

Economy prompts more calls to suicide hotlines

By Marilyn Elias, USA TODAY

Many mental-health crisis and suicide hotlines are reporting a surge in calls from Americans feeling despair over financial losses.

It's unknown if the economic meltdown will lead to more suicides, says Lanny Berman, executive director of the Washington-based American Association of Suicidology. "Maybe the fact that so many are calling is a positive sign. They're seeking help."

Although suicides spiked during the Great Depression, they didn't increase in subsequent recessions, which lasted an average of 10 months, according to the suicidology group's website. The current recession is 13 months long and counting.

Concern centers on rising unemployment, Berman says, because the unemployed have two to four times the suicide rate of employed adults.

Also, there's a strong link between humiliating losses and committing suicide. "Losing your job, losing your home — these are such major losses," Berman says. Although the majority can cope, adults who already have mental health problems or lack supportive relationships are most vulnerable, he says.

Calls to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline jumped 36% from 2007 to 2008, totaling 545,000 last year, says director John Draper. But callers were increasing before the economic collapse, and about half of the added calls in 2008 came from taking over a veterans' suicide line, Draper says.

He is worried because a lot of adults phoning a hotline with resources for those facing foreclosure (888-995-HOPE) say they feel isolated, as if they're the only one facing this problem.

"This sense of aloneness is part of suicidal thinking," Draper says.

Among areas with suicide hotlines reporting increases in callers since the economy slid: Dallas; Pittsburgh; suburban San Francisco; Hyattsville, Md.; Georgia; Delaware; Detroit.

In Boston, more hotline callers with mental health problems mention job losses, evictions or fear that they'll lose their homes, says Roberta Hurtig, executive director at Samaritans Inc.

In Kalamazoo, Mich., and other locales, callers with mental illnesses such as bipolar disorder say loss of insurance and cutbacks in public health programs are preventing them from getting medications.

At the Gary, Ind., Crisis Center, suicidal callers with economic worries are increasing, and their depression is more severe, says Willie Perry, program coordinator for the hotline.

"There's more hopelessness. They don't see a way out," she says. "We try to help pull them up by the bootstraps, but the bootstraps are a lot lower than they used to be."

WARNING SIGNS

- Unusual talking or writing about death or suicide
- Seeking access to firearms or pills
- Feelings of hopelessness

- No sense of purpose in living
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Dramatic mood changes — anxiety, rage

Sedgwick County Suicide Prevention Hotline: 316-660-7500

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 800-273-8255

Source: American Association of Suicidology