone was depressed for a time and suddenly feels so much better and happier, this is an important sign, because it is possible that the person has made peace with the suicidal act and may carry it out soon. Increased use of alcohol and drugs along with reckless behavior is another major sign.

It is a change in their typical day-to-day behavior. Another symptom is giving away prized belongings, like an autograph, instrument, or a video game console. It is typically something of high value to the person. Some signs are obvious, but at the same time can be secretive and hidden, making it difficult to take action.

Treatment of suicide, according to the Mayo Clinic, typically involves the use of psychiatric medications and various forms of therapy in a clinic with a counselor or therapist. Therapy could also include music, exercise, and the use of animals. If someone is on psychiatric medication, it can ironically increase the risk of suicide. An example would be if someone was too depressed to take action, may now have the energy to carry it out with the use of antidepressants. That's why when such medications are given, the first several weeks are the most important to monitor the person, to see if there is a change in his or her behavior.

Medicine and therapy can only go so far in treating the person. It is up to us, the friends, the relatives, or even strangers to take action on these signs. Any change in their behavior requires further questioning and assessment. Ask them bluntly, "Are you planning to kill yourself?" and no matter what their answers are, even jokingly, keep an eye on them further. We know our friends and family better than anyone else if we spend time with them on a regular basis. Pay attention to them. If something that makes them happy no longer has that effect then it is a sign that something is wrong. Spend more time with them. Sometimes the act or talk of suicide is a cry for help and maybe all they need is a friend. The same thing can be applied to a random stranger. I may not know the person, but I can still try to reach out to them. It is better to offer help, than to never offer it at all. Get that person the help they need.

Suicide will always be a difficult topic to talk about, especially to those close to us. My friend nearly ended his life, and it is a memory that is still etched in my mind to this day. I paid attention to him and I felt that something was off, so I immediately looked for help. Today, he's now at school, finishing up his education, and living life in a better way. He knows that someone is out there to listen

to him if he needs help. One of the most profound statements about suicide is that it is a permanent solution to a temporary problem. Everyone is capable of seeing the signs, whether obvious or hidden. Most people have someone in their life that they know inside and out. With that, we can take notice if something is wrong. Be there for your fellow soldiers, friends, and family even if nothing seems wrong. Sometimes, that is all they need. A good idea is to keep the number for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-8255 handy. You can even chat online with them and it is available 24/7. Remember to take action before it is too late and do not brush it off as a phase. As it is quoted in the Warrior Ethos, "I will never leave a fallen comrade." Don't let your fellow Comrades fall!

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